Body and Soul Language: Thoughts for Shabbat Tazria-Metsora

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

It was said of Rabbi Yitzhak Luria, the great kabbalist of 16th century Safed, that he was able to see into people's souls when he looked at their faces. By looking into one's eyes, he could gain clear insight into that individual's personality. For this reason, many people were ashamed to appear before Rabbi Luria, believing that he could detect their character flaws and inadequacies.

Actually, one does not need to be a saintly kabbalist to assess people's character traits on the basis of external observation. Psychologists have pointed out that people often reveal their personalities through their facial expressions and body language. A careful observer can learn much about others simply by paying close attention to their expressions and gestures. While these observations may not be as accurate as those of Rabbi Luria, they nonetheless provide insight.

In our own experience, we find ourselves drawn to warm, smiling and kindly-looking people. We find ourselves repelled by mean, scowling and arrogant faces. We raise our guards when we feel we are in the presence of smooth-talking hypocrites; we feel at ease when we are in the presence of compassionate and thoughtful individuals. We shape our views of others by looking into their eyes, by examining their demeanor, by reading their facial expressions. Surely, our judgments may be wrong at times; yet, we intuitively feel that there is an intimate connection between physical appearances and spiritual/emotional/psychological qualities.

This week's Torah portion deals with "tsara'at" (often translated—incorrectly—as leprosy), providing details that are very difficult for us to understand. Yet, the underlying message seems to be: spiritual impurity may manifest itself in a physical blemish. When a person is stricken with "tsara'at," a purification ritual is required to bring body and spirit back into proper alignment. Our inner feelings and personality traits are indeed reflected in our physical appearances.While some people are better able to camouflage their emotions, even they will inevitably betray their real selves in moments of weakness.

Our goal should be to maintain a healthy spiritual/emotional life so as to have nothing to hide! We can all strive to be good, compassionate and sensitive human beings—and these qualities should be easily detected in our faces and our physical appearance. We can all strive to avoid the negative qualities associated with the arrogant, the bullies, the egotists. We can all hope to be approachable and kind, so that others will be drawn to us rather than be alienated from us.

The manifestation of a “tsara’at” wound was a wake up call to ancient Israelites, demanding that they self-reflect and then purify themselves. Although we lack the “tsara’at” of biblical times, we have mirrors. If we look honestly at ourselves, we might detect some character traits that need improvement, and we can work to purify ourselves.

If we look into the mirror and don’t see character flaws that need improvement, then we can be fairly sure that we indeed do have “tsara’at,” that we have become content with ourselves…and therefore have become spiritually numb. Even if we do not see our own spiritual/emotional/character shortcomings, others can observe them clearly enough by looking at our facial expressions, our gestures, our physical demeanor.

We need to live our lives in such a way that we would not be ashamed to stand before Rabbi Yitzhak Luria…or anyone else.

Angel for Shabbat