



VAYIKRA

Parshat Tazria - Metzora
How Can I Find My Blind Spots?
April 21, 2018

HOW CAN I FIND MY BLIND SPOTS?

THE FACE IN THE MIRROR: ARE YOU WHAT YOU HATE?

ABSTRACT

In today's polarized climate of partisan politics and media bias, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between objective facts and subjective opinions, and to determine who if anybody can be trusted.

In this week's double Torah reading we find one of life's most profound and relevant psychological insights: How to discover one's blind spots?

"What?!" you may be wondering. "What possible message can we derive from this week's reading, which discusses leprosy and its many manifestations – blotches, blemishes, rashes, patches, spots and stains – and their purification process?!" These laws are obsolete today; this type of spiritual disease no longer exists. So what, we may ask, have they got to do with me?

The short answer is: Everything.

A dramatic episode with King David, a moving story with the Mittlerer Rebbe and some fascinating examples in human behavior, and our modern-day Twitter, of all things – reveal for us how the eternal Torah laws about the leper teach us a lesson that is more relevant than ever in helping us understand a vital part of our psyches. They offer us a formula to dislodge one of our most critical blocks in life: Our own blind spots.

They help us discover an essential truth: You are what you see. Divine Providence holds up a mirror before us, and (in one form or another) we are what we love, and what we... hate. So be very careful the next time you feel like passing judgment on another.

1. Blind Spots (Humor)

"Do you have any blind spots?" asked the therapist of his new client.

The young man replied: "Yes, I do. But I know what they are..."

In today's polarized climate of partisan politics and media bias, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between objective facts and subjective opinions, and to determine who if anybody can be trusted.

In this week's double Torah reading we find one of life's most profound and relevant psychological insights: How to discover one's blind spots?

2. Riddle

Let's begin with this question:

Imagine that a wealthy man who is part of a scavenger hunt rings your doorbell in the middle of the night. He asks if you have the final item on his list, a piece of wood that measures about three-by-seven feet. He says he will pay you \$50,000 for it.

What would you do?

Think about it, and we'll get back to the answer later.

3. Spots and Blemishes

So let's speak about blind spots, as described in this week's Torah portion, where the Torah takes on the issue of all kinds of spots and blemishes.

In the double reading of *Parshat Tazria-Metzorah*, the Torah discusses leprosy and its many manifestations – blotches, blemishes, rashes, patches, spots and stains, and finally presents the purification process for all of the above.

And I know what you are thinking: “What's that got to do with me?” What possible message can we derive from this week's Torah reading?

Leprosy as a disease has virtually disappeared from the world – and is totally unknown in the West. It's also true that the kind of leprosy that the Torah is speaking about is a spiritual (miraculous) disease that no longer exists today,¹ and its laws are obsolete after the Temple has been destroyed.

So what do the Torah's laws of leprosy have to do with me?

The short answer is: Everything.

The eternal Torah laws about the leper teach us a lesson that is more relevant than ever in helping us understand a vital part of our psyches.

At first, the mother was resistant to this approach. She had no idea what to tell her son. She had never had a real conversation with him. Her only relationship with him was of a mother to a child. But he was no longer

¹ Rambam, Mishne Torah, end of Laws of Tum'at Tsara'at. Likkutei Torah on our chapter (Tazria) 22b.

that.

“Your son still needs your guidance, but tailored to his maturing self,” my colleague advised. “If you don’t open a dialogue now with him, things will get worse to the point that you may never be able to reconcile in the future. You will grow further and further apart.”

The mother finally agreed. The evening went very well. Mother and son had a cordial conversation for the first time. The young man was taken aback and quite surprised to be spoken to as an adult.

At this time, he is still struggling. Parents and child have yet to be at peace with each other, but now there is a relationship. There is some mutual respect and acceptance – a foundation has been established than can be built upon. The parents recognize the need for their son to independently discover his path, even if he stumbles and takes some wrong turns. The son acknowledges the need to respect his parents’ guidelines at home at least.

4. Mark of the Leper

Regarding all these spots and blemishes, the mark of the so-called leper – or *metzorah* as the Torah calls him – the sages tell us that “a person can examine all leprosy signs except his own,”² which really means that “a person can see everyone’s faults except his own.”³

Ah yes.

Every one of us is subjective and biased. When something affects us personally, our biases and interests can blind us or seriously distort our vision.

“Love covers all faults”⁴ said King Solomon in his Proverbs. For, as we know, love is blind – especially self-love, right?

Indeed, self-love can blind us to our most glaring inadequacies.

2 Negaim 2:5.

3 Meiri Avos 1:7. Cited in Midrash Shmuel. See also *Ish al Diglo* 5700 chapter 3. *V’ohanto* 5701 chapter 15.

4 Mishlei 10:12.

5. Twitter and the Metzora

This, interestingly, is the sin of the *Metzora*, the leper in the Torah: He is struck by leprosy because of *loshon hora*, speaking badly and slandering others.⁵

When one is blinded due to self-love they only see the flaws and failings of others, not their own. As mentioned above, us that “a person can see everyone’s faults except his own.”

This is also the reason that one of the elements in healing the metzora is bringing an offering of two birds. Why birds? “Because lesions of tzara’ath come as a result of derogatory speech, which is caused by chattering. Therefore, for his cleansing, this person is required to bring birds, which twitter constantly with chirping sounds.”⁶

Something to think about next time we tweet on Twitter...

6. The Path to Clarity

How then can we ever free ourselves from our blind spots and reach objective clarity?

One way, of course, is by consulting an objective friend, teacher or mentor, even a professional counselor or therapist.

Yet, most of us find it difficult to open up to another and confide intimate aspects of our lives. This may be because we fear condemnation, or because we are embarrassed, or because our pride and dignity stand in the way.

There is another way.

And this is what the Torah teaches us in this week’s reading.

⁵ Talmud, Arachin 16a. Rambam in note 1.

⁶ Arachin ibid. Rashi in our chapter 14:4.

7. The Mirror

The entire world serves as a mirror for each one of us as individuals. If we see negative traits in others, this means that we embody that same blemish in one form or another within ourselves.

In the words of the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement:

Your fellow is your mirror. If your own face is clean, the image you perceive will also be flawless. But should you look upon your fellow man and see a blemish, it is your own imperfection that you are encountering – you are being shown what it is that you must correct within yourself.⁷

The Baal Shem Tov further teaches that every event in our lives is purposeful, and an integral part of our divinely ordained mission in life. So we never “chance” upon anything. If we witness an event or phenomenon, there is a reason for this experience, a reason that is closely tied to our own path in life.

Therefore, it follows that if Divine Providence causes us to see someone else’s faults or even degradation, it is for a positive and constructive end – to open our eyes to a failing of our own.

Now, I know what you are thinking: How can this be? If I encounter an obnoxious person, this does not mean I am obnoxious. If someone treats me rudely, this does not mean that I am rude.

Undoubtedly true. You are not obnoxious or rude like this person, but *something* in his behavior should resonate with you. *Something* in his behavior is holding up a mirror to a blemish in you.

8. Chassidic Story

Let me tell you a story.

There once was a famous Chassidic Rebbe, his name was Rabbi Dovber, also known as the Mitteler Rebbe, the son and successor of the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. People from far and wide would come and seek his advice and blessing, and long lines would form of people waiting for an audience with him.

One day, in the middle of such an audience, the Rebbe suddenly announced that he could see no one else. His disciples were astonished. So many people were still waiting – what had happened?

⁷ Ma’or Einayim Parshas Chukas. See Toldos Yaakov Yosef Parshas Terumah. Sefer HaSichos 5700 p. 83. Likkutei Sichos vol. 10 pp. 24.

They were doubly astonished when they heard the Rebbe weeping and praying behind closed doors. It took two days for the Rebbe to emerge, and then, in answer to the many questions of his disciples, he explained what had happened.

He told them that when people came to him for advice and described their faults and mistakes, he was always able to counsel them with compassion because he would first search and rectify a similar fault (in far more subtler form) within himself. On this occasion, however, a man came to him and confided something so heinous that the Rebbe's instant response was repulsion. And just as instantly the Rebbe realized that this very fact was pointing out a very similar fault in him. But search as he did, he could not find anything remotely similar (even in the subtlest form) within his own experience.

What had so repelled the Rebbe?

The man had confessed that he was guilty of a behavior that involved taking pleasure at the expense of another who cannot participate in that pleasure.

Of course, the Rebbe had never in life even remotely thought of such a thing, yet the very fact that the man had shared this demanded self-examination. The Rebbe could not advise this person until he first found a similar "fault" within himself. Since he could not find anything close to this, the Rebbe stopped seeing anyone, and he wept and prayed – and soul-searched – to discover within himself that which was unable to see.

He finally identified what was the fault in himself. The Rebbe realized that he sometimes took pleasure in sharing deep Kabbalistic insights with his students, though they could not understand such complex matters and participate in his pleasure.

This story has many tremendous lessons for us. One of the most powerful is the ultra-sensitivity – the profound empathy – necessary to help advise and heal others. When someone shared a problem with the Rebbe, he did not for a moment think to himself that this is "his problem, not mine, and in my benevolence I will help him." The Rebbe took the issue personally – and saw it as his *own* problem. He saw the issue like a mirror, reflecting back to him a part of himself. He understood that the only way he can actually help the other is by seeking out within himself a similar challenge, albeit on a far lesser scale, correct it, and then he can wisely advise the one who served as a "mirror" how to rectify his life.

If this is the way a great Rebbe behaved – a holy man incapable of the petty improprieties of regular men and women like ourselves – how much more do we have to see the shortcomings of others as mirror images of our own lives? As wake-up calls to look at ourselves and improve our situations.

We may not guilty of the exact same offense that we see in another, but the principle applies.

9. Examples

For example:

We might not ever loudly vent our spleen at a waiter, like that obnoxious guy at the adjoining table, but do we ever subtly take out our frustration on people who serve us? Do we blame the waiter for the overcooked steak and reduce or withhold his tip, though the quality of the food is hardly his personal fault?

This is the mirror that the obnoxious guy at the next table is holding up to us.

We might never gossip in *shul*, but do we ever interrupt the prayers of others by warmly greeting a friend, praying too loudly ourselves, or failing to attend to our rambunctious children who are annoying others?

We might never steal office supplies from our employer, but do we make personal phone calls at work, or answer our personal e-mails, or surf the net?

We might never maliciously slander someone, but do we ever get caught up in a bit of chit-chat and rumor-mongering on Twitter (or Facebook)?

We might never rudely turn away from the beggar with an outstretched hand, but are we likely to share our umbrella with someone else in a downpour? Are we likely to let the old lady go ahead us in line for the check-out counter? Are we always sensitive to the needs of others around us?

Something in the behavior of that obnoxious, rude person who repels us is holding up a mirror to a blemish in us.

10. Dealing with Imperfections

Ultimately, this is the only way we can truly recognize and deal with our own imperfections.

“Love covers up all sins,” King Solomon said and wasn’t he the wisest of men? For what greater love is there than the love of self?

Our self-love blinds us to our own deficiencies. We tend to forgive ourselves too easily and minimize whatever

faults of ours we are aware of. But, a negative trait or deed, so innocent and justifiable in ourselves, appears in all its dreadfulness when discerned in others.

And this is one of the most effective way that G-d has to open our eyes. He shows us what is wrong with our fellow and broadly hints that we suffer from the same lack.

Then if we truly wish to improve ourselves ... if we truly search our hearts until we discover what it is that G-d is pointing out to us ... our self-love will no longer blind us. It will not be able to obscure what has been so glaringly presented to us in the person of this dreadful fellow.

11. The Question of Rebuke

At this point, some here may be asking: “Is that necessarily so? Maybe G-d is presenting us with this dreadful fellow so that we chastise him and set him on the right path?”

Good question.

To answer this question, we must first take a closer look at the principle of Hashgacha Pratit – that is, the particulars of how Divine Providence works.

Hashgacha Pratit means that not only is every event purposeful, but also its every aspect and nuance.

For example, the same event can imply different things to different observers. Divine Providence is particular in that it shows each observer precisely what is applicable to him or her.

So if you witness an event, it stands to reason that everything about it, including the particular way in which it has affected you, has a specific application to your life. The same applies when you witness a negative act or behavior pattern on the part of another.

Here, you must consider two things: 1) what you perceive and 2) how you feel about it.

You may be aware of what the other person has done is wrong, yet such knowledge may only bring forth in you a feeling of sadness or compassion.

Indeed, when G-d makes you aware of another person’s deficiency for the sole reason that you do something about it, you’d see the other person’s problem and, rather than being repelled, you would be moved to try to resolve it. Your compassionate response would help you to reach out to the other person in a loving and tolerant manner.

But, if the opposite is true – if you are in fact repelled and feel no compassion – then you must conclude that this aspect of the experience also serves a purpose. Divine Providence has provided you with a mirror with which to discern your own shortcomings.

11. The Question of Rebuke

Don't worry, you are not alone. Some of the great biblical figures had to face that mirror. Perhaps the most dramatic example is that of King David with Bathsheba.⁸

We all know the story:

One night, looking down from the roof of his palace, King David saw a beautiful woman bathing down below. She was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, who was away at war.

King David sent for her and spent the night with her. When she became pregnant, he ordered her husband to come home. But, although Uriah returned to Jerusalem, he refused the king's order to go to his wife, stating that he could not do so while his comrades were dying on the battlefield.

Not knowing what else to do, King David then commanded his general Yoav to place Uriah on the front lines, where the poor fellow died in battle. And then King David married Bathsheba.

At this point, G-d sent the Prophet Nathan to hold up the mirror to the king. And this is how the prophet did it:

He said that he came to inform the king of a great injustice in the land – a rich man with many sheep, took the one small, beloved lamb of a poor man and had it slaughtered for a feast.

Furious at what he has just heard, King David immediately passed sentence on such dreadful, repulsive behavior: “As G-d lives, the one who has done this deserves death.”

Responded the Prophet: “You are that man!”

In an instant, King David saw the face in the mirror, understood and broke down, confessing, “I have sinned before G-d!”

⁸ 2nd Book of Samuel, chapters 11 and 12.

However we interpret this controversial story – as the Talmud explains⁹ that it wasn't an actual sin (because Batsheba was divorced), or that Batsheba was divinely destined for King David, and they would have child, Solomon, that would redeem the apparent indiscretion – the fact remains that King David's behavior in acquiring Batsheba certainly was not in the spirit of G-d's highest standards.

Yet, we are told this story even about the great King David – which is itself a fascinating fact, that the Torah does not mince words and whitewash any form of behavior – to teach us that every person, even great people, can be blinded by self-love. And we therefore all need a mirror to remind us of our flaws.

One way this mirror is presented to us is by asking us (as King David was asked by Nathan): How we would judge another who transgressed.¹⁰

Think about that next time you feel like passing judgment on another... Or you feel like tweeting like a bird about another...

9 Shabbat 56a.

10 As the Baal Shem Tov's explains the Mishne in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), which we read these weeks: Know... before whom you are destined to give a judgment and accounting (Ethics 3:1):

When a person comes before the supernal court to account for his sojourn on earth, he is first asked to voice his opinion on another life. "What do you think," he is asked, "about one who has done so and so?" After he offers his verdict, it is demonstrated to him how these deeds and circumstances parallel those of his own life. Ultimately, it is the person himself who passes judgment on his own failings and achievements.

This explains the peculiar wording of the above passage of the Ethics, "before whom you are destined to give a judgment and accounting." Is not the verdict handed down after the cross-examination of the defendant? So should not the "judgment" follow the "accounting"? And why are you destined to "give judgment" as opposed to being judged? But no judgment is ever passed on a person from above. Only after he has himself ruled on any given deed does the heavenly court make him account for a matching episode in his own life.

The same idea is also implicit in another passage in our chapter of the Ethics (3:16): "Retribution is extracted from a person, with his knowledge and without his knowledge." As a person knowingly expresses his opinion on a certain matter, he is unwittingly passing judgment on himself.

What we have here is a most profound insight into the specialty of the human soul. In all of creation, nothing is loftier than the "spark of G-dliness" that is the soul of man. This is reflected in the fact that man has been given the power of choice—a power he shares only with the Creator Himself.

Free choice allows him to stumble and err, but it is also what makes his potential for good infinitely greater than G-d's more spiritual creations. So even when a soul comes to stand in judgment, implying that there are perhaps faults and failings in its past performance, no judge, be it the loftiest and most spiritual of heavenly beings, has any jurisdiction over its fate. The only power on earth or heaven that can judge man is man himself!

13. Transforming Flaws into Assets

Because self-love prevents us from confronting our own defects, G-d has found another way to call our attention to them – by holding up an example of another in whom we can see our own flaws, as clearly as in a mirror.

If someone were to tell you, “Hey you have x, y, and z imperfections,” you would most likely become defensive. Your own self-love and personal bias would block out any true critique. But you have no problem seeing these very shortcomings in another person.

Thus, G-d in His wise way found a strategy to get you to notice your own flaws by seeing them in someone else. Now all you need is the wisdom to understand that what you see is a reflection of yourself.

So the next time you recognize a blemish in another and are about to pass judgment, remember:

You are what you see.

Ask yourself: Are you what you hate?

When you see another you are actually looking at yourself in a mirror. Both for the negative and for the positive.

14. Blinded to Blind Spots

This week’s double Torah portion teaches us a vital lesson in human psychology: We all have our blind spots. Awareness of this fact is the first critical step to seeing the truth.

For an example of a blind spot, let us go back to our opening riddle – what would you do if someone was standing at your door in middle of the night offering you \$50,000 for a piece of wood that measures about three-by-seven feet?

I am sure some of you may have come with the answer. But most of us wouldn’t realize that we were standing right next to the needed item: the door...

We read these weekly Torah portion to remind us of our collective flaws and of our blind-spots. To remember that “a person can see everyone’s faults except his own.” Since we are blinded to our own flaws, we are allowed to see the flaws in others to show us reflection of ourselves.

But therein also lies a very uplifting message: When we see beauty in another, it reflects for us own inner beauty.

I look at all of you sitting here in shul today and know that I have two options: I can either see the beauty in each of one you or the other side. And I know that what I see will reflect what I am. [Humorously:] I therefore assure you that looking at your wonderful faces all I see is beauty...

I ask you all to try the same exercise: Look at your spouse, your children, your family, your friends, strangers – whom-ever you meet. And consciously ask yourself: What are you seeing? Know that you have the two options – and both will reflect who you are: To see beauty. Or to see flaws.

May we always only see beauty in each other, which reflects the beauty within ourselves.

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