

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Rochel bas Yosef.
"May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

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1 NISSAN

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS TAZRIA

Seeing is Not Believing

All the days that the affliction is upon him he shall remain impure. He is impure and he shall stay in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside of the camp (13:46).

In this week's *parsha*, the Torah introduces the laws of *tzora'as* – commonly mistranslated as leprosy due to the fact that *tzora'as* shares a similar symptom where white splotches appear on the skin of the afflicted.

In fact, *tzora'as* isn't merely a disease caused by a bacterial infection (which is what leprosy is); it is a very specific punishment sent from heaven for the sin of *loshon hora* (see Rashi in his comments on this *possuk*). The Torah first introduced this concept in *Parshas Shemos* when Moshe's hand turned white "like snow" from *tzora'as* (*Shemos* 3:6) and Rashi (ad loc) explains that it was because he spoke *loshon hora* on the Jewish people. Similarly, Miriam is afflicted with *tzora'as* when she speaks negatively about Moshe at the end of *Parshas Beha'aloscha* (*Bamidbar* 12:10).

Loshon hora is considered one of the worst sins a person can commit, as heinous as murder, adultery, and idol worship (*Talmud Arachin* 15b). Yet the punishment, *tzora'as*, seems to be a minor one. After all, the size of the *tzora'as* discoloration can be relatively small, around the size of a nickel. While the consequence of having *tzora'as* is related to the sin of *loshon hora* (see Rashi 13:46), it is difficult to understand how a relatively small mark on one's body is a fitting punishment. We know that Hashem punishes in a very strict system of quid pro quo, nothing more and nothing less than a transgression deserves. How is this small discoloration a proper punishment for the terrible sin of *loshon hora*?

One of the most famous photos of the 20th century was taken by famous war photographer Eddie Adams. The photo, named "Saigon Execution," depicted a general in the S. Vietnamese army (America's ally) killing, in appalling cold blooded fashion, a Vietcong prisoner. Beyond the Pulitzer Prize that Eddie Adams won, this photo deeply contributed to the American public's conflict as to whether or not to support the Vietnam war.

The New York Times (when they still had a conscience) was extremely hesitant to publish his photo for it depicted the brutality of America's ally, and only consented to run it side by side with a photo of a child slain by the Vietcong. Nonetheless, Eddie Adams' photo was the one burned into the American psyche.

Yet, Adams himself lamented, "Two people died in that photograph: the recipient of the bullet and General Nguyen Ngoc Loan. The general killed the Vietcong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapons in the world. People believe them; but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths."

The actual circumstances from the incident (obviously not captured on film) were that the prisoner had just ambushed this general's regiment and murdered three of his soldiers. It was a hot and miserable day and tempers were running very high. The general, who actually had a reputation for compassion, made the decision to execute the prisoner for he feared he would lose



control of his regiment who were furious that this Vietcong had just murdered three of their fellow soldiers. Because of the terrible backlash from that photo, the general was stripped of his command and discharged from the army. Eddie Adams felt so guilty that he supported him and his family until the end of his life.

Loshon hora, while technically true, is actually the most horrible kind of lie. *Loshon hora* is exactly like a photograph – a fleeting glimpse of a terrible act that a person committed. But what are the circumstances? Who is that person in reality? Is it fair to paint that person's entire being by that fleeting act; is that who they really are? No one is proud of every moment of his life (there is a well known saying that no one growing up in the digital era will ever be elected to public office because there are photographs of just about everyone in compromising circumstances).

This is why the punishment for *loshon hora* is *tzora'as*. A little discoloration, even the size of a nickel, comes to define the whole person as a *metzora*. This is the perfect quid pro quo; for it is exactly what the person speaking *loshon hora* did – took a relatively small (when compared with a person's entire life) and embarrassing vignette and portrayed that to be the entirety of an individual's identity. So too *tzora'as*, a small discoloration, comes to define the entirety of the sinner.

Partners in Creation

This week we read *Parshas Hachodesh*, the last of the four *parshios* that were instituted to be read on Shabbos in the weeks prior to Pesach. *Parshas Hachodesh* discusses the *mitzvah* of blessing the new moon, *Kiddush Hachodesh*. Moshe was instructed to set the Jewish calendar by the new moon and to regard Nissan as the head of all the months of the year. Hashem even showed Moshe exactly the standard by which the new moon is to be identified and gave him the exact calculation of a lunar month (29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes, 3 and 1/3 seconds).

This *mitzvah* holds a special significance as it was the first one given to the Jewish people as a nation. In fact, the very first Rashi at the beginning of the Torah points out that the Torah should have logically begun with this very *mitzvah* instead of the story of creation. Maharal explains Rashi's rationale: the Torah is a book of *mitzvos*. For this reason, Rashi questions if perhaps it would be more sensible for the Torah to begin with the first *mitzvah* given to Bnei Yisroel.

Still, this assertion seems odd for a few reasons. Based on the assumption that the Torah is a book of *mitzvos*; wouldn't it be more logical for the Torah to begin with the mass revelation at Sinai, when the entire Jewish people received Hashem's commandments? The Torah could have begun with the Ten Commandments, which encapsulate all of the 613 *mitzvos*, and then filled in the remaining information afterward.

This would seem to be far more appropriate than beginning with a revelation experienced by two individuals (Moshe and Aharon). After all, every religion in the world is based on a supposed "revelation" experienced by a single individual or a small group of people. However, the very foundation of our knowledge of the Torah's truth is based on the fact that the giving of the

Torah was witnessed by millions of people. Following Maharal's explanation of Rashi's reasoning, it would be much more logical to begin the Torah with the story of the revelation at Mount Sinai. So what does Rashi mean that the Torah should have begun with this *mitzvah*?

The answer lies in understanding what the significance of this *mitzvah* is and why Hashem chose it to be the first one given to the newly formed nation of Bnei Yisroel.

In fact, the *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hachodesh*, that of establishing the new month, really goes far beyond merely establishing a Jewish calendar. This *mitzvah* establishes Hashem's intention for Bnei Yisroel to be His partners in running the world. The *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hachodesh* is the very definition of the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people.

Hashem created the world and everything in it, but the management of this world, and Hashem's interaction with it, is in the control of the Jewish people. Giving the Jewish people the power (and responsibility) to establish the calendar and to determine when each month begins means that we have control over time.

In other words, if we decide that today is Rosh Chodesh, Yom Kippur falls out on one day. If we determine that tomorrow is Rosh Chodesh, Yom Kippur falls out on a different day.

This is incredibly significant. In essence, we are the arbiters of how and when Hashem interacts with the world because we hold power over time. We can actually imbue days with holiness based on our decisions. This is a profound statement of the trust Hashem has in the Jewish people and defines the depth of our relationship with Him.

This is why it was the first *mitzvah* given to the Jewish nation; it defines our role

within creation and the role Hashem expects us to play within His divine plan for the world. It is for this reason that Rashi suggests that the Torah should have begun with the section of the Torah known as *Parshas Hachodesh*.

Did You Know...

As previously discussed, *Parshas Kiddush Hachodesh* is about the sanctification of the new moon. The new moon tells us which day is the first of the month, and therefore which days are *Yomim Tovim*. This is the first *mitzvah* given to the Jewish nation because it is the greatest gift Hashem could give us: the power to decide when we serve him, and the power to make days holy.

The Chachamim, based on a calculation they received from Moshe who received it from Hashem at Mount Sinai, calculated the lunar month at 29.53059 solar days. This translates to 29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes, and 3.333 seconds.

About forty years ago NASA established, based on calculations and data derived from satellites orbiting the earth, that the lunar month is exactly 29.530588 days long. It is remarkable to note that when the Jewish calendar was established there were no satellites. In fact, if we think for a moment, they were also lacking computers, telescopes, and even watches. This makes the knowledge that our sages had all that more remarkable.

If we compare the two calculations:

29.53059 = Sages' measure

29.530588 = NASA satellite measure

The difference is 00.000002 = two one-millionths of a day!

It is quite possible that if we give NASA another couple thousand years they may actually get it right!

