PARASHAT TAZRIA-METZORA:
MORE THAN SKIN DEEP
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

YUCK skin disease! This has been the clarion cry of many a bar and bat mitzvah student when informed that this week's Torah portion will be their Torah reading on their big day. I empathize with them, for I have had the same reaction in preparing this column. But as is so often the case with the Torah (and with skin disease) to get to the root of understanding you have to go below the surface.

Tazria-Metzora, is actually two Torah portions combined into one by the necessities of the Hebrew calendar. The chapters deal with the biblical affliction known as *tzara'at*, a term which has no English equivalent. The term is often mis-translated as "leprosy" though more accurately seems to be a condition related to "psoriasis", a common skin condition that causes skin redness and irritation in about 3% of the population.

When we look deeper at this week's portion(s) we begin to see a clearly discernable pattern in what the Torah calls the *tzara'at* - afflicted person. What begins as something relatively incidental to the person becomes something all-consuming and completely identified with the person.

13:2 When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration…

13:12 If the eruption spreads out over the skin…

13:29 If it [the affliction] appears to go deeper than the skin…

13:44 he is a leprous man, he is unclean...

13:45 He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him...

The person has become their illness. How often have we experienced this, in ourselves or in others? A person becomes so consumed by their ailments, physical, emotional, spiritual - that they define them. It happens all the time - when something, which began as a peripheral detail of a person's identity, is now the very basis for that identity. The identity of the afflicted person becomes increasingly wrapped up in the *tzara'at*, and the person is lost in the fog of the affliction.

We go from being a person, to a person with cancer, to a chemo patient, to being in remission, to (god willing) a survivor or most sadly, a victim of cancer. It is the same for one who has lost a job, been divorced, lost a home, or any of the myriads of modern day afflictions. But we are much more than our disease, career, home, bank account or relationship status. Those things may describe us for a period of time,

but they need not and should not define us. We are - our tradition informs us at the moment of our creation - adam – we are a human being created in God's image.

Maimonides, in his Laws of Tzara'at-Induced Impurity 16:10, describes a different progression, but one that leads to an important related insight. He explains *tzara'at* as a divine warning message, imploring its victim to soul-search, to look deeper inside themselves than what they see when they look in the mirror (what is only skin deep). In Maimonides' progression the affliction would start by affecting the house, then furniture, clothing and finally the body itself. Here too there is a movement from the periphery to the center of the victim's existence.

It is important to note that the role of the priest in biblical times was not to cure the disease, rather his charge was to diagnose and then quarantine the person from the community. The priest would send them out of the camp for a set period of time, checking on them from time to time, but not allowing them back in until the affliction had naturally subsided. Then an elaborate procedure of sacrifices is initiated to thank God for being restored to full health.

At first this may appear to be betraying the limits of biblical medicine, but as we have learned we have to go deeper to find the greater lesson. The question that arises is what happened to the person during the quarantine that cleared up the affliction? And why was it necessary for that healing to take place outside the camp.

One thing we know from our own experiences with becoming consumed by our ailments and afflictions is that emotional and spiritual healing requires perspective. Both progressions of *tzara'at* - the one in the Torah and the one in Maimonides – describe a process by which one must identify and accept something about him or herself before a healing can begin. You have to acknowledge the affliction before you can begin to confront it. The ailment is not only physical it is also psycho-emotional - being defined by our present circumstance (illness, job loss, etc.). As such it follows that treatment begins with acknowledging that painful fact, what 12 step programs refer to as Step One.

There is no better place to gain perspective on your afflictions than to surround yourself with others similarly afflicted. That is why the priest sent the *tzara'at* outside the camp, to find perspective and solidarity in those who similarly suffer. When our affliction is no longer unique to us, but shared by others who are travellers on the same road, we cannot define ourselves by it. In that moment we are are forced to look deeper, beyond how we appear to others, because it is not distinct and begin to confront how we appear to ourselves. Then healing can begin, and then we are more than our disease, and much more than our skin becomes clear.