

RABBI GEWIRTZ'S D'VAR TORAH FOR PARSHIOT TAZRIA-METZORA

“Boy am I glad that doesn’t happen anymore!” This is a very normal reaction to learning from the Parshiot, Tazria and Metzora, that G-d used to send various types of נִגְעִים (afflictions) as responses to moral failings. The Torah refers to all three of them by a common name, צָרַעַת (Tzora’at), which is often translated as “leprosy”, but human skin is only one place where it appeared. Our oral tradition describes the skin type as G-d’s response to excessive negative gossip or *lashon hara*, לְשׁוֹן הָרָע, the clothing type for haughtiness, and the kind that developed on the walls of stone houses as an indication that its occupants were unusually stingy. We consider their absence a blessing and are grateful that we don’t have to be concerned with them.

But after reading an unusually long (essay length) commentary from Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno (16th century, Italy), my opinion changed. It reminded me of an article I had seen about a rare condition called “congenital insensitivity to pain”. Here is a paragraph about it from the website independent.co.uk/us:

“Teenager Ashlyn Blocker, who lives with her parents in the US town of Patterson, Georgia, feels no pain and is one of a small number of people in the world who have been diagnosed with congenital insensitivity to pain.

“Everyone in my class asks me about it, and I say, ‘I can feel pressure, but I can’t feel pain’,” Ashlyn explained.

She cannot feel hot objects, or cuts and scratches on her skin, or insect bites. She can, and has, put her hand in boiling water without feeling any painful sensation – which has led to a lifetime of anxiety for her parents Tara and John.”

Just as the ability to feel pain protects most of us from physically dangerous behavior, Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno explains that Tzaraat was a compassionate warning about morally destructive behavior. He says that it operated at a time when the majority of the Jewish people were highly spiritually sensitive and that when “a few select Jews” would be afflicted, the rest would “get the message”. We, however, no longer qualify for such a miraculous and specific wake up call. It is our loss that in Tzaraat’s absence, we suffer somewhat from a “congenital insensitivity to destructive moral behavior”.

Now the good news! Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno insists that G-d still tries to get our attention when we act badly. Very often this is in the form of some misfortune. (Difficulties in life may also be growth opportunities, unrelated to correcting mistakes.) We can also ask G-d to help us discover our failings in a more pleasant way. None of us want to be like a student who is so hopeless, that the teacher pays him no attention. (Don’t worry, there are no children like that in the Silver Academy!!) Seforno says that there are people who are so far gone that G-d doesn’t “bother” them. But most of us would welcome even a jarring alarm bell so as not to miss the train that can take us on a life’s journey to greatness.

