

He shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (13:46)

Alone means completely alone – not simply as the result of his impure state. If that would have been the case, he would have been able to congregate in a “*metzora* colony” where everyone like him was *tamei*, ritually impure. Indeed, *Rashi* says that he should be secluded from other *metzoraim* as well. The reason for this is quite simple. The slanderer is supposed to spend quality time introspecting his own faults, rather than focusing on those of others. When a group of negative people get together, they only see the faults of others, never of themselves. They create an echo chamber in which false information suddenly becomes true. The group dynamic creates a toxic environment that entrenches each one’s negative attitudes. Thus, instead of improving, the slanderer’s negativity becomes concretized, because he sees that there are others who are much worse than he is.

It is a well-known reaction that when an *eis tzarah*, time of trouble, make its way into our lives, people become ill, suffer economic hardships, experience family problems. In response, they introspect and search for a reason. What could “I” have done to bring this Heavenly response on myself? When the *tzarah* is of a collective nature, during which the general community sustains a tragedy, everyone goes into *teshuvah*, repentance mode, searching for the shortcomings that might have been the precursor for this punishment.

In 1847, the city of Vilna was struck by the deadly cholera plague. People suffered; people died. It was an *eis tzarah*. Everyone introspected his deeds and corrected whatever misdeeds he may have committed. Some “overzealous” individuals took it upon themselves to search through everyone else’s dirty laundry as well. After all, they had found no personal failings to speak of. It must be that the “other guy” caused the plague. One such “righteous” individual went to *Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl*, and discreetly claimed that he was aware of some not-so-pleasant activities of a member of the Vilna community. Indeed, he was certain that the cholera epidemic was a Heavenly response to this man’s nefarious deeds.

Rav Yisrael replied, “Why did the Torah demand that the *metzora*, leper, be sent out from all three *machanos*, camps? No other *tamei* person is permitted to be in the *metzora*’s vicinity. Why? What makes the *metzora*’s *tumah* so much more forbidding? The answer is that *tzaraas* is visited upon a person as a result of his *lashon hora*, slanderous speech. The issue of *lashon hora* does not involve only speech; it also prohibits one from probing a person’s activities in search of anything negative about him – even if, in fact, it is true. Thus, we address the *baal lashon hora*, slanderer, ‘You think that you are able to ferret out the negative faults of others; let us leave you completely alone and allow you to do the same for yourself.’”

During the War of Independence in *Eretz Yisrael*, one of the “do gooders” (who always had something negative to say about others) came to the *Brisker Rav, zl*, claiming that all the troubles

and casualties sustained by our people were due to the lack of *shemiras Shabbos* in the new *Yishuv*. The *Brisker Rav* replied, “Yonah *HaNavi* was on a ship whose passengers were all *ovdei avodah zarah*, idol worshippers. Yet, when a vicious storm threatened to sink the ship, Yonah took the blame saying, ‘It is because of me. Cast me into the waters and the storm will subside.’” We see from here that one can be surrounded by a ship of idolaters but, if troubles challenge them, he should declare, “It is because of me,” and not seek to blame others.

How easy it is to blame others for our own shortcomings. Part of maturing is accepting blame, which is the result of honest introspection. No one is perfect. By accepting responsibility for our actions, we open the door to positive growth and ultimately respect for others. Such an approach encourages a mindset focused on self-improvement and resilience in the face of challenges. To put it in simple terms: owning up to one’s actions, accepting responsibility, makes one a better person.