Thoughts for Tazria/Metsora

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Angel for Shabbat--Tazria/Metsora

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The Torah describes a certain ailment known as *tsara'at*. While this word has often been translated as leprosy, Maimonides wrote that we do not really know what it means. It seems not to be a medical condition at all, but rather a physical sign of a spiritual blemish.

Rabbinic tradition has connected *tsara'at* with the sin of *lashon hara*—slander, evil gossip. Obviously, *tsara'at* does not manifest itself today in all those who utter negative comments about others; if it did, almost everyone would be afflicted with it. However, the moral intent of the rabbinic tradition is important; it relates to an affliction of the soul rather than the body.

The Torah teaches that one who contracts *tsara'at* is sent into isolation "outside the camp." Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz comments: "When one is isolated with *tsara'at*, one remains alone and only then can one truly ponder one's own faults. Only after one is told that he is beset with faults and is isolated with them can he begin to grapple with them until they disappear" (*Talks on the Parasha*, p. 224).

Being isolated gives one an opportunity for self-reflection and for honest thinking about moral shortcomings.

But isolation provides something else.

It is natural for people to compare ourselves to others. Yes, I have made sins…but others are much worse than I am. Yes, I've spoken slander and gossip…but hardly as much as many people I know. Consciously or subconsciously, we tend to evaluate ourselves favorably in contrast with others.

When one is isolated, there's no one there to compare oneself against! The isolated individual suddenly realizes that he/she must self-judge without the advantage of having anyone to look down upon.

One of the root causes of slander and gossip is comparing ourselves to others. People often see themselves in a general competition. If others have more or better, the tendency is to want to cut them down to size, to find faults, to speak disparagingly about them. If others have less or worse, the tendency is to gloat and publicize their shortcomings in comparison to ourselves. *Lashon hara* stems from lack of self-esteem. In order to bolster one's ego, one seeks to compare others unfavorably to oneself.

That is the source of the moral blemish of *tsara'at* and that's why isolation is a suitable cure. Isolation helps one to realize that making negative comparisons to others is a sign of personal weakness. We

shouldn’t be comparing ourselves to others; we should be comparing ourselves to our ideal selves, to what we can be. It is a way to develop the inner poise and strength of character so that we don’t feel a need to run others down in order to bolster ourselves?

Today, we don’t have the physical manifestations of *tsara’at* and we don’t punish anyone by sending them into isolation. However, we can each find occasion to make private time for self-reflection. The goal is to enable us to rise above the pettiness of *lashon hara*. We aren’t better when we demean others; we actually demean ourselves when we do so.