



## Learning Leprosy

By Nachi Scheiner ('22)

Isolation is a powerful but dangerous tool. After sinning in one of many different ways, most notably by speaking Lashon Hara, one is afflicted with a blemish known as Tzara'at. Once declared Tamei by the Kohen, the Metzora is sent out of all three camps of Bnei Yisrael and are left in isolation. When in isolation, the Metzora is almost parallel to a mourner. The Rambam (Tumat Metzora 10:6) writes that a Metzora should cover his hair, wrap his face, tear his clothes and refrain from greeting passersby.

Despite the powerful attachment between the Metzora and the Avel there is one striking difference: Talmud Torah. When in the house of an Avel, one is prohibited to learn Torah. However, the Rambam (Tumat Metzora 10:6) writes that a Metzora should learn and delve into any aspect of Torah. Furthermore, the Metzora must sit in isolation, while the Avel receives continuous visitors. What is the root of these distinctions? Why are the Metzora and the Avel so similar, yet so different?

Rav Yonason Sacks (personal interaction) explains that although the expressions of the two are similar, the reasons behind the expressions are drastically different. Rav Sacks says that the Avel experiences a familial loss and requires comforting from the Tzibbur. Therefore, the Avel specifically does not sit in isolation rather has constant visitors. On the other hand, due to the gravity of his loss and the sadness he is experiencing, it is incomprehensible that he should be learning the gladdening Torah. Therefore, an Avel spends his days being comforted by his community, not by learning Torah.

Similarly, the Metzora is also mourning a loss. However, the loss he is mourning is himself. In fact, the Gemara (Nedarim 64b) states that a Metzora is

considered like a dead person. Why is it that the Metzora is considered dead? The Metzora destroyed his connection to the community by speaking negatively about others. Thus, the Metzora must sit in isolation. He must realize the consequences of what he did and how he destroyed interpersonal relationships in his community. The Metzora caused a break in the community, and thus he is cut off from them. So, how does the Metzora rejoin the community?

The answer lies in the power of Talmud Torah. Rav Sacks explains that when the Metzora learns Torah and connects to something bigger than he, he recognizes the power of the community. He recognizes that he is connected to something much more than just himself. When learning Torah purely for the sake of Hashem, one acknowledges the centrality of Hashem and the role he plays within Hashem's children.

## Tzara'at - a Gift?

By Ariel Kryzman ('23)

*Adapted from Rabbi Yamin Goldsmith's FMT series*

Last week's Parashah, Parashat Tazria, discussed Tzara'at on one's body and clothing. This week's Parashah, Parashat Metzora, examines Tzara'at on one's house.

In the beginning of Aliyat Revi'i, Hashem introduces the concept of Tzara'at on the house with a seemingly ordinary Pasuk: "כי תבאו אל-ארץ כנען אשר אני נתן לכם לאחזה ונתתי נגע צרעת בבית ארץ אחותכם" "Once you arrive in Eretz Yisrael which I gave you to receive and I will give you Tzara'at on your house" (VaYikra 14:34). Rashi quotes a Midrash in Vayikra Rabbah that says that Tzara'at on the house is a blessing because it leads people to remove bricks from their houses or even destroy their homes. When the natives of Eretz Yisrael heard that Bnei Yisrael left Mitzrayim and were heading to Eretz Yisrael, the natives hid their gold in the walls of their houses so

that the Jews would not retrieve the gold when they captured Eretz Yisrael. When the Jews would remove the bricks from their walls, they would find the treasures hidden by the previous homeowners.

Rashi seems to be saying that Tzara'at on the house is a gift. If so, why did Hashem make us go through the entire hassle of bringing the Kohen and cleaning the house just to give us a gift? Also, why is Hashem seemingly rewarding us by giving us treasures for doing the egregious act of speaking Lashon HaRa?

On a basic level, one can relate the case of Nigei Batim to all other Aveirot and punishments that we bring upon ourselves. For every Aveirah that we do, there is a hidden treasure. When we do Aveirot, we push ourselves farther from Hashem and from reaching our potential. When Hashem punishes (hopefully, the punishments only affect our houses and not something closer to us), He does us a favor by giving us a nudge in the right direction. When we understand that Hashem is trying to help us and then accept the Musar and better ourselves, we realize that the punishment was a hidden treasure to return us to the right path. We can appreciate that the Simchah of returning to Hashem is worth far more than the pleasure of the Aveirah.

The Sefat Emet (Rav Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter zt"l) adds a deeper meaning to the Midrash. The Sefat Emet quotes Chabakuk 2:11: "כִּי־אֲבֹן מִקִּיר תִּזְעַק וְכֹפֵיס מֵעֵץ יִעֲנֶנֶה," "The stone will cry out of the wall and the beam of the wood will cry out." The Gemara (Ta'anit 11a) explains that this Pasuk states that the stones and wooden beams of one's house will testify against the person in Shamayim. When people do Aveirot in the privacy of their own homes, they think that nobody is watching, but NO, the walls are watching, and they testify against us in Shamayim. You and your home both are negatively affected by sin. However, if we can bring Aveirot to the walls, we can also bring Kedushah to the walls. We can make our homes places of spirituality and Kedushah, and that is the hidden treasure in our walls. Our job is to find the hidden treasure by bringing Kedushah to our homes. Be'Ezrat Hashem, we should internalize this message, and hopefully, we will not need Aveirot and punishments to show us how we can uncover the Kedushah of our homes.

## Discovering Extraordinary Jewish Talent in a Roman Prison

*By Rabbi Chaim Jachter*

The Gemara (Gittin 58a) presents an extraordinary story (William Davidson translation):

There was an incident involving Rabi Yehoshua ben Chananya who once went to the great city of Rome, where they said to him: There is a child in prison with beautiful eyes and an attractive appearance, and his curly hair is arranged in locks. Rabi Yehoshua went and stood by the entrance to the prison. He said, as if speaking to himself: "Who gave Yaakov for a spoil, and Yisrael to the robbers?" (Yeshayahu 42:24). The child answered by reciting the continuation of the verse: "Did not Hashem, He against Whom we have sinned, and in Whose ways they would not walk, neither were they obedient to His law?"

In simple terms, Rabi Yehoshua tested the young lad, who was acclaimed for strikingly handsome features, to see if he knew a Pasuk in Yeshayahu which asks why our people have been degraded. The boy, without missing a beat, completed the Pasuk which assigns the blame on our sins. Rabi Yehoshua was so impressed that he predicted greatness for this child and was willing to redeem the youngster at any price. The child emerged to be the great Rabi Yishma'el ben Elisha.

### **Halachic Ramifications**

Before we delved deeply into the story, let us note two Halachic points communicated by this story. Most prominently, although Halacha forbids ransoming captives for exorbitant prices, lest captors be motivated thereby to grab others (Gittin 45a), in a case where the captured individual is of overwhelming importance to the Jewish community, he may be redeemed (as noted by Tosafot ad. loc. s.v. Kol Mammon). Tosafot's insight may justify the Israeli government's releasing an outrageous amount of Palestinian criminals to obtain the release of a kidnapped Israeli soldier. Maintaining the morale of Israeli soldiers is of paramount importance to the extent it may warrant the exorbitant price.

The second insight is Rabi Yehoshua's framing of the boy's great promise as an eventual "Moreh Hora'ah BeYisrael," or a Posek (a Halachic decisor). Rabi Yehoshua regards one who renders Halachic decisions to be of the highest level of Torah achievement. Rabi

Yehoshua's view supports a point repeatedly stressed by both Rav Ovadia Yosef (e.g. in his introduction to the Yabia Omer) and his son Rav Yitzchak Yosef (many times in his work Yalkut Yosef) in their writings. While some (such as Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in his Ish Halacha) extol delving deeply into the "Lomdus" (underlying Halachic logic) as the ideal of Torah learning, Rabi Yehoshua supports the idea that rendering practical Halachic decisions is the ultimate achievement for a Torah scholar.

### **A Practical Lesson**

On a practical note, the child is redeemed not because he begs for release or presents himself as being in greater need than others. He projects himself with confidence and proves his value to the community and thereby achieves redemption. This type of stance for someone in need is crucial in a wide variety of areas ranging from fundraising to dating for marriage to obtaining a raise at work. Posturing as pitiful and pathetic is most often not a recipe for success.

### **A Powerful Question**

Our story is deceptively simple. However, a powerful question is needed to unlock the deeper meanings of the story.

While it is impressive that the child was able to complete the Pasuk, how does this demonstrate that he is, in Tosafot's words, an extraordinary scholar? Does knowing one Pasuk indicate that he will eventually be a great Halachic authority?

### **Inclusion in the Community**

As a first step, the Pasuk (and the child's immediate response, indicating his internalizing its message) expresses inclusion in community. Although isolated in a Roman prison, the child states "Chatanu," "We have sinned," including himself in Am Yisrael (quite the opposite of the Ben Rasha of the Seder). The young lad is not self-centered. Instead, he sees himself as part of a much greater entity, Am Yisrael.

Moreover, by including himself in a Pasuk in Yeshayahu, written hundreds of years before his encounter with Rabi Yehoshua, the boy shows that he views himself not only as part of the Jews of his days, but rather as part of an even greater entity – the Jewish People of the present, past, and future. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik is fond of citing Ramban (Bereishit 24:1) who refers to this great entity as "Kenesset Yisrael."

The critical importance of connecting with our people of the distant past and far away future lies at the heart of the astounding Talmudic teaching that "Whoever mourns for Jerusalem will merit seeing its joy" (Ta'anit 30b). The Gemara states that the opposite is true as well. One who connects to the sorrowful episodes of our past is also part of the glorious moments of the future even before they happen!

### **Taking Responsibility**

Moreover, by citing the Pasuk the child assumes responsibility for his suffering. He does blame the Romans and he does not cast himself as a victim. This stance represents the beginning of his redemption.

The boy's attitude contrasts sharply with other suffering groups who instead of assuming responsibility for their plight, cast the blame on others. This disempowering attitude serves only to perpetuate their difficulties.

Rabi Yehoshua, living on the heels of Churban Bayit Sheini, recognized that the Jewish future depends on leaders who will promote the attitude of the young lad in a horrid Roman jail. Since he felt we needed such leadership so desperately he was willing to pay any price to ransom this young man.

### **Recognizing the Bigger Picture – Hashem**

For the young lad, his evil Roman oppressors are irrelevant. Hashem is behind his suffering and the suffering of so many other Jews that share his plight.

### **A Road to the Redemption**

The boy's attitude is an empowering one. Since he is part of the cause of his suffering, he can partake in his redemption. Identifying the cause of his difficulty also sets forth its solution. The suffering can end only after we commit to the Hashem and His Torah. Of course, this is the core message to communicate to our people.

### **How Did the Boy Know the Pasuk?**

The boy's ability to complete a Pasuk on demand not only shows that before his capture he assiduously studied. It also proves that he continued to study while in captivity!

Torah must be constantly reviewed, otherwise, it is easily and very readily forgotten. Chazal teach that "Im Ta'azveini Yom, Yomayim E'ezveka," "If one abandons the Torah for one day he distances himself from Torah for two days." The reason is that he was away for Torah for one day and the Torah was away from Torah for a day as well, bringing the total to two days!

Accordingly, how did this boy continue to learn Torah while in a horrid Roman prison? Chazal very rightfully refer to the Romans as the “Umah HaResha’ah,” “The evil nation.” The Nazis, Yimach Shemam, very much looked to the Romans as role models of evil behavior. Thus, one can only imagine the horrible conditions of a Jewish captive in a Roman prison!

And yet the boy could complete a Pasuk on a dime! How could he still do this? He assuredly did not have holy Sefarim from which to learn in the Roman jail. It must be that the boy was constantly reviewing the Torah in his head.

Moreover, the fact that a Pasuk that addresses his plight is foremost on his mind, as evidenced by his fluency in the Pasuk, shows he is keenly aware of this Pasuk and its powerful message.

### **How Did the Boy Maintain His Good Looks in Jail?**

Finally, we must ask how this Jewish youngster maintained his handsome appearance in a very unfriendly environment. He probably did not have an opportunity to bathe, and he likely was given little to eat. The fact that he looked so good in the Roman jail was so striking that people called this very surprising phenomenon to the attention of the great Rabi Yehoshua.

The boy’s good looks, I suggest, stem from his positive attitude. While his external environment was deplorable, his inner environment, namely his mindset, was positive and happy. On the outside, he was a wretched prisoner in a Roman jail, but on the inside, he was an aspiring Torah student regardless of his environment. Such is the stuff of greatness.

### **Conclusion**

Two of the greatest leaders two generations after the Churban were not candidates to be voted as “most likely to succeed” by their peers. Nonetheless, the extraordinary talent of Rabi Yishma’el was discerned and discovered by Rabi Yehoshua, just as Rachel, the wife of Rabi Akiva, realized the potential for her husband’s greatness.

Although each of us is unlikely to rise to the level of Rabi Yishma’el, we can still achieve our own level of greatness by embracing the attitude exemplified by Rabi Yishma’el as a child in a Roman prison.

By digging deep and discovering the extraordinary quality of this story, we have unlocked an essential characteristic of our people: a great nation that

has persevered and thrived even in the most difficult of situations.

### **Postscript**

Many have noted that it seems very unusual for Rabi Yishma’el to carry the name of a less than wholesome character from Sefer BeReishit. However, based on our story, my son Binyamin notes that the name fits perfectly. Yishma’el of Bereishit Perek 21 emerges from a near-death experience and develops into a nation great in numbers, as a result of crying out to Hashem. Rabi Yishma’el, in turn, elevates himself from the depths to a great leader of our people, by his complete allegiance and fidelity to Hashem and His Torah even in the darkest of times. Therein lies the secret of the eternal vitality of our people.

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