

Sensitivity of Language and Land

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Many of our sages point to the conceptual contamination of a metzora to be much more than leprosy or a medical ailment, but rather a reflection of a tarnished spiritual condition. While the parsha describes, in great detail, the rules regarding the checking, diagnosing and successive quarantining for a metzora - which became surprisingly applicable during the waves of COVID-19 – many commentators actually focus on the moral and ethical aspects that cause this infection.

The key stress of this affliction is that of the sensitivity of speech; that negative talk or lashon hara is the ultimate cause of a metzora. A person isn't necessarily evil; rather one can choose words that can come out poisonous and destructive. However, the place of this malicious talk is also significant. The Ibn Ezra (14:34) notes on "For when you come to the land; the phenomenon of the metzora only occurs in the land since its elevated and holy places are in it". I argue this is not just a warning about how a person speaks when IN the land of Israel, but also how they speak ABOUT the Land of Israel.

I have the privilege of living in Israel and I am ever humbled that I celebrated my 20 year Aliyahversary recently. For the past 13 years I have held various responsibilities in assisting thousands of North American Jews make Aliyah working with the Nefesh B'Nefesh team. Throughout my travels and conversations for work, I am struck by how people express their connection to our homeland and realization of our 2,000-year dream coming true. For some it is a celebration of the greatest project of the Jewish people. I do meet people who have a more casual interest or justifiably skeptical attitude to Aliyah – but it's the negative and dispassionate people that always seems to shock me.

The Talmud in Shabbat (31a) lists the six questions one is asked when standing before the heavenly court upon passing – one of which is, "Did you anticipate the Redemption?" How does one actively express such a sentiment? Each and every one of us have the ability to yearn to be closer to Israel even if we cannot pack our bags for the NBN flight. Rebbe Nachman famously said, "Wherever I go, I go towards Eretz Yisrael". He longed for it, even though he wasn't able to fully settle there.

The Sfat Emet comments that the importance of remembering the Exodus from Egypt daily is also a reminder to breakout of a narrow (from the word miztrayim) way of thinking. Too often people can become so immersed in their day-to-day life that lose sight of what really matters. I believe that the spiritual check-up with the Cohen described in our parsha is a designed check-in to makes sure our spiritual calibration is in tune. It's only natural that in our everyday worldly matters we might get distracted or take on new causes to champion.

Israel is not just a destination – it is also the cradle of our value system and an integral part of our identity. To speak poorly about the Land of Israel is to lose sight of an essential part of what make us - the Jewish people - special. Thus, in our aspirations for a healthy life, keep in mind a language that properly expresses your spiritual and physical yearnings.

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