

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת תזריע-מצורע

וביום השמיני ימול בשר ערלתו

“On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised” (12:3)

The Mechilta writes that we can see the greatness of Shabbos in the fact that a baby cannot have a bris milah until he has experienced a Shabbos. Since Shabbos is a basic foundation of Judaism, he cannot have a bris until he has gone through a Shabbos. This is difficult to understand. A baby is not capable of understanding Shabbos and is unaware of what day it is. What difference will it make to the baby if he lives through a Shabbos? The answer is that Shabbos is not only about the physical eating and resting. There is a spiritual enjoyment and tranquility that can be derived from Shabbos. The neshama of the baby can sense this spirituality that is inherent in Shabbos and this has an effect of him. Thus, although the baby is unaware of the physical aspects of Shabbos, it does have a spiritual impact on him and is therefore an important prerequisite for having a bris milah.

In Parshas Lech Lecha, Rabbeinu Bachya explains the idea behind bris milah. He writes that the milah serves as a permanent sign on a person's body of trust in Hashem. Wherever a person goes, he has this special sign with him. The midrash tells the story that Dovid HaMelech was in the bathhouse and became distressed that he was not able to occupy himself with any mitzvos. When he noticed his bris milah, he was happy because he realized that he was never without mitzvos. The milah constantly reminds a person that he is a Jew and must act accordingly.

On a deeper level, Rabbeinu Bachya writes that a bris milah brings about an atonement, much like sacrifices do. In fact, we find many similarities between a sacrifice and a bris milah. Just as an animal cannot be offered as a sacrifice until it is eight days old, a baby has a bris milah on the eighth day. Just as the blood of the sacrifice is the catalyst for atonement, so is the blood of milah. Just as the Kohanim had to eat the sacrificial meat in order to complete the atonement process, so too a bris milah is not complete without the ensuing festive meal. However, the bris milah achieves a greater atonement than a sacrifice because the vehicle for this atonement is the person's body, rather than his possessions. Nevertheless, milah is the only time that we are permitted to cause harm to any person. One is never permitted to wound his fellow man or to wound himself. Putting one's life in danger is never allowed.

אדם כי יהיה בעור בשרו שאת או ספחת או בהרת והיה בעור בשרו לנגע צרעת והובא אל אהרן הכהן או אל אחד מבניו הכהנים

“If a person will have on the skin of his flesh a s'eis or a sapachas or a baheres, and it will become a tzaraas affliction on the skin of his flesh; he shall be brought to Aharon the Priest, or to one of his sons the priests” (13:2)

Chazal tell us that tzaraas comes as a punishment for seven sins, the most prominent of which is loshon hara. The Midrash tells the story of a peddler who was going around announcing, “Who wants life?” R' Yanai went over to the man and expressed some interest. The peddler told R' Yanai that what he had was not for a great talmid chacham. R' Yanai insisted so the peddler pulled out a Tehillim and read him the verse: “Who is the man who desires life?...Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking falsehood.” R' Yanai exclaimed that he had never been able to satisfactorily explain this posuk until now. What did he not understand about this? The answer given by the Kochav MiYaakov is that he thought not speaking loshon hara guaranteed a good life in olam haba, but not necessarily in this world. Now he understood that avoiding gossip leads to a pleasant life in this world as well. Many times people get stressed out and cause great pain through their speech. If one is careful, he will spare himself much hardship. The Ksav Sofer says that Rabbi Yanai learned that it is not enough for one to watch his own mouth but to tell others to do the same and be careful as well. This is why the posuk continues: “Avoid evil and do good.” It is not only enough to avoid evil but one must make sure to also do good.

The Ketzos HaChoshen writes that there are many people who do not live for today. They are constantly looking forward to some important event in the future. This is not the proper way to live. Every single day has a potential to be used for certain accomplishments. No day serves only as a stepping stone to the next. One who "desires life" is also one who "loves days." Each and every day is special and is to be cherished. There is always work to be done. It is not just another day in the countdown to some special day.

A similar message is conveyed with regard to Avraham Avinu. Why does the Torah repeat itself and say that "Avraham was old, he came with days?" Isn't old the same as coming with days? The Alshich explains that every day in the life of Avraham Avinu was full of meaning and was lived to its fullest. Not only did Avraham live a long life in years, but he also was coming with days and each day had been meaningful and lived with a purpose. The Vilna Gaon quotes a Chazal that says that some people merit old age but their days are nothing because each day was not meaningful, while some have meaningful days without old age. Avraham merited to have both. He was an old man whose every day had been lived with meaning and purpose. We should also strive to make each day of our lives meaningful and be sure to accomplish something every day.

This is a central theme of Sefiras HaOmer. We count "Today is 18 days of the Omer" rather than saying "Today is 32 days until Kabalas HaTorah" because the Omer is not just a seven-week waiting period. It is seven weeks to improve ourselves, seven weeks of preparation for Shavuos, the day on which we accept the Torah anew every year. Today is another day in the Omer, another day to climb closer to the pinnacle of Shavuos. Kabalas HaTorah does not happen on its own. We must use each day of the Omer to attain it.

וראה הכהן את הנגע בעור הבשר ושער בנגע הפך לבן ומראה הנגע עמק מעור בשרו נגע צרעת הוא וראהו הכהן וטמא אתו

“The priest shall look at the affliction on the skin of the flesh: If the hair in the affliction has changed to white, and the affliction's appearance is deeper than the skin of his flesh - it is a tzaraas affliction; the priest shall look at it and declare him contaminated” (13:3)

Why is white hair a sign of impurity by tzaraas even though white usually represents cleanliness and purity? R' Yonasan Eibeschutz explains that white hair is a sign of old age. The white hair in tzaraas indicates that the person's sin is not a recent development but is deeply ingrained in the person. It has reached the point where Hashem needs to inform the person of the gravity of his sins and the need to repent. This message is delivered in the form of tzaraas and the incriminating white hair.

Tzaraas is a spiritual plague that affects a person who has sinned. However, this does not necessarily mean that tzaraas is a bad thing. It is an indication from Hashem of a person's station in life and a reminder to improve. In fact, the Netziv writes that one is only worthy of tzaraas if he has begun to travel down the path of repentance. If a person has not begun the repentance process, he will not be stricken with tzaraas because he is not yet worthy of the atonement that is brought about by having tzaraas. Thus, if one were afflicted with tzaraas, it would be a comfort because he would know that he is moving in the right direction and is on the path of teshuva.

R' Dovid Feinstein goes even further and points out that the word “nega,” “affliction,” has the same letters as the word “oneg,” “pleasure.” Tzaraas can also be construed as a happy occasion. Today, many people have trouble accepting criticism and rebuke. This is a wrong attitude. One's feeling about criticism should be quite the opposite. One should be glad that his fellow is helping him change his ways and should thank him for doing so. Being wrong and being reminded of it does not make one a bad person. Rather than viewing the rebuke as an attack, one should view it as an opportunity. The door has been opened and now the person must step through it.

וצוה הכהן ולקח למטהר שתי צפרים חיות טהרות ועץ ארז ושני תולעת ואזב

“The priest shall command; and for the person being purified there shall be taken two live clean birds, cedar wood, crimson thread and hyssop” (14:4)

The Torah instructs the metzora to take two birds for his purification process, one to be slaughtered and

one to be sent away. Rashi says that a bird is constantly chirping and thus symbolizes a person whose mouth is always running. R' Dovid Feinstein says that the slaughter of the bird represents the fact that this characteristic must be eradicated. However, one might say that he will never talk because talking only leads to tzaraas. Therefore, the Torah says to take another bird and send it out to the field. One should not necessarily avoid talking, just stay away from groups of idle talkers and engage in Torah study and other noble pursuits. Avoid associating with gossipers and attaching yourself to them and there will be no need to be concerned about the problems of talking.

Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur
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