

He is to call out: “Contaminated, contaminated!” (13:45)

The *metzora*, individual afflicted with a spiritually-originated form of leprosy, is isolated. In an effort to safeguard people from coming in contact with him, he must warn people to stay away by calling out: “Contaminated, contaminated!” *Chazal* (*Moed Kattan* 5a) offer another reason for his declaration of spiritual contamination. Letting people know of his circumstances, informing them of his pain, will motivate them to pray for his recovery. A homiletic rendering of the *pasuk* is very appropriate and practical. *V'tamei*, one who is himself contaminated – ie, one who is a victim of his own shortcomings – will make a point to call out others concerning their failings. In other words, one who is himself *tamei* will identify others as *tamei*. We tend to defray attraction from ourselves by calling attention to others. Alternatively, the fellow who makes note of another person's faults is probably himself guilty of these very same fault.

The *Imrei Emes* of Gur supplemented this exposition with a powerful insight from the *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Tehillim* 8:31). One of the musical instruments used in the *Bais Hamikdash* was the *neival*, lyre. (The name is “interesting” in the sense that it is related to: *naval*, abomination; *neveilah*, carcass; in short, it is a term of degradation.) The *Yalkut* explains that it is considered to be *neival* because it is *menaveil*, degrades all other instruments (since its sound is so superior to that of any other musical instrument). If so, notes the *Rebbe*, it should be called *menaveil*, not *neival*.

The *Rebbe's* explanation goes to the core of human nature and character. One who – even by default – makes others look bad, who diminishes the stature of his fellow, who rises to glory at the expense of his friend, himself has a deficient character. We are to “make it” on our own volition – not on the shoulders and backs of others. *Tamei – tamei yikra* – he who is himself contaminated will be the first to expose the deficiencies of others.

In the world of psychology, this is called “rankism.” It typically takes on the form of putting others down. Indeed, rankism is probably at the root of most man-made suffering. While we often excuse it as human nature, as a way of saying that we have no way of overcoming it, it does not change the fact that rankism is an ugly and mean character deficiency, which focuses on subordinating and exploiting the weakness of others. It is (in the opinion of some psychologists) the residue of predation, survival of the fittest, the “we are at the top of the food chain,” attitude that once prevailed. While then we (as a society) preyed on those weaker than we were, today we simply put down those who are in our way. This may be a societal norm (because society is not normal), but it goes against the very basics of Torah. Life is about dignity in serving Hashem, in glorifying Him. Dignity that is derived at the expense of others is shameful and degrading; it is the direct opposite of what Hashem asks of us. Imagine if a child would attempt to get into the good graces of his/her parent at the expense and the pain of his/her sibling. Is this any different?

Veritably, those who put others down are often too shallow to recognize and acknowledge their own shortcomings. It is easier to paint others in a negative light than to look in the mirror and see

the truth about oneself. I once heard a meaningful quote from an author whose name has slipped my mind: "Blowing out someone else's candle does not make yours shine any brighter." Our function is to worry about and address our own positive and negative qualities, to work on creating ourselves, to become holier Jews. Rather than pulling someone down so that we can reach the top, we should help those in need. By helping others, we become better people. How much happier we would be if, rather than focusing on the negative aspects of others, we would work on building our own positive qualities.