



Holy Haughtiness • Parshat Metzora

Parshat Metzora continues to detail the intricate laws of the skin, cloth, and house affliction, *tzara'at*. While *tzara'at* is often considered a punishment for evil speech in rabbinic literature, the Talmud relates six other possible causes, one of which is arrogance (*Arakhin* 16a). Psalms connects these two sins in one verse, “He who slanders his friend in secret I will cut off; I cannot endure the haughty and proud man” (Psalms 101:5). There is a conceptual similarity between slander and hubris. Evil speech is often an external manifestation of the internal trait of arrogance. People who are humble and internally self-confident, do not need to talk badly about others to lift their own egos.

The ritual process of purification reflects this moral message. One of the sacrifices offered by the priest on behalf of the *metzora* is an *asham*, a guilt offering. Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno explains that this type of offering atones for *me'ila*, a misuse of the sacred domain. Evil speech and haughtiness are both considered a misappropriation of the Holy. Often done in private, those who slander others presume that nobody else will hear or take note. This is a direct insult to God, ignoring Divine omniscience. As the Talmud comments, “Whoever commits a transgression in private, it is as though he pushed away the feet of the Divine Presence” (*Hagiga* 16a).

Arrogance is also an exploitation of the Divine. Sforno quotes a stark statement from the Talmud, “Any person who has arrogance within him, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: He and I cannot

dwell together in the world” (*Sotah* 5a). In his commentary on the Sforno, Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz explains that someone who is arrogant “misappropriates God’s exclusive right to *gei’ut*, majesty, which is related to *ga’ava*, pride. Here again, he intrudes on God’s domain.” As the verse in Psalms contends, only “God is King, He is clothed in majesty (*gei’ut*)” (Psalms 93:1).

Taking the Sforno’s model of *me’ila* further, perhaps the *metzora*’s misuse of the holy goes even deeper. Both evil speech and arrogance not only disregard God’s presence, but they also diminish the fact that humans are created in God’s image. The *metzora* attempts to denigrate, degrade, and deprecate the holiness of his victim through the defamation. Moreover, these sins dismiss the holiness of body and soul endowed by God to the *metzora*. He, like all of us, is tasked to use his power of speech for kind and sacred purposes. He is encouraged to cultivate his character, skills, and talents for redemptive acts. Misinterpreting these gifts as his own - “My own power and the might of my own hand” (Deut. 8:17) - and distorting them to defame others, is *me’ila*, a mishandling of Divine blessings.

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, in his *Chidushei HaRim*, identifies one more perversion of the sacred: misplaced humility. Rashi, quoting a *midrash*, describes the symbolism of the purification process, which included cedar wood and hyssop. Cedar, the tallest of trees, was included because *tzara'at* was a manifestation of the arrogant

personality. Hyssop, a shrub whose leaves are tiny, is used because the *metzora* necessarily lowered himself through the purification process. Rabbi Alter argues that it only makes sense to include symbolic objects in the purification process that reflect the aspirational goals of the *metzora*. Since the cedar represents haughtiness, why would it be singled out and have a place of prominence in the process of purification?

Rabbi Alter suggests that there are times that the cause of our sins is not arrogance but erroneous humility. The Talmud, after a dozen or so serious denigrations of arrogance, writes in the name of Rav, that a Torah scholar needs to embody at least a small measure of arrogance (*Sotah* 5a). In Hasidic

texts, this nuanced notion is referred to as “holy haughtiness.” When there is a need to be morally and spiritually proactive, a false sense of “Who am I?” can lead to misinformed complacency and inaction.

How does one find the balance between holy haughtiness and desecrating the holiness of God, self, and others with arrogance? When we focus on ourselves to the exclusion or displacement of God or others, then we are inappropriately arrogant. In contrast, when we recognize and utilize our talents and aptitudes to look beyond ourselves to serve God and help others, we demonstrate a true appreciation of the value of the holy.

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Character Challenge: Reflect on your relationships with God and others. How can you proactively use your speech and abilities to make space for others and elevate them, thereby increasing holiness in the world?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “Humility means that you are secure enough not to need to be reassured by others. It means that you don’t feel you have to prove yourself by showing that you are cleverer, smarter, more gifted, or successful than others. You are secure because you live in God’s love. He has faith in you even if you do not. You do not need to compare yourself to others. You have your task, they have theirs, and that leads you to co-operate, not compete” (*Studies in Spirituality*, p. 263).