

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

VAYIKRA

TZAV

SHEMINI

TAZRIA

METZORA

ACHREI MOT

KEDOSHIM

EMOR

BEHAR

BECHUKOTAI

TAZRIA

PLEASURE IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

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It is always interesting to note how two people can see the exact same thing in two completely different ways. The State of Israel, for example, has differing religious meanings for different groups of Jews. Some, such as the Neturei Karta group, are categorically opposed to the establishment and existence of the State of Israel, believing that it is slowing down the ultimate redemption by the Messiah. On the other hand, there are religious Zionists who believe that the State of Israel is a miraculous gift from God, that it is the beginning of the redemptive process and constitutes the fulfilment of biblical prophecies. Yet these directly opposing perspectives are based on the same historical facts

... In honour of a speedy and complete recovery for our precious daughter

Lital Gila bat Renana Yael

מוקדש לרפואתה השלמה
המהירה של ביתינו היקרה
ליטל גילה בת רננה יעל

and presented through the same religious texts. Similarly, **if two people gaze at an object, one from the front and one from the back, they can have two very diverse perspectives on what it looks like, though they are looking at the same object.** And of course, each individual's own preconceptions and experiences come into play when they interpret the meaning of a particular event or object. The Talmud describes two different types of guests, one good and one bad:

What does a good guest say? How much trouble did the host go to for me! How much meat and wine, and how many rolls he brought before me, and all the trouble that he went to was only for me. But what does the bad guest say? What trouble did the host go to? I ate only one piece of bread and drank one cup of wine, and all the trouble that he went to was only for his wife and children.¹

Two guests of the same host can choose to see the same experience in completely different ways. Their choices, according to the Talmud, do not reflect on the host, but rather they define the guest. This phenomenon is alluded to by the Torah when describing the effects of tzaraat (commonly translated as leprosy), a physical manifestation of a spiritual illness. In contrast to a regular skin condition, which is present on the outside of the body, this condition is described as being 'in the person'.² The Talmud isolates seven different potential causes for this disease, the best known of which are slander and improper speech, or *lashon bara*.³ However, another cause, according to the Talmud, is *tzarut ayin*, or narrow-sightedness - seeing the negative in a given situation or person.⁴

When describing *tzaraat*, the Torah repeatedly uses the term *nega*, meaning affliction. Interestingly, the term *nega* is an anagram comprised of the very same letters as its direct opposite - *oneg* - meaning pleasure. An ancient book of Jewish mysticism states that: "There is no good higher than *oneg* and no evil lower than *nega*."⁵ Both of these words contain the letters *nun* and *gimmel* next to one another; the only difference is the positioning of the letter *ayin*. In addition to being a letter, the word *ayin* means 'eye'. Based on an inference quoted in the *Sefat Emet*⁶ one can extrapolate a deeper meaning within these Hebrew words. Depending on where it is placed, the *ayin* (eye) can transform the other two letters from meaning an affliction, to meaning pleasure. In life, **our experience of any given situation can be entirely altered by the unique lens through which we perceive it.** When we look through a negative lens, we will see a *nega* - a painful affliction. But if we move our eye to look on the bright side, the same situation can take on a positive transformation.

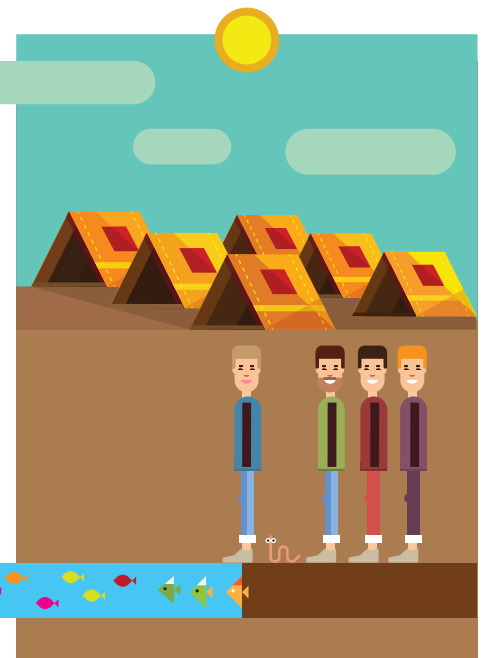
At the conclusion of its description of the *tzaraat* affliction, the Torah states that the final way that the priest should assess whether or not an affliction is considered *tzaraat* is to check if the *nega* has 'transformed its *ayin* (eye)'.⁷ This cryptic verse now makes perfect sense - **the only remedy for the malady of narrow-sightedness is to shift one's paradigm and look through a different lens.** The Mishna states about this disease: 'Even if [the afflicted one is] a Torah scholar who

believes with certainty that the affliction exists, he should not render [negative] judgement with a definitive statement."⁸ The reason for this law is that one should learn to admit, with humility, the limitations of one's own knowledge - for only God knows for certain the real meaning behind a situation.⁹ The *Tosefot Yom Tov* takes this one stage further and states that by branding something as destructive or negative, one actually ensures that it will become so.¹⁰ This conveys the strength of an individual's attitude in the transformation of a situation.

If we look for the bad in life, it will always be found. Declaring a situation as doomed can generate a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, if we search hard enough and look at the world through a positive lens, metaphorically positioning the *ayin* appropriately, then even something ostensibly bad can turn out to be good.

Notes

- ¹ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Berachot* 58a.
- ² *Leviticus* 13:9.
- ³ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Arachin* 15b.
- ⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Arachin* 16a.
- ⁵ *Sefer Yetzira* 2:7.
- ⁶ *Sefat Emet, Tazria* (5658).
- ⁷ *Leviticus* 13:55.
- ⁸ Mishna, Tractate *Nega'im* 12:5, based on *Leviticus* 14:35.
- ⁹ *Mizrachi* on *Leviticus* 14:35.
- ¹⁰ *Tosefot Yom Tov* on Mishna, Tractate *Nega'im* 12:5.



Parasha Fact:

One of the punishments for someone that gossips is that they are exiled from the camp. This is an example of punishment that is measure for measure- the gossiper engaged in anti-social behaviour, so they are cut off from society.

Next week in Metzora:

*So often as children we are told not to speak badly about others behind their backs. We are told not to tell tales, not to lie, and not to use swear words. There are many very clear instructions about what we must not do in the realm of speech. The biblical remedy for the *tzaraat* disease (leprosy), often described as the punishment for *lashon hara* - slanderous speech - strangely and unexpectedly involves the very specific use of two birds. Beneath the surface of this fascinating instruction lies a metaphor for forging successful interpersonal relationships throughout our lives.*