

SICHA ESSAY

A Kohen's Proclamation - A Lesson in Love of a Fellow Jew

Much of the Torah portions of Tazria and Metzora deals with the laws of nega'im, a condition of impurity (not found nowadays) affecting people, their clothing and their dwellings, that came as a result of an individual's spiritual failings.

With regard to nega'im, there are two general principles:¹

In order to establish whether a nega was of a ritually pure or impure variety, it had to be viewed by a scholar - not necessarily a kohen - who was well-versed in the area of nega'im.

The actual purity or impurity resulted from the proclamation of "pure" or "impure" by a kohen.

So vital was the kohen's proclamation that, when the kohen were incapable of discerning the state of the nega, "a scholar would view it and say to the kohen, 'proclaim it impure' and the kohen would proclaim 'impure'...."²

Since an unlearned kohen had to rely on a scholar, why was the kohen's proclamation so vital? Moreover, why specifically, regarding this impurity, does the Torah tell us that "impurity and purity are dependent upon the kohen"?³

Understandably, the most novel aspect of the fact that "impurity and purity are dependent upon the kohen" lay not so much in the kohen's ability to declare "pure," but in his ability to proclaim "impure," for the declaration of "pure" could only follow a declaration of "impure."

The question therefore becomes even greater: Were the novel aspect the declaration of purity, the need for a kohen would be understandable - only a kohen (a pure and holy individual in his own right) had the ability to bring forth and declare purity in others. But why could only a kohen declare a person "impure"?

The impurity of nega'im carried with it a stringency not found with any other type of impurity - the afflicted individual was banished from all places of Jewish habitation, and was to "sit alone;

outside the camp shall be his dwelling."⁴ The impact of this impurity was thus so harsh that the person was, as it were, severed from any connection with the Jewish nation.

The Torah therefore tells us that only a kohen could utter such a declaration. For the purpose of a kohen⁵ is that of "lovingly blessing the Jewish people,"⁶ and it is specifically upon the kohen - a "goodly individual"⁷ who blesses Jewish people - that the Torah relies to make such a serious decision.

It goes without saying that the kohen's ruling had to be based strictly upon the Torah, for which reason the nega had to first be viewed by a scholar well versed in the laws of nega'im. The actual adjudication, however, had to be carried out by a kohen, for it was he who felt the extreme harshness of such a banishment most strongly.

The kohen's inherent kindness and sensitivity would lead him to spare no effort in learning from the scholar whether it was possible to address the matter in a lenient fashion.

If, after such a thorough investigation, the kohen declares "impure," we can rest assured that the Torah law has been properly applied. Conversely, we can be assured that the kohen would spare no effort to see to the person's subsequent purification.

There is a vital lesson here. If we note glaring faults in a fellow Jew, we must remember that even a great scholar had to scrupulously probe his own love for his fellow Jews before he dared suggest that a person be placed outside the Jewish encampment.

Should we find that we are even somewhat lacking in this love, we have no right to make such a declaration about a fellow Jew, for doing so is merely a reflection of our own faulty character. As such, it is the antithesis of the Torah's desire that we love every Jew unconditionally.

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