



Tazriah: Building Unity One Smile at a Time

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In this week's *Parsha* of *Tazriah*, we learn of the laws of the *Tzaraas*. We loosely translate this disease as leprosy, but in fact, the Talmud explains that this was no ordinary physical ailment. *Tzaraas* was the physical manifestation of spiritual sickness. Specifically, if one spoke *Lashon Hara* (slandering or negative speech) about another, he or she would be stricken by this disease. We are told in great detail about the process for declaring someone a *Metzora* as well the multi-step purification process. While there are many intricate details and steps involved with this process, one thing is clear – it is only a *Kohen* who can make a final determination as to whether a particular discoloration is in fact *Tzaraas*. Someone can study the laws for years – but it is only a *Kohen* who can utter the words “*Tamei*” (impure) or “*Tahor*” (pure). It is this Kohanic utterance that determines the ritual status of the individual.

But why the *Kohen*? Why is he vested with this ultimate authority? The person who contracted *Tzaraas* spoke negatively about another (as mentioned above) and in doing so has driven a wedge, created a chasm, and orchestrated a divide within *Klal Yisroel*. Who can repair this damage? It is only a *Kohen*, a descendant of Aharon whose entire being was dedicated to creating peace, harmony, love, and respect within the ranks of the Jewish people, who can heal this stricken individual. The *Metzora* must come face to face with a man who is the very antithesis of what the *Metzora* represents. The *Metzora* divides; the *Kohen* bridges. The *Metzora* sows the seeds of animosity; the *Kohen* nurtures the sapling of love. The *Metzora* sees the worst in everyone; the *Kohen* sees the beauty in every soul. It is only the *Kohen* who can repair that which the *Metzora* has destroyed.

The laws may not be currently applicable, but the message certainly is. We must make sure the *Kohen* triumphs over the *Metzora*. We must do what we can to prevent animosity, slander, and negativity within the ranks of our people. We must foster an atmosphere of *achdus* (unity).

We speak about unity often. Throughout the ages, rabbis, sages, and scholars have all written on the need to avoid conflict and create national cohesion. The Talmud warns us repeatedly as to the dangers of being a divided people. It sounds so simple – yet, it often feels so elusive. Where do we start? What is the first step in achieving this lofty goal of Jewish unity? There is an incredible passage in the Zohar (Shmini, 36a):

Rabbi Pinchos ben Yair was once travelling, and his donkey began to bray happily. Rabbi Pinchos said, “If my donkey is braying happily, it must be that another Jew is on the road approaching us. As he rounded the side of the mountain, he met Rabbi Elazar. Rabbi Pinchos said, “I now know why my donkey was so joyous!” Rabbi Elazar embraced and kissed Rabbi Pinchos. Rabbi Pinchos said, “If we are travelling in the same direction, let’s travel together.” To which Rabbi Elazar responded, “Once I have found you, I will travel in whichever direction you are headed.”

The Zohar then goes on to discuss the various topics they pondered as they were journeying together. What I find striking is the donkey. Rabbi Pinchos ben Yair had a donkey which brayed happily at the presence of another Jew. This is because Rabbi Pinchos ben Yair was one who greeted every person with a smile and warm countenance. When you greet someone with a smile you convey to them a sense of importance and meaning. A simple smile allows a person to feel recognized. So many people walk through this world thinking they are unimportant or extra. So many people feel the world doesn't need them, and no one would care or notice if they were no longer here. When you smile at someone, you are making the statement, “*You are important. Important, enough that I am going to take the few extra moments, flex my facial muscles, and extend a greeting to you. I see you, I recognize you, we are part of the same nation. Even if I don't know you – deep down, I do.*” And when you do this often enough, you begin to change the world around you. The feeling of friendship, warmth, companionship, and love for the other is felt – even by your donkey.

The road to *Achdus*, national unity is a long and circuitous one. But it begins with a smile. It begins with a simple gesture that shows, creates, and engenders connection.