

Chazal observed that bodily afflictions, נגעים, such as leprosy, are the punishment for deterioration of morality. For example, נגעים are mentioned in connection with illicit relationships, לשון הרע among other sins. The Midrash in the beginning of Leviticus says on the verse אדם כי יקריב מכם (Vayikra 1:2): When the Jew, אדם, is bringing a sacrifice, the Torah uses the word מכם, from within you. However when the Jew sins the word מכם is not mentioned, as it says אדם כי יהיה באור בשרו שאת ספחת או בהרת.

This Midrash is consistent with the statement of Rabbi Simlaey, brought by Rashi, at the beginning of פרשת תזריע that man was created last and his punishment was mentioned first. Man has two possible extremes. If he is worthy then he is considered the greatest of all creations. If he is not worthy he is lower than the simplest of animals, as he is reminded that even the mosquito was created before him. Moses, the Prophets, Chazal, were all human beings, yet they reached amazing heights of sanctity and were close to Gd. They epitomized the notion of מכם, as sanctity emanated from the depths of their souls.

The first part of ספר ויקרא through פרשת שמיני describes how a Jew reaches the level of מכם, how he dedicates himself to be a קרבן to Gd, by living a life of תורה מצוות וגמילות חסדים. Rambam (at the end of הלכות שמטה ויובל) says that a close relationship to Gd is not the exclusive province of the Levites. Any Jew can aspire to be close to Gd, to become a living עולה קרבן, to reach higher levels than the angels. On the other hand, man can be a great artist, scientist, engineer, politician etc., and still be a spiritual and moral leper. Leprosy is more spiritual than physical. For example, the Prophet describes Naaman as a person who was esteemed by his peers. Yet ethically and morally he was bankrupt, a leper. Each Jew has an inherited and intrinsic trait that can lead to greatness and spiritual heights: the concept of מכם. When the Jew sinks to the level of מצורע, he is clearly not exhibiting מכם. When a Jew sins, he does so due to external influences. His spiritual makeup is inconsistent with, and incapable of, internally provoking the sin.

Rambam uses this concept of מכם to explain the Halacha of כופין אותו עד שיאמר רוצה אני. A man is required to divorce his wife under certain circumstances. If he refuses, Beit Din has the authority to give him lashes until he agrees to grant the divorce. How can the court coerce him if we know that a divorce obtained via coercion (גט מעושה) is not valid? Rambam explains that the internal personality of the Jew wants to comply with the order of Beit Din. However, external forces, the יצר הרע, prevent him from complying. Beit Din gives him lashes to make him ignore the יצר הרע, allowing him to express his true internal desire to comply with the wishes of Beit Din.

Chazal comment that as part of the service of the שעיר המשתלח on Yom Kippur, the High Priest, כהן גדול, would recount the various sins and "place them" on the head of the שעיר המשתלח, transferring the role of Esau to the he-goat. The כהן גדול asks Gd to forgive the people, כפר נא. Why not use the term סלח, or מחל? . כפר means to wipe away with minimal effort. Gd has many different "detergents" through which to remove the blemish of sin that would not necessarily be comfortable for the sinner to endure. The כהן גדול asks that Gd simply wipe the sins away, for they are only surface stains and have not been absorbed into the fabric of the Jew. The sins are not consistent with his internal makeup. They were not done voluntarily by the Jew, rather they were externally coerced on him. Sin is the realm of Esau, איש שעיר, hence we return them to their rightful owner, wiping away their residue from the Jewish People without leaving a lasting blemish. Indeed, the entire concept of repentance is built upon the idea that sin is only skin deep and can be readily cleansed through repentance.

This is the idea of אדם כי יהיה באור בשרו שאת ספחת או בהרת. The sin, the צרעת, is limited to the skin, and not deeply embedded into the personality of the sinner. Hence, כפרה, simple rinsing to cleanse the sin, is possible.

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