

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Tazria Metzora

Tzoraas of the Body, Clothing and the House

BACKGROUND: THE ORDER OF THE PARSHIYOS AND THE SEQUENCE OF TZORAAS

One of the classic questions concerning our parshiyos relates to the order in which the different forms of *tzoraas* are presented in the Torah.

- ▷ First it discusses *tzoraas* of the body.¹
- ▷ Second it discussed *tzoraas* of garments.²
- ▷ Finally, it discusses *tzoraas* of the house.³

However, the Sages inform us⁴ that the sequence in which *tzoraas* would actually affect the person is in the reverse:

The Merciful one does not afflict the body first... rather, first the [tzoraas] afflictions come upon the house, if the person repented, well and good. If not, they come on his clothes. If he repented, well and good. If not... they come on his body.

Why does the Torah discuss *tzoraas* of the body first, if in reality it would appear last? Examining the classic answers to this question will give us insight, not only in to this matter specifically, but also to the way in which the Torah communicates through the verses generally.

FIRST APPROACH – THE GOAL AND PURPOSE OF THE PARSHA

Let us preface the first approach by asking a simple question: What is the goal of the Torah's presentation of the laws of *tzoraas*? Seemingly, the answer is straightforward – to know how to deal with any such situations that arise. However, that is not a full answer. *Tzoraas* comes as a punishment for certain wrongdoings, foremost among them *lashon hara* (slander). We note that the Torah is unique in that it read both by the judiciary who are to dispense justice to those who break its laws, as well as by the citizenry who are required to abide by them. In light of this, we will appreciate that the sections of

1 Vayikra 13:9.

2 Ibid. verse 47.

3 Ibid 14:34.

4 Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 17:4. See also Midrash Tanchuma Parshas Metzora sec. 10. This sequence is codified by the Rambam in the Mishneh Torah (*Hilchos Tumas Tzoraas* 16:10).

punishment and retribution in the Torah serve a dual function:

1. As *information* for the court in a case where justice concerning these laws needs to be dispensed.
2. As a *deterrent* for the Jewish people so that the laws will never be violated in the first place.

As such, returning to our question, we may say that the ultimate goal in the Torah presenting its various punishments is that they never happen! Indeed, it is correct to say that with regards to these sections of the Torah, the highest level of their fulfillment will come in their *non*-fulfillment.

Indeed, this idea will explain another anomaly in our parsha, which is pointed out by the Midrash. The mitzvos of the Torah are typically introduced with the words “דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם” – Speak to the Bnei Yisrael and say to them.” In our case, however, verse two of chapter thirteen dives straight in to the topic of *tzoraas* itself. Why are the standard introductory words missing? The answer is that the absence of these “bridging words” between Hashem and the Jewish people indicates that the parsha is actually **not** for them, i.e. they are being told about these laws specifically in order for them never to have to happen.

Moreover, if the laws as deterrents represent their highest purpose, then the order in which they are presented will be determined by this function. It is clear from the midrash quoted above that of the three types of *tzoraas* the type which afflicts the body is the worst; indeed, for this reason, it affects the person last. Yet *for this very reason* the Torah discusses it first, for the “higher” goal of deterrent will be best served by opening with the form of *tzoraas* that is most likely to deter. In the event that this goal is not served and the person sins nonetheless, it is sufficient for the oral tradition to inform us of the actual order in which the forms of *tzoraas* will come.⁵

This idea finds expression elsewhere in the Torah, regarding the penalty for injuring one’s fellow. As is well-known, the verse in Parshas Mishpatim states that it is “an eye for an eye”,⁶ while the oral tradition informs us that the perpetrator’s eye is not actually put out. Rather, the punishment is “ransomed” and meted out in the form of a monetary payment to the value of the victim’s eye.⁷ If so, we ask, why did the Torah choose to write the “pure” answer – an eye for an eye, instead of the practical answer – monetary payment?

Here, too, says the Chazon Ish,⁸ the Torah gave primacy to the role of the verse as deterrent, for the ultimate goal is not to dispense justice to one who injures his fellow, but that such an injury never occurs. Therefore, the verse describes the penalty in a way which is more likely to deter, leaving the practical rendering of that penalty to the Oral Tradition.

SECOND APPROACH – THE PURPOSE OF TZORAAS

It is clear from the Midrash quoted above that, strictly speaking, a person who deserves *tzoraas* should receive it on his body immediately. The reason this does not happen is due to Hashem’s mercy, whereby the person is first afflicted with a milder *tzoraas* in the hope that he will do teshuva and that no harsher form will be necessary. To this end, the Torah first mentions *tzoraas* of the body, indicating that this is *what should happen* to the person, in order that he recognize

5 R’ Yaakov Ettlinger, *Derashos Minchas Ani*, Parshas Tazria, citing his father.

6 Shemos 21:24.

7 See Bava Kama 83b-84a and Rambam *Hilchos Chovel u’Mazik* 1:3.

8 Sefer *Emunah u’Bitachon*.

the element of mercy when his house is afflicted instead of him⁹. Awareness of this fact will hopefully serve two purposes:

1. It will encourage him to avail himself of Hashem's mercy and improve his situation. As long as he sees *tzoraas* purely as a matter of *retribution*, and with a mindset that by this stage the Torah is simply "out to get him" for his misdeeds, he may descend further into wrongdoing. In contrast, awareness of this process as one aimed at his *rectification*, with the Torah not "pressing the advantage" but rather giving him a chance to do better may change his perspective for the better and encourage him to reverse his negative trajectory.
2. Lashon hara takes the form of honing in on what one perceives as another's faults and shortcomings, exposing and expressing them without mercy. Upon a person seeing that the Torah gave him a chance when he was clearly in the wrong, this may encourage him to do likewise with others, extending them a measure of grace and understanding even as he feels he has identified negative aspects within them.

It is fascinating to perceive in this way the role of the verses in our Parsha as presenting what *should be* the reality alongside what becomes the *actual* reality, in order to ensure that the punishment of *tzoraas* achieves its intended goal.¹⁰

THIRD APPROACH – LE'SHAAH AND LE'DOROS

The question of why the Torah did not mention *tzoraas* of the house first is actually already discussed in the Midrash,¹¹ which explains as follows:

Why did [the Torah] not open with the section dealing with houses? For The Omnipresent related the laws of tzoraas while [the Jewish people] were in the wilderness, at a time when they did not yet have houses. Thus said The Omnipresent to them: "Since you do not have houses, I will bring tzoraas on your bodies at the outset. However, once you enter the Land, I will only start with your houses. And why did it not start with their clothes in the wilderness? Since their clothing was accompanied by miracles, for they went forty years in the wilderness without needing to even launder their clothing."¹²

This Midrash reveals a fascinating concept regarding the Torah's presentation of its laws:

- ▷ The Torah which we received in the wilderness is for all future generations, including many laws which did not yet apply at that time, such as the mitzvos related to the Land of Israel. Indeed, the benchmark characteristic for something to be included in the list of *taryag* (the 613 mitzvos of the Torah) is that it is *halachah le'doros* – an enduring obligation for all generations.
- ▷ At the same time, there were certain aspects of the mitzvos which pertained particularly to the situation of the Jewish in the wilderness in the generation that received the Torah – *halachah le'shaah*. These aspects are also reflected in the verses.

9 Pardes Yosef Parshas Tazria sec. 15. See also Rabbeinu Bachye to Vayikra 14:54-56.

10 In this respect, too, our parsha mirrors the situation where the Torah writes "an eye for an eye". See Seforno to Shemos ibid, who writes: "This is what *should have happened on terms of absolute justice, measure for measure; except that the tradition of our sages tells us that he pays monetary value.*"

11 *Midrash Tadshah chap. 17.*

12 Therefore their clothing was vouchsafed from the adverse effects of *tzoraas*.

Indeed, not only are they reflected, there are times when they assume primacy in the Torah's presentation in the verses. Such is the case in our parsha, where the order of the types of *tzoraas* listed is in keeping with *halachah le'shaah*, leaving the order *le'doros* to be communicated via the Oral tradition.

This fundamental idea is one that can illuminate many verses throughout the Chumashim of Shemos, Vayikra and Bamidbar, and features prominently in the discussions of numerous classic commentators.¹³

CONCLUDING NOTE: THE DIVINE PRESENCE – IN ERETZ YISRAEL AND IN THE WILDERNESS

It is worthwhile noting that the Ramban¹⁴ likewise maintains that *tzoraas* of the clothing and houses did not pertain before entering Eretz Yisrael, but for a different reason. He explains that the supernatural phenomenon of a house or clothing changing color only existed in the Land of Israel where the Divine Presence resides.¹⁵ It is interesting to note that the Midrash, quoted above, did not ascribe the restriction of those types of *tzoraas* to Eretz Yisrael based on proximity of the Divine Presence in that land, but rather on more practical concerns, such as the fact that the people did not yet have houses. Perhaps this is because prior to entering the land, the Divine Presence rested with the Jewish people in the wilderness, as is evidenced by the multiple miracles which accompanied them daily throughout their sojourn there. Hence, the requirement of the proximity of the Divine Presence would not have been an impediment to *tzoraas* of houses, if they had them.

This week's divrei Torah are dedicated le'ilui nishmas

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13 Of particular note in their use of this idea are the commentaries Haamek Davar of the Netziv and Meshech Chochmah of R' Meir Simcha of Dvinsk.

14 Vayikra 13:47.

15 Seemingly, *tzoraas* of the body was a less obvious miracle, as a person's skin can naturally change color for various other reasons as well, and hence could pertain even outside of Israel.

The Torah itself links *tzoraas* of houses to the people's entry to Eretz Yisrael (14:34). Indeed, the Sefer Hachinuch only mentions this limitation when discussing *tzoraas* of a house (mitzvah 177), but not while discussing *tzoraas* of clothing (mitzvah 172) or the body (mitzvah 169), seemingly indicating that in his view the latter two have applied in the wilderness. According to this approach we can understand why the Torah mentions the purification process for the metzora in between its discussion of *tzoraas* of clothing and of a house. Having finished its presentation of all the types of *tzoraas* which apply at that time, it immediately presented the purification process from those forms of *tzoraas*, and only then proceeded to discuss to *tzoraas* of a house which apply at a later time. (R' Aharon David Goldberg *shlit"a*, Shiras David, Vayikra 14:2)