

Metzora

Parshas Metzora discusses at great length the procedure for cleansing a person or his dwelling from *Tzoraas*. An intricate description, one that few other commandments can match for detail, lets us know how the Al-mighty wishes to have a *Metzora* reenter society. Live birds, wood from a cedar, scarlet wool and hyssop, all play a role in the purification process.

Maimonides concludes his laws of Metzora with an insight into the "*Tumah*," uncleanness, of *Tzaraas*. The term *Tzaraas*, he points out, is used for a variety of seemingly different ailments. The same term is applied to a skin condition, to a specific condition of baldness of the head or beard. It applies to an unnatural change of color in one's clothing and the stones and mortar of his house. It is obvious, he concludes, that what is referred to as *Tzaraas* is not a natural disease but rather a wondrous condition limited to the Jewish experience with the purpose of teaching us to be careful with our manner of speech and behavior. As Chazal say, *Tzaraas* is brought on by *Loshon Horah* and *Letzonos*. Unlike natural disease it may not be exorcised by surgery, rather we are admonished "*Hishomer Menega Tzaraas*." Furthermore, one of the 613 Mitzvohs is to remember *Tzaraas* with which Miriam was smitten, when she questioned the uniqueness of her brother Moshe Rabenu's prophecy.

Chazal tell us that the Al-mighty's choice of the cedar and the hyssop in the cleansing process is because the former reflects the haughtiness that brings about *Loshon Horah* and the latter the antidote, humility. The twitter of the birds represent the looseness of the tongue, and the thread dyed in the extract of a worm, again represent lowliness. Each step in the purification ritual similarly reflect the desired Jewish attributes of humility and humbleness.

It would seem that because these lessons are so fundamental to Judaism, two entire Parshios are devoted to them. The severity with which G-d views the idle and loose tongue we may learn from Miriam, says Maimonides. Miriam, who helped raise Moshe and

was ready to give her life for him, merely equated him with other prophets and was immediately punished with *Tzaraas*. Hence we are told *Zachor*, remember what happened to Miriam *Haneviyah*.

The Midrash says that this is the meaning of Shlomoh Hamelech's altruism, *Mavess vechayim b'yad haloshon*: "Life and death are in the hands of the tongue." *Loshon Horah*—Evil tongue—may bring *Tzaraas*—and we are told that the *Metzorah* is likened to the dead. Conversely, when the manner of speech is of another caliber, we are told (Malachi 3:16): "Then conversed they that fear G-d one with the other, and G-d listened and heard it."