

PARASHAS TAZRIA

Surrounded by Mirrors

The city gates swing open, and a solitary man walks out, carrying a bundle of food and personal belonging on his shoulder. The gates swing shut behind him. He walks to a secluded spot, puts down his things and sits down to contemplate his fate in the solitude of his isolation. As we take a closer look, we notice strange skin lesions that resemble leprosy. Who is this man, and why has he been banished to sit in isolation outside the city? And why does he have lesions on his skin?

This man is called a *metzora*. The lesions, called *tzoraas*, are not caused by toxins or microbes. Rather, they are a physical manifestation of a spiritual malaise. Our Sages tell us that a person who gossips and slanders other people is afflicted with *tzoraas*, and as we read in this week's Torah portion, he must go into isolation until it fades away.

Why isolation? the commentators want to know. Wouldn't it have been better for him to deal with the problems of his character in the company of his friends and loved ones? Wouldn't their emotional and moral support help him overcome his malicious inclinations?

Furthermore, the Torah states, "Impure, impure, he shall call out." What is the significance of the repetition of the word impure? Why wouldn't once suffice?

The commentators explain that our attitudes toward other people are always a reflection of our own level of spirituality and refinement. We see ourselves in others. People of good will and magnanimous spirit will always view others in the most favorable light. They will attribute only the best motives to the actions of other people. Mean-spirited people, on the other hand, are surrounded by mirrors. They always view others with suspicion and disdain, and they automatically assume that others look at them in the same negative way.

This is the implicit meaning of the statement, "Impure, impure, he shall call out." The impure person sees himself in others and calls out, "Impure!"

A person afflicted with *tzoraas* because he accused other people of improper behavior is most probably guilty of those same offenses himself. He knows what evil things he himself would do in certain situation and therefore he assumes everyone else would do the same. The company of others is like poison to such a person, because he sees every person he encounters through the malignant filter of his own debased personality and character. Therefore, the Torah decrees, it is

better that he sit in isolation and contemplate what he has become. It is better that he face the harsh reality that he is unworthy of human company. In this way, he will be perhaps take stock of himself and decide to make fundamental changes.

A man sought the advice of a great sage about a problem he was having with his son. "How do I improve my relationship with my son? I try to show him how I care about him by giving him many compliments. I compliment his schoolwork, his behavior at home, his singing, everything. But he always accuses me of insincerity. 'You just saying it, but you don't really mean it,' he says. What should I do?"

"The problem, my friend," said the sage, "is that your son does not see the good in other people. Therefore, when you say you see good in him, he doesn't believe it. Spend more time pointing out to him all the goodness you see in other people. Once he sees that, he will believe that others may see goodness in him."

In our own lives, we often encounter people who relish speaking ill of others. First of all, we must not accept slander at face value. Most probably, it is a reflection of the deficiencies of the talebearers themselves. And even when such people victimize us, we should not react with anger and retaliation. As long as we maintain our high standards, as long we do not stoop to the level of our detractors, we can take comfort in the knowledge that it is not us that these people are seeing but themselves.