

# Loving the Leper

*Is leprosy contagious, and how should you treat it? And what lesson does it teach us in our own lives?*

## The Three Endearments

People often ask Israelis how they manage to live there. “What is it about Israel? You have terrorism, your kids have to serve in the military, and taxes are so high!” They can’t understand what connects people to the land.

This question is not new.

The Book of Kings (Book II, chapter 2) tells us about the prophet Elisha—how immediately after he was chosen as a prophet he visited the city of Jericho. It was his first visit anywhere as an official *navi*, or prophet.

So the citizens of the city approached him and said, “Behold, the city is a good place to live in, as my lord sees, but the water is bad and the land causes people to die.”

Essentially, they said to him, Jericho’s a nice place to live—but we’ve got a problem we’ve got to deal with here: the water’s no good and the soil’s lousy. You can’t drink the water and people die here. And so Elisha cured the water—it was the first miracle performed by Elisha the Prophet.

But the Talmud (Tractate Sotah 17a) asks: If the water and land was bad, what was good about it? How did the residents of

Jericho say that it was “a good place to live in” when you couldn’t even drink a cup of water there and people would drop dead in the streets!

Rather, Rabbi Chanin explains, “the place was endeared to its residents.”

Human nature is such that people form some sort of spiritual bond with the place where they live—it endears itself to them. It has what is called in Hebrew *chein*—charm, or endearment. Rabbi Yochanan adds to this, saying, “There are three endearments in the world: The endearment of a place to its residents, the endearment of a woman to her husband, and the endearment of a possession to its possessor.”

Now, just because something has *chein*, endearment, it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s beautiful. Endearment of a place, for example, doesn’t mean that the place is beautiful. It could be not beautiful at all—but still, the place is loved by the people who live there. It has *chein* to them. (It’s also interesting to note that the root words of both Rabbi *Chanin* and Rabbi *Yochanan* is “chein.”)

And it’s the same thing when it comes to marriage: one partner finds the other charming or endearment. It’s not necessarily the beauty that attracts one to the other. Rather, it’s something that can’t be explained that makes one find the other so endearing.

In like manner, when a person acquires a specific item, he or she gets used to it over the years and develops a certain dependency on it—a certain bond. That’s why it’s hard for

people to move—to sell their houses and move into other houses: they feel that they're leaving part of their life behind.

So now, we come to this week's Torah portion: Tazria.

## **Is Leprosy Contagious?**

Tazria deals with several different states of spiritual impurity, including one that triggers a physical reaction called *tzara'as*, commonly translated as leprosy. Leprosy is (medically known today as Hansen's Disease, but the Torah's description of *tzara'as* tells us that *tza'aras* was something else. Thus, *tzara'as* as the Torah describes it doesn't occur today.)

But anyways, let me ask you a question: When you hear "leprosy," what do you think? Very simple: Run for it! That's because most people think leprosy is extremely contagious and extremely dangerous.

But it's not. As a matter of fact, the National Hansen's Disease Program website says, and I quote, "it is well established that Hansen's Disease is not highly transmissible, is very treatable, and, with early diagnosis and treatment, is not disabling."

Still, when people hear that someone has leprosy, they run away from him or her as fast as possible—so much so that when you want to describe someone whom no one wants anything to do with, you say that he is a leper.

But this week, the Torah makes great effort to try to purify the *metzora*, the person with *tzara'as*—to try every possibility to rule out *tzara'as* before the person is exiled from the camp for solitary purification. The Rebbe explains in a talk that this is

why the Torah specifically requires that a Kohein, a priest, who is described in Judaic literature as “a man of kindness,” be the one to decide whether the person does indeed have leprosy.

So we have two views here of the man or woman with an isolating condition: one is to flee from him and to banish him as far away as possible. The other view is to do everything possible to keep him in the fold, connected to people—only quarantining him if it’s absolutely necessary.

And we see these two approaches in the Talmud.

Most of the Amoraim, the later Sages of the Talmudic era, say that a healthy person is obligated to isolate himself from those who have tzara’as so as not to get it themselves. (Apparently the tzara’as of the Torah was contagious.) The Talmud quotes a long string of Amoraim who would not live in or visit places inhabited by people with tzara’as. That’s no surprise.

But then the Talmud (Tractate Kesuvos 77b) comes along and tells us about one famous Amora named Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: “He attached himself to them [meaning, people with tzara’as] and studied Torah with them.” Rashi explains this to mean that “he adhered to them while he studied Torah and seated them next to him.”

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was not afraid of people with tzara’as. Quite the opposite—he went to visit them and embraced them. “They were endeared to him.” As far as he was concerned, these Jews were his brothers and he loved them, and when you love someone, you don’t see his or her faults. You don’t see tzara’as. You see a child of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

And that's exactly why Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was the one who merited at a certain point to get daily visits from Elijah the Prophet—because a person who loves lepers, who loves the outcasts and who draws them close, it is he who deserves such a spiritual revelation.

## **How To Treat a Friend**

Today, my friends, society thankfully doesn't really have a leprosy problem, at least not in developed countries and cities. But spiritually, the concept of isolation still exists.

People will stay away from certain individuals because "they're not religious enough" and are not interested in being their friends. People generally try to be friends with people just like them—not any more religious and not any less religious. They try to find their cliques, where each individual can have his or her social standing that appeals to them. They don't want to be friends with people who are not their type.

But along came Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and taught us that if you want a relationship with G-d, if you're looking for the key to "capture G-d's heart," you'll find it when you embrace everyone— even the leper, the outcast, the outsider that no one wants anything to do with.

We're all familiar with the blessing "shehechyanu" which we recite at each holiday.

Halachah, defines the blessing of "shehechyanu" as being recited "at each occasion of the heart's joy that comes to a person as a result of the good things in this world." And there

too, along comes Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and teaches us a very interesting halachah. He says: “One who sees his fellow after not seeing him for 30 consecutive days recites the blessing of ‘shehechyanu.’ ”

In other words, if you don’t see your fellow for an entire month, it’s enough of a joy for your heart to justify reciting the blessing “shehechyanu.”

We all know that we need to help, respect, draw close and even love everyone, even those whom it is unpleasant to be in their company. And so, we suppress our natural urges and do what we need to do for our fellow Jew.

But what Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi is teaching us here is something completely original: It’s not enough to treat the other like a friend—rather, you must love him to the extent that if you don’t see him for 30 days, it should cause you such joy that you *want* to recite the blessing of “shehechyanu.”