

The Iyar Journey

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Having recently celebrated Pesach, we are now in the Sefirah period, counting towards Shavuot and striving each day to refine ourselves, so that we may be worthy and prepared to accept the Torah and its way of life.

Our study this week of the parshiyos of Tazria and Metzora is an essential part of that process. Otherwise, we would not be lauding these parshiyos during this time of introspection and personal growth.

These parshiyos focus on the halachos of tzoraas. Although the laws are intricate, many are familiar with the basic idea: A patch of skin, clothing, or even a house changes color. A kohein is summoned to inspect the anomaly, and if he determines it to be tzoraas, the person or object is isolated.

While tzoraas is often mistaken for leprosy or some physical disease, it is not an illness of the body. Rather, it is a whisper from Hashem, a heavenly signal that the soul has strayed and must be restored through repentance and heartfelt teshuvah.

Chazal teach us that tzoraas is not simply a physical affliction, but the result of misused speech, particularly the sin of lashon hara. It is not the body that first betrays a person, but the mouth. Tzoraas reveals what lies beneath the surface, a spiritual ailment manifesting in flesh.

Illness, more generally, can be viewed similarly. It acts much like a vaccine, introducing a small measure of weakness to stimulate strength. Traditional vaccines introduce a weakened form of a disease into the body to allow the immune system to develop resistance. In the same way, the yissurim that Hashem sends are opportunities for growth. They are Divine nudges, urging us to pause, reflect, and return.

The Rofei chol bosor, the Healer of all flesh, sometimes brings suffering with the goal of awakening the soul. There were tzaddikim who, upon falling ill, turned first not to doctors, but to introspection. They understood that every part of the body draws vitality from a specific mitzvah, and when a certain limb suffered, it hinted at a spiritual flaw. They would seek out the corresponding aveirah and begin their healing journey with sincere teshuvah.

Most of us have not attained such levels of insight. When illness strikes, chas v'shalom, we often cannot identify a particular failing. Nonetheless, we must know that nothing happens without purpose. When hardship strikes, it is a summons to examine our deeds, habits, and hearts. Teshuvah becomes our remedy. Once we begin that journey, Hashem sends healing—through natural means, through doctors, medicine, and the healing forces He placed into the world.

The name of this month, Iyar, forms the roshei teivos of the phrase, “Ani Hashem Rofecha—I am Hashem, your Healer.” It is a time especially suited for both physical and spiritual refuah.

Yet, Iyar is a month filled with paradox. Even as it embodies healing, it is a month during which talmidim of Rabi Akiva perished in large numbers. Tragedy swept across the nation. But even within that sorrow, there was hope, for the plague that felled many during Iyar ended during Iyar, on Lag Ba'omer.

Mourning and redemption are intertwined.

Healing does not come automatically. It is not a miracle granted without merit. When sin increases, devastation follows. But when we turn to Hashem in honest teshuvah, the channels of healing reopen. The deaths of Rabi Akiva's students remind us of the high cost of spiritual failure, but Lag Ba'omer reminds us that even amidst pain and grief, Hashem's salvation is near.

Often, we cannot perceive the direct connection between our actions and their consequences. Hashem's ways are hidden from us, and true understanding may come only with time. Nevertheless, whether we grasp it or not, Hashem remains by our side. We are never abandoned. The One who declares, "Ani Hashem Rofecha," stands with us, during Iyar and throughout the year.

It is no coincidence that this is also the season when herbs begin to grow—the same herbs that serve as the basis for physical healing. As nature awakens, life renews itself, and healing literally rises from the ground. This parallels our own potential for renewal: Just as the earth regenerates during Iyar, so can we.

Iyar reminds us that we are never beyond repair, never too broken to be made whole again. Healing is in the air. Growth is within reach.

The Chazon Ish would often remark that each generation experiences its own set of incurable diseases. In earlier times, people died from typhus, smallpox, and measles, and they prayed desperately for cures. Today, illnesses that were once deadly are treated with a simple course of penicillin.

Yet, once those dreaded diseases were conquered, new illnesses emerged, ones that science still struggles to cure.

This is meant to remind us that Hashem alone is the Rofei cholim. Doctors are His emissaries, but they have no power to heal unless Hashem grants it. It is He who creates illness and He who enables us to find cures.

This idea is spelled out clearly by the Rambam in Hilchos Mikvaos (11:12), in his concluding words on the topic of taharah:

"Impurity is not filth that can be washed away with water, but, rather, a scriptural decree that calls for intent and focus of the heart. Chazal therefore teach that one who immersed but did not intend to purify himself is considered as not having been toveled.

"Although it is a gezeiras hakasuv, there is an allusion inherent in the act of tevilah. One who focuses his heart on purity is cleansed through immersion, even though there is no visible change to his

body. Similarly, one who focuses his heart on removing the contamination of the soul—namely, evil thoughts and negative character traits—becomes purified when he resolves within his heart to distance himself from such counsel and immerses his soul in the waters of knowledge.”

The kohein’s mission is to bring people closer to Hashem by guiding them to remove the sins that create separation between themselves and their Maker. His role is to help people achieve taharah.

Since tzoraas stems from sin, it falls upon the kohein—the one tasked with assisting in the purification process through the offering of korbanos—to help the metzora return through teshuvah, ultimately leading him back to healing and spiritual wholeness.

We are familiar with the posuk (Tehillim 34:13) that states, “Mi ha’ish hechofeitz chaim oheiv yomim liros tov. Netzor leshoncha meira usefosecha midabeir mirma.” One who desires life must be careful not to use his mouth for evil purposes and not to speak improperly.

We know that tzoraas is a punishment for those who fail to heed the warning of that posuk and speak ill of others. Those who do not value other people, who disregard the feelings of others, or who cavalierly destroy the reputations of fellow Jews, are punished by being banished from the camp. For seeking to create separation between the people they gossiped about and their communities, they are placed in isolation.

In the town of Radin, there was a group of progressive Jewish freethinkers known as the Poalei Tzion. They used mockery and cynicism as tools to undermine the traditions of the yeshiva world, employing their writing skills to produce works that demonized yeshivos. They prepared a booklet filled with barbs and slanders to vilify the yerei'im ushleimim. Some Radiner bochurim learned of their plans and raided the Poalei Tzion headquarters. They seized the hateful materials and brought the bundles of booklets back to their yeshiva, where they tossed them into the furnace.

The next day, when Poalei Tzion activists arrived at their workplace and saw what had happened, they quickly gathered clues pointing to the identity of the perpetrators and headed straight to the yeshiva. There, in the furnace, they found the burnt remnants of their hard work.

They declared war on the bochurim, threatening physical violence and further retaliation. Their campaign began at the home of the Chofetz Chaim, where they stormed in to announce their plans.

The leader spoke with tremendous chutzpah, and almost as soon as the brazen words left his lips, he fell to the ground. His eyes bulged, and an incoherent stream of words poured from his mouth. He had lost his mind.

His terrified friends led him away and word of the incident spread quickly. The young man had gone insane.

The story, in today’s parlance, went viral.

A few days later, the incident was reported by Heint, the foremost Haskalah newspaper based in Warsaw. In a fiery editorial, they criticized the rabbon shel Yisroel. “Is this the Chofetz Chaim, known

for the work he authored on the laws of lashon hora?” they asked. “How can someone who preaches love of Jews curse another Jew?”

The Chofetz Chaim took the unusual step of responding directly to the newspaper.

“In response to your report that I cursed the young man, chas veshalom, I have never cursed another Jew. In response to your report that he has been stricken with madness, that is indeed true, and that is because mit yeshiva bochurim fangt men nisht un—one doesn’t start up with yeshiva bochurim.”

The editors of Heint made a fundamental mistake that remains a risk for all of us. Man creates his own tzoraas. It is not curses or bad luck that bring about tzoraas.

However, because we are no longer worthy of receiving such direct Divine messages, people mistakenly believe that they can speak lashon hora without consequence.

The loving Rofei still sends us hints of His disapproval. We are beset by aches, pains, and at times ailments. We visit doctors, fill prescriptions, and seek cures, convincing ourselves that the cause and the solution are entirely physical.

How wrong we are.

At times, we approach life’s weighty struggles like children mimicking grown-ups at play. They reach for their little tools, intent on mending a shattered toy. Yet, no matter how sincere their efforts, no matter how full their toolbox may seem, they cannot truly fix what’s broken, for they lack the wisdom, the precision, and the hands trained by experience.

Life is a journey of unfolding lessons. With each step, as we grow in understanding, we become better equipped to meet the trials placed before us. When we respond with thoughtfulness and grace, we find the strength to remain whole—vibrant in body and steadfast in spirit.

But healing, true healing, demands more than effort. It calls for insight. Each limb, each organ, and each breath we take is nourished by a particular mitzvah. When something falters, when pain creeps in, it may be the echo of a misstep, the consequence of a hidden aveirah.

A child sees only the surface: the shine, the motion, the noise. Children have yet to live through the stumbles and triumphs that grant the soul its vision. But with maturity comes clarity, the courage to look deeper, to accept that our hardships are not random misfortunes, but sacred messages whispered by Hashem, gently guiding us back to the path of truth.

The truest path to healing does not lie in dialing a number flashing across a screen, promising miracle cures and easy relief wrapped in the enthusiastic words of strangers. Real healing begins with awareness, the soul-deep understanding that every limb is nourished by a mitzvah, and every ache is the echo of an aveirah waiting to be mended.

Today, we no longer suffer from tzoraas. But this is no blessing, for if tzoraas still cast its pale shadow across our skin, we would think twice before uttering words of lashon hora. Cause and effect would be clear, silencing gossip before it even found a voice.

But tzoraas is only the beginning. Every illness has a root, and every root draws its sustenance from the soil of our actions. It is not only lashon hora. It is every misdeed, every lapse, that leaves its trace.

We must awaken to the truth that our purity, our clarity, our very well-being, rests in our hands. The Gemara in Sotah (21a) proclaims, “Torah magna umatzla—Torah shields and rescues.” And as Mishlei teaches, “Tzedakah tatzil mimovess—Charity saves from death.”

If tzedakah holds the power to save a soul, then tefillah can open the gates of mercy. Torah surrounds us like armor, protecting us from judgment. And every action we take—each thought we nurture, each word we choose—becomes a thread woven into the tapestry of our lives.

As the posuk states (Vayikra 18:5), “Ushemartem es chukosai v’es mishpotai asher ya’aseh osam ha’adam v’chai bahem—Observe My laws and you shall live by them.” This is not a metaphor. It is life itself. Observance of Torah does not merely enrich. It gives life. So powerful is this truth that even the sanctity of Shabbos yields before the urgency of pikuach nefesh.

And so, as we enter the month of Iyar —“the time of Ani Hashem Rofecha”— may the winds of refuah blow gently across all who suffer. May every pain find its cure, every wound its balm, every heart its comfort.

During these days of Sefirah, as we study the sacred parshiyos of tzoraas, let us begin our journey back to wholeness, not only in body, but in spirit. Let us refine our middos, elevate our speech, and strengthen our connection to the mitzvos, chukim, and mishpotim.

May all who suffer be granted relief. May the sick be healed. May the lonely be embraced. And may we all, together, merit the coming of the geulah sheleimah, speedily, in our days.