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Healing Ourselves, Healing Our Planet

By Rabbi Natan Greenberg¹ on the Torah portion of Tazria

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The Torah portion of Tazria discusses sickness and healing, concerning a person who contracts *tzaraat*. In the case of *tzaraat*, what manifests as a physical symptom of the skin is not remedied through medical practice. The sick person does not see a doctor, though physicians are mentioned elsewhere in the Torah.² Instead a *cohen*, or priest, must diagnose the condition. The healing comes from a period of isolation, followed by immersion in a ritual bath and the bringing of an offering to the Temple. Through the depiction of a spiritual treatment to a physical ailment, this Torah portion presents a tremendous opportunity to connect to the roots of illness and come to true healing.

In the tradition of the Torah, physical wellbeing is inherently linked to spiritual balance. When a person is out of balance spiritually, he or she cannot be a vessel for Divine light, the flow of G-d given life force which sustains all of existence. The result is a physical manifestation of limited life energy, which appears as physical sickness, as in the case of the Torah's description of *tzaraat*. The symbolic ritual process of healing which is described for one with *tzaraat* bypasses the physical aspect of the ailment and fixes the spiritual root of the problem.

The Talmud pinpoints seven spiritual sources of *tzaraat*, with one being a condition called "*tzarut ayin*," or narrowness of vision.³ Narrow vision means not paying attention to the wider ramifications of one's actions. It is a decision-making process guided purely by the desire for immediate gratification, and not a larger plan to reach an extensive goal.⁴ In this sense, *tzarut ayin* is the opposite of wisdom. In Pirkei Avot, it says, "Who is truly wise? One who foresees the result."⁵ In the Talmud, this is explained to mean: "One who understands what will come, events that will result, and is therefore wary of them."⁶

In the Torah, the skin blight that appears on the skin of the person with *tzaraat* is called a "*nega*." There is a teaching that the difference between *oneg* (bliss) and *nega* (affliction) is the placement of the letter

¹ The author would like to acknowledge Sareet Benayahu for her involvement in this essay.

² Rashi (France, 11th cent.) to Exodus 21:19 based on the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Kama 85a

³ Commentary of the R"if (R' Yitzhak Alfasi, Morocco 11th/12th cent.) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 14a.

⁴ Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (Ukraine, 18th cent.) mentions the connection between wisdom and seeing, for example in Likutei Moharan teaching 94.

⁵ Mishna Avot 2:9

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Tamid, 32a, commentary on the words "ha-ro-eh et ha'nolad"

ayin. In Hebrew, the name of the letter *ayin* also is the word for eye. With *oneg*, the *ayin* comes before the rest of the word, symbolizing foresight and 'looking before one leaps.' This is what leads to the joy. *Nega*, however, has the *ayin* at the end of the word. This can teach that a person comes to low places because their vision only follows an action, and does not precede it.⁷

Spiritual brokenness expresses itself in the physical world as in the case of *tzaraat*. Physical brokenness impairs one's ability to make the proper spiritual choices. Just as a person has a body and a soul, this entire physical world is animated by the divine light of God that flows down from ever higher worlds. Damage done in the natural world has traumatic effects on the spiritual world, and vice versa. This portion about the affliction of *tzaraat* can be understood in a global context. "Every person is a small world, and the world is a giant person."⁸ In a macrocosmic sense, we can see the whole of humanity as one being, and apply the same lessons. Humanity today suffers from an illness, and the planet suffers as a result. The Torah offers a healing for this sickness.

The spiritual blemish of *tzarut ayin*, narrow vision, characterizes many environmentally unsound practices today. We live in a time when computers can calculate predictions of changes in organism population and 'bioenergetics'.⁹ Certain scenarios of future development clearly point to a disastrous plunge in resources and thus human population, in future years.¹⁰ The Jewish view of wisdom prohibits us from creating a situation where we will have major population crises, and we should have the foresight to prevent this. Otherwise, like the person with *tzaraat*, people will not experience true *oneg* (bliss), only its distorted equivalent.

People's priorities are out of balance in areas as major as energy sourcing and waste management. The search for cheap non fossil-fuel energy leads many countries to rely on nuclear power, which creates radioactive waste that persists for thousands of years. The desire to immediately remove something unwanted from our narrow field of vision is what rationalizes the unsustainable use of land as garbage dumps. People have confused their priorities in life because the light is broken and the world is out of balance. Fixing the world requires people to re-focus their priorities.

Western environmentalism posits two main problems with environmental degradation. One, that we will harm ourselves by changing the climate and polluting the air and water. The second, that we will run out of resources and then we will not have more to use. For example, although reducing energy use is an important goal of many environmental campaigns, getting people to simply "reduce" is more easily said than done. Use of all forms of energy and electricity sources in America have increased steadily since the 1980's, and continue to rise.¹¹ For this reason, modern environmentalism champions the search for "alternative energy sources." This approach tries to fix the brokenness without changing human

⁷ According to Sefer Yetsira 2.2 (origin of the book is debated; some attribute it to Abraham the Patriarch; others source it around the time of the Mishna, 200 CE).

⁸ Rabbi Yosef Albo (Spain, 15th cent.), Sefer Ha'ikarim, Ma'amar Sheni, Chapter 31.

⁹ Kitchell, James F. and Crowder, Larry B. "Predator-prey interactions in Lake Michigan: model predictions and recent dynamics." *Environmental Biology of Fishes* Volume 16, Numbers 1-3 / June, 1986.

¹⁰ See, for example, the Pulitzer-prize winning author Jared Diamond's Collapase. Chapter 14's analysis of failure to anticipate, failure to perceive, and rational bad behavior relate to the above discussion of long-term thinking. Chapter 16's discussion of the implications of not properly addressing today's most serious problems should serve as a vivid reminder of what is at stake today.

¹¹ To see information on energy usage in the US: http://energy.cr.usgs.gov/energy/stats_ctry/Stat1.html

lifestyles. While technical approaches to current problems are important, consciousness change will also be necessary for true *tikkun* (repair) to occur. Such an approach promises to restore balance to the spiritual worlds as well as the physical.

A more expansive spiritual perspective sees harming the physical world as damaging the spiritual world, because the physical world is an outgrowth of the spiritual worlds. Since the opposite of ‘narrow vision’ is ‘wider vision’, we must ask; how broadly can we expand our outlook? Will we stop our foresight and discussions of ‘sustainability’ here in the physical realm? Or will we see beyond that as well to the spiritual dimensions we are disrupting and thus enable fixing of those worlds? Furthermore, how can we expand our vision to these worlds, and how do we go about fixing the ‘spiritual environment’? The answer is in the Torah.

In the Torah’s first description of the Garden of Eden, that idealized environment, humans were placed there “*l'ovdah u'lshomrah*”, to work and protect it.¹² But the trees in the Garden of Eden do not need pruning or irrigation. We learn instead that the direct object of ‘to protect it’ is Torah, which means spiritual pursuit and balance. By ‘protecting’ the Torah, one can find instruction for balanced living in the world. Similarly, work in the Garden of Eden is spiritual work, keeping the spiritual instruction from G-d.¹³

Though the world is in a state of physical and spiritual imbalance, it is not the result of G-d's mistake or neglect. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (Israel, 20th cent.) in teaching about prayer mentioned that within a process, something is always imbalanced. At every stage of life, something is not in harmony. This is because imbalance leads to new growth.¹⁴ Imbalance of global climate change can lead us to a new awareness and responsibility, to change the way we live. Spiritual imbalance and global ecological imbalance are an opportunity for growth towards sustainability, spiritually as well as physically.

Action Items:

In order to prevent ourselves from being constricted to “*tzarut ayin*” or narrow vision, there are a few things we can do:

- 1) Learn about Life Cycle Analysis (http://www.pre.nl/life_cycle_assessment/default.htm) to expand the way you understand products and resources you use: your impact on where it comes from, how you use it, and where it will go when you are done with it.
- 2) When you think about your “ecological footprint” consider also your ‘spiritual footprint.’ Do you pray for yourself and for others? Do you pray for the general wellbeing of the planet? What spiritual imbalances within yourself need rectification? Remind yourself that every improvement you manage in your spiritual path has effects in the physical world.
- 3) To deepen your spiritual-physical environmental awareness, ground one aspect of your environmental approach in a *mitzvah*: For example, if you are conscientious about overusing resources, give *tzedakah* (charity) in place of a material item you would have bought. Connecting to the Torah’s instructions for this physical world helps to bring the spiritual balance that protects the physical world.

¹² Genesis 2:15

¹³ Rabeinu Bachya (Bahya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, Spain, 11th century) commentary on Bereishit, 2:15 (author's interpretation)

¹⁴ “Inyanei Tefilah” Olat Ra'ayah, Mossad Harav Kook Press, Jerusalem, 1983, “Inyanei Tefilah,” p. 10-18

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