

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

Tzaraas is a punishment visited upon a person whose morally-flawed character has caused him to slander a fellow Jew. It often begins with gossip and wratches up to full-fledged slander and character assassination. A spike in one's self-esteem can catalyze an unbecoming arrogance, which allows a person to think – to actually believe – that he is better than others, that he can decide who is worthy and who is not. This self-generated haughtiness allows him to speak callously of others, to lord over them to the point that they become miserable. He is punished with *tzaraas*, an affliction which will deform him, cause him to be isolated; in short, he will feel the pain that he has caused others.

No one is perfect. Some of us are better than others at concealing our imperfections, while others specialize in finding faults, engendering animus, and being proud of it. After all, it is all part of their self-righteous nature, a haughtiness that encourages entitlement, because “I am better than you.” If these same character-defective individuals would take the time to understand some of the challenges faced by others, they might even become more tolerant, patient and caring. When we categorize and judge people through our myopic lens, refusing to give others the benefit of the doubt, we destroy not only them – but also ourselves. Yes, there are people who have let us down, who have downright lied to us, who have hurt us both materially and emotionally, but they, too, have shortcomings. By overlooking their personal challenges which led them to act harshly toward us, we are encouraging them to continue in their downfall spiral. If we would just pause a moment to give the other fellow some latitude, we might discover later on that we have misread the situation.

Assuming responsibility requires an element of maturity which, unfortunately, is at a premium. This is especially true when there is someone readily available upon whom we might defer the onus of guilt. Raising children requires enormous responsibility which, regrettably, some parents relegate to the school. The *rebbeim/moros* become the sacrificial lamb for such parents who are inept and ineffectual. Children growing up in such homes learn quickly that all of their problems are the result of the school and its faculty. The teacher soon becomes the enemy, and everything that he/she does, regardless of its positive motivation, is always viewed through a jaundiced perspective. The following story should give us something to consider before we misjudge and misspeak.

Rav Mendel Kravetz was a European Jew who emigrated from Vilna to Yerushalayim at the turn of the twentieth century. Any student of history is aware of the economic deprivation and hunger that prevailed in the old *yishuv* at the time. Despite the misery and squalor that was rampant, its inhabitants were satiated with boundless *simchas hachaim*, joy of life, in having the good fortune of living in Yerushalayim. Rav Mendel sought every which way to support his family of eight young children. Alas, no work was available. Finally, the *menahel*, principal of the *Talmud Torah*, offered him a job – to teach a class of twenty-five young boys. Rav Mendel was a saintly scholar whose pleasant disposition and caring manner made him a perfect candidate to imbue these young children with faith in Hashem and an appreciation and knowledge of His Torah. He excelled at this

position for twenty years.

One day, the *menahel* summoned Rav Mendel to his office, “Rav Mendel, my dear friend, I have decided that at my advanced age, it be best that I retire, so that I can spend my twilight years totally engrossed in Hashem’s Torah. Veritably, this is what I always wanted to do, but at the time, my services as a *rebbe* and, later, as a *menahel* were vital to the community’s growth. I have given forty years of my life to this *Talmud Torah*. I ask you to serve as my replacement, to serve as the *menahel* of Talmud Torah Shoneh Halachos.”

Rav Mendel was overwhelmed, “Until now my responsibility extended to twenty five souls. Now I will be responsible for the spiritual and physical welfare of three hundred children!” He understood that a leadership position was not about money and esteem – it was about increased responsibility.

It did not take long before various students began to question Rav Mendel’s youngest child, “Why does your father walk around all day writing into a little notepad? Why does he stare out of his office window, watching everything that we do? Is he observing our actions, so that he can mark down every negative thing – to save for later punishment?” These were the questions the students asked. Any educator whose own children were enrolled in his school knows quite well the piercing questions and negative innuendo with which his children must put up.

Eliezer, Rav Mendel’s youngest, was in sixth grade, and all of this negative chatter about his father was getting to him. They were constantly asking him to “borrow” his father’s notepad, read what was written there, and report back to them. Eliezer was an ethically-raised child who would never do such a thing as taking his father’s notepad. One day, however, when his father was called away while the notepad happened to be open on his desk – he took a peek. What he saw changed his appreciation of his father, and transformed his entire outlook on the definition of a *rebbe*. This is what he read: “*Moshele* R. has a torn jacket. This is the third day that he is wearing it. *Chaimke*’s pants are much too short. *Asher* B. is wearing shoes that are torn and distended. Winter is fast approaching. *Shimele* A. did not bring a slice of bread for lunch. I must remember to speak with Mr. Mandelbaum (a wealthy benefactor) for clothing contribution. These children cannot learn properly amidst such poverty. Rabbi Z. is drowning in debt. I must speak to the *Gemach*, charitable organization, to give him an advance.” The notepad continued with demands for *chesed*, kindness. His father would jot down daily the material needs of his students and faculty. This notepad was holy of holies! His father was a true *menahel*, who did not just address his students’ spiritual needs, but cared about their physical and emotional needs as well!

Understandably, when Rav Mendel was summoned to his Heavenly reward, a powerful void was left in the old *Yishuv*’s education system, which begged to be filled. “When our father passed away, we decided to bury his notepads with him. He was against it, but we, (his sons, all devout Torah scholars) felt that this was his ticket, his entrance to *Gan Eden*. We have no doubt that these notepads were a powerful and demanding intercessor on his part, which he received the true, just reward that he deserved.

How easy it is to misjudge, and how evil it is when we misspeak.