

This shall be the law of the metzora. (14:2)

Tzaraas, spiritual leprosy, is not visited upon a person in a vacuum. There is a profound reason that this Heavenly punishment just happens to show up one day on a person's body, clothing, or home. In fact, there are a number of reasons, which all have one common thread coursing between them: interpersonal relationships. The *metzora* is a *motzi ra*, brings forth slander, evil speech, arrogance – all these and much more – in their various forms. Everyone has excuses to justify their slanderous talk, whether they feel they are only telling the truth, protecting the public, calling it the way they see it. They cloak their conceit in a veil of righteousness, as they attempt to get away with their character assassination.

After all is said and done, however, we all do it, and often it is actually true! So, what is to motivate a person to keep his mouth shut? I recently came across the *Leket Amarim* from the **tzaddik Horav Yaakov Meir Shechter, Shlita**. This small sefer is a veritable treasure house of practical insight and inspiration. In one of his *maamarim*, Rav Yaakov Meir distinguishes between two terms that are often used in tandem, when they are actually opposite in nature: *Hischazkus*, to strengthen, embolden oneself; *Hisorerus*, to arouse, inspire oneself. When we analyze the definitions of these terms, we note that they actually work in opposition to one another.

Hisorerus, arousal, inspiration, is the force which makes demands on a person, which calls on him to present an accounting of his actions. *Hisorerus* tells a person like it is: "You are doing poorly! You have made many egregious mistakes; you must get your act together." *Hisorerus* admonishes the person to return to Hashem. If the individual possesses a brain, he will respond to his call of inspiration.

Hischazkus emboldens and encourages the individual not to give up hope. True, he "messed up," but all is not lost. We still have hope. One can always repent and once again be embraced by Hashem. These appear to be two distinct approaches in one's relationship with Hashem.

Rav Yaakov Meir explains that these approaches actually complement one another. Indeed, the greatest form of *hisorerus* is *Hischazkus*. It would be a mistake to suggest that *hischazkus* belittles that which is wrong or covers up sin. Absolutely not! *Hischazkus* reveals the sin and uncovers the errors that we all seek to hide. Embedded deep within every individual there is a burning desire to be close to his Divine Source, the Almighty. The *yetzer hora*, evil-inclination, inevitably worms its way in and convinces us that it is too late. We have sinned too much. Give up hope of ever returning to Hashem. Therefore, you might as well continue with your "good time." The resulting depression and hopelessness are the clinchers, such that one is left out in the cold. With time, he becomes increasingly estranged and more and more distant. The worst aspect of this estrangement is that he believes that there is no turning back!

When one hears words of *Hischazkus*, however, and he listens intently to their message, he realizes that there is always hope. This arouses him to do *teshuvah*, repentance, inspiring him to

return to Hashem. The good is hidden within, beneath layers of evil. It is waiting for that special moment when it will be discovered and revealed. Rav Yaakov Meir supports this idea with the words of *Chazal* in *Meseches Bava Metzia* 85. The *Talmud* relates how Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi* was able to return Rabbi Yosi *ben* Rabbi Elazar, grandson of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who had strayed from the path of observance. *Asmechi*, He gave him *semichah*, ordained him. He announced from now on “Yosi” should be referred to as Rabbi Yosi. His goal was simple: By calling him Rabbi, he would strengthen and encourage him that it was not over. He could return and be accepted. It worked, because concealed beneath layers of evil and neglect were the *middos*, character traits, of a truly refined person, an individual that was righteous. This process revealed the inherent good that existed within Rabbi Yosi.

People are surprising. A fellow, who for years had presented himself as evil, suddenly acts atypically and demonstrates a covert sense of righteousness to which we had been clueless, and, under different circumstances, would never have believed. The *Chafetz Chaim* related the following story: The government in one of the Eastern European cities issued a decree demanding that every home in the city sport a large cross on the front door to their home. The punishment for ignoring this decree was death. There was no room for negotiation. One either had the cross, or he died. It was that simple.

Obviously, the city’s Jewish citizens had a problem acquiescing to this decree. What could they do? Their lives hung in the balance. One particular Jew in the community, a pharmacist by profession, was an apostate. He had years earlier reneged his affiliation with Judaism and had continued living in the community as a gentile. In recent years, no one had seen him manifest any affinity toward the religion of his parents. It was, thus, shocking to hear that, of all people, this renegade Jew refused to have a cross on his door. “I am a Jew and Jews do not have crosses,” he said. His response shocked everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike. Indeed, his gentile maid begged him to hang a cross on his door. He ignored her plea and waited patiently for the police to come and arrest him. Come what may be – he was prepared for the worst. His fears were sadly realized, as he was *mekadesh Shem Shomayim*, publicly sanctified Hashem’s Name. From where did he derive the fortitude to make this move? His entire adult life was spent running from Judaism, eschewing religious observance, and, now, in a moment of lucidity he transformed himself into a *kadosh*, holy person! How did it happen?

We all have it within us. Some have concealed it better, while others are fortunate to have the good near the “top.” One should never give up hope. Just keep on “digging.” The good will eventually materialize.