



Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

Yaacov and the Overcoming of Poverty

Jeffrey Albert

The Gemara (Nedarim 64b) teaches that there are four circumstances in which a living person is considered as if dead: childlessness, blindness, poverty, and having *tzaraas*. Leaving aside the last condition (which is no longer manifest in our time), we notice that these afflictions have a connection to the *Avos*, in that each of the *Avos* was temporarily challenged by one of them. Specifically, Avraham suffered from childlessness, Yitzchak became blind, and Yaacov experienced poverty.

The focus of the present essay is on the poverty suffered by Yaacov Avinu. We will discuss the source of this affliction as well as its remedy. In a future article, we will integrate these observations with insights into the experiences of the other *Avos*.

Yaacov's experience of poverty, as reported in the Chumash, began when he left Eretz Canaan. Yaacov, it will be recalled, left hastily after learning (from his mother, Rivka) that his brother, Esav, was determined to kill him. This was following Yaacov's "theft" of the *bracha* that Esav was expecting to receive from their father, Yitzchak. Given Yaacov's rush, it would not be surprising if he had gone with few belongings.

However, a midrash (Devarim Rabbah 2:20) tells us that when he left Eretz Canaan, Yaacov was robbed by Esav's son, Eliphaz, leaving Yaacov bereft of any money or belongings. In fact, Eliphaz – as directed by Esav – had intended to kill Yaacov. Fortunately, Yaacov convinced him to take all of his possessions instead, explaining that doing so would be tantamount to killing Yaacov (in accordance with the above Gemara), so that Eliphaz would technically be obeying his father's command. Consequently, Yaacov arrived at the home of his uncle, Lavan, empty-handed, much to the disappointment of the latter.

Yaacov's experience of poverty may be linked to his "theft" of the *bracha*. To procure this *bracha*, Yaacov needed to deceive his own father. Mishlei (10:4) brings out a causal connection between deception and poverty: "The deceitful scale makes a pauper, but the hand of the diligent brings prosperity." Another verse (ibid. 19:15) states, "Laziness casts one into slumber, and the deceptive soul will go hungry." These two verses make the same two connections: 1) hard work and wealth (with the second passage implying the converse: lack of hard work connected to stagnancy), and 2) dishonesty and poverty.

Yaacov's material hardship continued during his years with Lavan, as Yaacov was continually cheated by the latter. Again, Yaacov's continued tribulation of poverty, now at the hand of Lavan, may be seen as *midah k'neged midah* (measure for measure), that is, a just consequence of Yaacov's earlier dishonest behavior.

Yaacov's eventual path to prosperity involved the dual virtues extolled in Mishlei, namely, honesty and hard work. Yaacov's first step towards commitment to a life of honesty took place soon after his departure from home, when he arrived at Mount Moriah and dreamt of ladders

extending to Heaven. At that time, Yaacov made a vow, concluding with: "...this stone which I have set as a pillar shall become a house of G-d, and whatever You will give me, I shall repeatedly tithe it to you." Our sages tell us that *ma'aser* (tithing), like making *brachos* (blessings), provides us a license to take from Hashem; without our tithes and *brachos*, our use of the world's goods would be like stealing. Thus, Yaacov was essentially vowing not to "steal" from Hashem.

While living with Lavan, Yaacov continued his commitment to honesty and hard work:

These twenty years I have been with you, your ewes and she-goats did not miscarry, nor did I eat the rams of your flock. That which was mangled I never brought you – I myself would bear the loss, from me would you exact it, whether it was stolen by day or stolen by night. This is how I was: By day scorching heat consumed me, and frost by night; my sleep drifted from my eyes. (Bereishis 31:38-40).

At one point during his stay with Lavan, Yaacov appeared to use trickery in his management of Lavan's flocks, when he placed peeled rods in the watering holes to induce birth outcomes that would be favorable to him. However, halacha allows one to use guile to protect yourself from someone who would cheat you. Thus, Yaacov was legitimately using his ingenuity to obtain his due against the swindler, Lavan.

By the end of his stay with Lavan, through some 20 years of hard, honest work, Yaacov had overcome his poverty and accumulated great material wealth. As the verse (Bereishis 30:43) states, "The man became exceedingly prosperous and he attained fecund flocks, maidservants and servants, camels and donkeys."

Thus, it appears that Yaacov took responsibility for the acts of deception committed in his youth, and perhaps understood his poverty (and affliction by Lavan) to be a consequence of this deception. Once Yaacov acquired wealth, he did not take it for granted, nor attribute it to the "strength of his own hand." Rather, Yaacov repeatedly acknowledged Hashem's hand in his fortune; for example, telling Esav, "Please accept my gift which was brought to you, inasmuch as G-d has been gracious to me and inasmuch as I have everything" (Bereishis 33:11).

Thus, we see that Yaacov Avinu took great pains to uproot his early inclination toward dishonesty. (We should of course emphasize the subtle nature of any such flaw that might be identified in our *Avos*, given their lofty level.) Through his practice of hard work and honesty, Yaacov built himself up to such a degree he would become known as the paragon of truthfulness: "ascribe truth to Yaacov" (Micha 7:20). Further, through his efforts, Yaacov planted seeds of greatness for the Jewish nation, whose members would inherit his attributes of honesty and diligence, while also re-experiencing both his poverty and his wealth.

Physical and Spiritual Quarantine

Sarah Rudolph

Some of the material in this dvar Torah comes from Studies in Sefer Vayikra, by Nechama Leibowitz, and from Rav Hirsch's commentary on the Torah.

When a person shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising or... and he will be brought to Aharon the priest or to one of his sons the priests. And the priest will look...and if... it is the plague of *tzaraat*; the priest will look at him and declare him *tamei*. And if... then the priest will shut up the one with the plague for seven days... And the priest will look at him on the seventh day... All the days that the plague is in him, he will be *tamei*; he is *tamei*; he will sit alone; his dwelling will be outside the camp. (Vayikra 13)

Diagnostics, precautionary quarantine, full isolation to avoid transmitting the condition to others... These are very familiar concepts these days.

Indeed, some commentaries have explained *tzaraat* in naturalistic terms of health and avoiding contagion. Nechama Leibowitz cites both Ralbag and Abarbanel as explaining the condition along those lines; for instance, Abarbanel's explanation of the Torah's concern for the clothing of the afflicted individual: "Perhaps after his purification he would want to use the same clothing and shoes, and the pure would come in contact with that impure [object] and perhaps return him to his sickness."

In a third example, which Nechama labels "a combination of the rationalist and non-rationalist," the Meshech Chochmah suggests that *Kohanim* were given the responsibility of examining possible *tzaraat* specifically because *tzaraat* "is a communicable disease... and involvement with it was a dangerous matter, **and for this one needs wondrous personal hashgacha**...to be saved from it... Therefore, the Torah chose the children of Aharon, who were separate from the rest of Israel and subject to a greater level of divine supervision."¹

On the other hand, the Torah in general is not a health manual, and several specific *halachot* of *tzaraat* would make no sense in the treatment of a physical ailment. For instance, the *kohen* is to have all objects removed from the house before examining the potential *tzaraat* (14:36). With a natural illness that could be transmitted via objects, we would surely want to keep everything contained until we're sure the disease is not present; conveniently taking items out to avoid having to diagnose them indicates we are dealing with a condition that follows spiritual rules, not natural law. (As Rav Hirsch comments, "It would be a very peculiar procedure to take out the suspectedly infected clothes, bedding, utensils, etc., out of consideration for the loss to the owner!") Further, we well know the potential for disease transmission in large gatherings; we know special care must be taken if there is even a suspicion of illness in such a setting – yet the *kohanim* did not examine potential *tzaraat* cases during *aliyah l'regel*.

For these and other reasons, Chazal emphasize that *tzaraat* is a result of sin, not germs, and also discuss which sins might bring it on. The most famous is *lashon hara*, for which we see Miriam afflicted with *tzaraat* in Bamidbar 12 and held up as a cautionary tale in Devarim 24:8-9. The Gemara in Arachin 16a, however, lists **seven** sins for which a person might receive *negaim* (plagues): added to *lashon hara* are murder, false oaths, forbidden relationships, arrogance, theft, and stinginess. Vayikra Rabbah 17 goes even further with its list of **ten** sins, and stories in Tanach in which individuals were afflicted with *tzaraat* offer even more causes.

Many of these discussions of *tzaraat* as divine punishment for sin are accompanied by analysis of how the punishment relates to the sin and how it may even serve a corrective purpose – especially in relation to *lashon hara*. For instance, the Gemara in Arachin says the *metzora* is isolated because he caused divisiveness among others. Rav Hirsch explains this isolation as basically a "time-out," a chance to think about what one has done and repent. Along similar lines, he suggests a reason potential *tzaraat* is not examined on festive occasions: Rather than viewing those large gatherings with concern for transmitting a physical disease, *halacha* sees them as opportunities for positive social interactions that might constitute *teshuvah* for earlier infractions. If one can improve one's interpersonal relations among all those people, one may not need the *tzaraat* after all!

Viewing *tzaraat* purely as a punishment for *lashon hara*, as we often do, offers a nice, neat package: the concerning patch of skin (or wall or clothing) is literally a sign from God, one knows what the sign means, and one can then choose to engage in a program of self-improvement to rectify that sin. Nice and easy – much more so than natural phenomena, which in the absence of *nevuah* offer little information about what, if any, human misdeeds could have been the cause.

And yet – though the traditional focus is on *lashon hara* as the cause of *tzaraat*, Chazal find many more possibilities as well. Perhaps all those possibilities can serve to remind us that human life, and sin and repentance and reward and punishment, are rarely so neat and certain. Did the *metzora* only speak ill of someone, or was there also arrogance involved? Etc.

With spiritual afflictions as with physical ones, we may not really be certain of the cause, even when we think we are. On the other hand, with physical afflictions as well as with spiritual ones, we may as well take whatever opportunities arise – in the company of crowds, like the *regalim*, or perhaps in occasional times of isolation – to look within ourselves and find areas in which we might improve.

¹ *This seems like a good point at which to express our prayers on behalf of all those medical professionals on the front lines of the battle against coronavirus. They are certainly in need of both individualized and generalized divine assistance.*

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May Hashem continue to guide and protect us through these uncertain times

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