

She Doesn't Mean It

ג"ה

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Parshat Tazri'a

When it happens that a person has a swelling, a rash, a discoloration on the skin of his body. . . . (Leviticus 13:2)

This stich typifies the Torah's perspective on human transgressions, for *tzara'at* (traditionally, but inaccurately, rendered as "leprosy") is the prototypical "blemish," and what the Torah says about *tzara'at* applies with equal force to all our other character blemishes. Why character blemishes, since *tzara'at* is about a physical blemish? Because, as the tradition teaches us, *tzara'at* is not merely a physical ailment, but a consequence of a moral transgression, the uttering of *lashon ha'ra*, negative gossip (whether true or not) about another. Thus, *tzara'at* represents all other character blemishes.

We begin with the introductory expression, **When it happens that**. The blemish of *tzara'at* is not something that speaks to the essential character of the individual, but simply something that "happens." Similarly, any blemish upon the character of an individual, any transgression of an individual, is not something stemming from the essential character of the individual, but something that s/he happens to have done.

We then note that the *tzara'at* is only upon the skin. That is to say, it affects only the surface, not the essence. Transgression is only skin deep.

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Not only is it merely the skin, we finally note; the *tzara'at* affects only the skin of the body. The soul remains pure, whatever one may do, whoever one may be. Our souls remain pure, and nothing we – or anyone else – may do or say can take that away from us!

The Hassidic master Rebbe Baruch Mordecai of Babroisk, when he was verbally abused, kept the “only skin-deep” nature of the transgression in mind.

Two women had gotten into a dispute and were arguing noisily in the study of Rebbe Baruch Mordecai. The rebbe finally deciphered enough of their arguments to hand down a ruling on their dispute.

The losing party then attacked the rebbe with a mouthful of vulgar curses. The rebbe's wife, drawn by the commotion, asked her husband why he didn't throw the vile woman from the house.

“She doesn't really mean it,” said the rebbe.

The woman's reaction was to let loose a fresh torrent of abuse which made the first round seem mild by comparison.

“Tell me,” Rebbe Baruch Mordecai then asked the woman, “would you wish to have children like myself?”

The woman gazed heavenward. “If only. . . .”

“You see,” said Rebbe Baruch Mordecai to his wife, “she doesn't mean it.”

To Rebbe Baruch Mordecai's equanimity may we soon be drawn.

Shabbat Shalom.