

# Isolation and Quarantine

Metzora 5782/2022

Continuing with the discussion around the spiritual affliction of *tzaraat* that we discussed in the previous article, Parashat Metzora discusses the purification process. It is one thing to sit with an ailment and discuss how that looks etc, but for a people that has always been forward focussed, future driven, the more important aspects are how to move forward.

The Torah establishes that the afflicted person leaves the camp. This is first noted by the fact that the Priest needs to leave the camp to check on the afflicted person<sup>1</sup>. While the Seforno mentions that the Priest only needs to go to the boundary of the camp and the person meets him there out of ease for the Priest<sup>2</sup>, the Chizkuni notes that going to the boundary was the first step in the reconciliation process<sup>3</sup>.

The person journeys from his or her isolation and quarantine to the boundary of the camp. It is the first interaction between the afflicted and society. It is a gradual reintroduction.

The most famous example of this isolation and quarantining is that of Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses<sup>4</sup>. She is stricken with the ailment and leaves the camp for 7 days. The Jewish people did not leave from their place, even though the Shechina, God's presence in the Mishkan, had left. The Seforno explains because the Jewish people realised that the Shechina was going into its own form of quarantine or isolation, separating itself from the case of *tzaraat*<sup>5</sup>.

In a Covid world we understand the precautions and necessities of isolation and quarantine. But what was the reason it was needed for this spiritual ailment?

The Chafetz Chaim whose magnum opus was *Shemirat haLashon*, Guarding of One's Speech, writes that the sin that causes the ailment of *tzaraat* is that of *lashon horah*, an evil tongue<sup>6</sup>. We see this explicitly in the case of Moses' ill speech towards the Jewish people at the burning bush, and Miriam's speech against her brother Moses that caused her to be exiled for 7 days.

It is with this in mind that I think the quarantining became so important.

The Rambam in his Mishneh Torah explains that human nature is to be attracted to the ideas and thoughts of their neighbour or the people around them, for negative and positive<sup>7</sup>. If a person is spreading gossip it can spread like wildfire, suddenly the whole neighbourhood is speaking ill of other people – God puts a circuit breaker into the mix – *tzaraat*, quarantine and then a gradual reintroduction into society.

*Tzaraat* might be a spiritual ailment, but it is a warning sign to the breaking down of the very fabric of society. The redemptive path back is to slowly re-establish yourself back into society in a way that makes you realise the need for building it up, rather than breaking it down.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**