

“AND THE KOHEN SHALL LOOK AT THE PLAGUE IN THE SKIN OF THE FLESH...” (VAYIKRA 13:3)

The disease of *tzara'as* is commonly misinterpreted as leprosy. Actually, *tzara'as* is an affliction unlike any physical disorder. It appeared, not only on a person's body, but also on his clothes or on the walls of his home. When a person suspected that he or his property were affected, they called a *kohen* to examine the *tzara'as*. Only after the *kohen* declared it an actual case of *tzara'as* did the laws of impurity apply.

He revealed his intentions to his wife and began teaching her the laws

The Midrash Tanchuma (Vayikra 13:2) tells the story of an impoverished *kohen* who intended to leave his family and home in Israel to seek a better living abroad. He revealed his intentions to his wife and began teaching her the laws of *tzara'as* so that she could substitute for him during his absence. “Check the hairs of the afflicted person,” he explained, “each and every hair on a person's body is nurtured by its own follicle, a wellspring that Hashem created for it. If the hair has withered, you will know that its source beneath the skin has dried up.” Upon hearing this his wife declared, “If Hashem created every hair with a wellspring to drink from, wouldn't Hashem provide sustenance for you, a human being with children to support?!” The *kohen* changed his plans and remained in Israel.

What persuaded him to change his mind?

How did the *kohen's* wife enlighten him? He obviously knew, even before she spoke up, that Hashem provides sustenance for all (he even taught her this fact himself). Nevertheless, he felt that the proper course of action was to leave Israel to earn a livelihood. What persuaded him to change his mind?

This Midrash illustrates one of the fundamental principles of *mussar*. We can acknowledge a basic truth as being correct, and even teach it to others, while at the same time overlook its full application to ourselves and our actions. The *kohen* knew quite well that Hashem sustains every living creature beneficently, yet he did not take this fact fully to heart. He did not properly focus on it and contemplate its significance in his own life. Had he done so, he would have realized the needlessness of traveling overseas to seek a livelihood – Hashem would surely sustain him in his homeland.

The study of *mussar* addresses this need. Reb Yisroel Salanter urged Jews to study the classic mussar texts *b'hispa'alus* – with fervor and inspiration – to contemplate and reflect upon its application to our daily lives. This should be done on a regular basis, preferably every day for at least a few minutes, so that the impressions thus created do not fade away between one session and the next.

A good friend, like-minded with our spiritual goals, can rescue us

At the same time, the Midrash also teaches the importance of a good friend or spouse to point out our errors. Even when we think we have made the correct decision, having double checked our calculations, we can slip-up and miss a simple point. A good friend, like-minded with our spiritual goals, can rescue us from these mistakes; often with merely a single insightful statement. If we reinforce ourselves with the study of *mussar* and surround ourselves with true friends, we are assured of great spiritual growth in all our endeavors.