

## CHAPTER AF: **SYMBOLISM of the LEPER PURIFICATION**

### **Part I of II**

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### ***Tazriah-Metzorah***

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**AF.1 – Introduction, The Leper Purification Text.** The Biblical text for the initial stages of the Lepor Purification as well as the Rashi comments are presented immediately below.

Biblical Text: Lv14-01:07

This will be the laws for the Lepor on the day he purifies

He is brought to the Priest

The priest goes outside the camp

The priest visually inspects to ascertain that the leprosy if healed from the lepor

The priest commands: They take for the lepor

Two wild(1) kosher(2) birds(3)

A cedar stick (4)

Wool died worm-red (5) and a

Hyssop (5)

The priest commands: One bird is slaughtered to an earthenware vessel on live water (6)

The wild bird: He takes it with (7)

The cedar stick

The hyssop

The worm-red wool

He immerses them (7) with the slaughtered wild bird

In the blood of the slaughtered bird on the live water

He sprinkles, on he who seeks purification from the leprosy, 7 times

He purifies him

He sends the wild bird on the face of the field

Rashi text:

1)The birds should be wild, not injured

2)The birds should be kosher

3)Because leprosy comes because of [the sin of] slander, which is a sin of chatter, therefore there is a need to purify him with birds that chatter continuously with a bird voice

4)Cedar, because leprosy comes from haughtiness [like a tall cedar]

5)What is his remedy to get cured: Let him humble himself like a worm and hyssop

6) The water is already there (it was placed first in the vessel) when the slaughtered blood is spilt – this way the blood is recognizable

7) In the first clause (“he takes”) there are two takings i) the wild bird and the ii) cedar, wool, hyssop while in the second clause (“he immerses”) they are dipped altogether.

**AF.2 – Summary of Rashi’s Interpretation:** Rashi interprets the lepor purification ceremony as psycho-socio-moral instruction to cure the lepor whose real problem is not the leprosy but underlying psychological imbalances manifesting themselves in slander and haughtiness. To cure his problems, he is therefore symbolically urged to forgo haughtiness symbolized by the cedar and humble himself like a hyssop or worm.

Rashi’s interpretation is obtained from Talmudic and Midrashic sources. Other biblical commenters similarly interpret. In fact, there is no dissenting opinion on the *basic* idea that leprosy corresponds to the psychological imbalances like slander and haughtiness and that the Torah is providing a means to remedy the problem.

**AF.3 – The Problem of Symbolic Interpretation:** Rashi’s interpretation is certainly meaningful, interesting, and relevant. But is it the straightforward meaning of the text, the *Peshat*? More generally, do we ever have the right, or possibly, the obligation to interpret a text symbolically? And even if we do, is the symbolic interpretation subjective and dependent on the interpreter.

These two issues – i) obligation to interpret symbolically and ii) method of symbolic interpretation - were raised and answered by Rabbi Hirsch in his essay, “Grundlinien einer Jüdischen Symbolik” (Groundlines for Jewish Symbolism). In the next few sections, we summarize the main answers to these questions. The answers to these questions open up for us a basic area of biblical interpretation. For without a firm commitment to the symbolic nature of certain biblical passages we can neither understand the text nor the commenters.

**AF.4 – Response #1; The obligation to interpret a text symbolically:** R. Hirsch shows 4 symbolic commandments *obligating* the reader to interpret them as symbolic. The clearest example is the Sabbath. The Sabbath commandment is explicitly called a symbol (Ex31:13).

Just to be clear the Sabbath is a *symbol* not a *sign* or a *seal of a covenant*. Let us review the sign-symbol distinction. A simple example of a non-symbolic item that is a sign would be an octagonal shape. The octagonal shape is designated as a *sign* indicating a request to stop. However, it is not a symbol; that is, there is no symbolic relationship between the number eight and the act of stopping. Therefore, it is a merely a sign or token.

A *covenant seal* is similarly an item that is designated as a sign that a covenant or treaty has been reached between two parties. The designated seal need not have a symbolic association with the substance of the covenant. The Sabbath is in fact called the *sign(seal) of a covenant* (Ex. 31:16).

One can even argue that the biblical word for symbol, *oth*, means *sign*, that is, it is the general category to which symbols, tokens, signs, seals, insignias etc. belong. The biblical word *oth* by itself does not mean indicate symbol, though in particular contexts it can mean symbol.

However, the Torah makes clear that the Sabbath is more than a sign or covenant seal, it is a symbol. The Torah explicitly *connects* the Sabbath observance to the item symbolized:

The Jews observed the Sabbath ...an eternal sign that created the world in six days but stopped creation and rested

Thus, the Bible obligates us to see the observance of the Sabbath, our cessation of work on the 7<sup>th</sup> day as *symbolic* of God's own cessation of work.

**AF.5 – Response #2; Obligation to Interpret Symbolically:** The first response just presented, only is applicable when the bible explicitly declares an item or activity to be symbolic. To present Response #2 we must first make clear what we mean by symbol.

A symbol is either an object or an activity such that, that object, or the performance of that activity, intentionally reminds us another object, performance, or idea.

To appreciate response #2 we examine the Tzitzith commandment (Nu15:37-41) which obligates a person who wears a four-corner garment to have string-like protrusions (called Tzitzith, which can also refer to strands of hair) emanating from them. The Bible never calls Tzitzith a symbol or sign. But the Bible at Nu15-39:40 explicitly *connects* the wearing of *Tzitzith* to another activity which is explicitly declared to be the purpose of wearing the Tzitzith.

The Tzitzith (on your garments) will be established for you: When you see them, you will remember all of God's commandments and not stray after your hearts or eyes which might lead you astray. *In order that you remember and do all My commandments and become holy to God.*

In other words, in lieu of explicit designation of an activity as a symbol, the Torah may alternatively explicitly require *connecting* the item or the performance of the activity to another item or activity. Since this *connection* is the essence of being a symbol, the Torah has thereby declared the commandment as symbolic.

Two comments are in order before leaving this example. First, some people philosophically object to the point of view that biblical commandments are observed for some reason such as a symbolic reminder. These people argue that commandments are exclusively observed because God ordered their observance and that is improper to attribute reasons to Gods commands.

I personally do not agree with this. After all, if the decree of God (or any sovereign entity) has a reason, it enhances the observance to know of its rationality. Furthermore, the purpose of this email group is to explain Rashi as *peshat*, not to discuss the philosophical basis for observance of commandments. Nevertheless, I personally heard from Rabbi Dr. Soloveitchick, "the Rav", citing the Sefer Chinuch, that the proper phraseology is to refer to *major issues of the commandment* (in Hebrew, *shoroshe hamitzvah*, *the roots of the commandment*), rather than *the reason* of the commandment. To this we can add, that the Torah explicitly requires *connecting* the wearing of Tzitzith to remembering God's commandments, and therefore, this mental connection is a required part of the performance of the commandment. From this point of view, we are not calling the symbol *the reason* but rather calling it a *requirement*.

A second issue relates to the distinction between symbol and sign, explained above. Is Tzitzith a symbol or sign? A further point to consider, is that the definition of symbol presented above (and

cited from R Hirsch) is equally a definition of sign. For example, the octagon is an object that intentionally should remind you of the activity of stopping; but the octagon, as pointed out above, is not a symbol, rather a sign since there is no intrinsic connection between the shape and the act of stopping.

The response to this is twofold. Biblically, *tzitzith* is simply a sign, no different than a string you wrap around your finger to remind you of something. But the Talmud was not satisfied with the sign nature of the Tzitzith and invested them with symbolic significance. For example, the Talmud required that there be 4 strings attached as Tzitzith which when doubled become 8 and that there be five knots; the sum of 8 and 5 is 13 which when added to the numerical value of the letters spelling Tzittzith equals 613, the number of biblical commandments. In this way, the Tzitzith were transferred from being a sign to a symbol.

On a deeper level however, there is no objection whether we initially call something a sign or symbol. In either approach, we must then ascertain how to *interpret* the sign or symbol. If the rules of interpretation do not require connecting the *component parts* of the item or activity with the symbolized then it has no symbolic interpretation but is simply a sign. On the other hand, if the rules of interpretation, which we will present below, do require connecting the component parts of the item or activity with the symbolized, then the item or activity is a symbol. We have already seen above examples of both. For example, biblically, the Sabbath is a symbol, not a sign, since *our rest* symbolizes *God's rest*; contrastively, biblically, Tzitzith are a mere sign, which however, in Talmudic hands were transformed into a symbol.

**AF.6 – Response #3:** There are many everyday examples where there is neither explicit designation of symbolic status nor of connection, but nevertheless the context clearly indicates a connection. Here is a simple example.

A husband gives his wife a bouquet of 7 roses on their seventh anniversary and says “I love you”

R. Hirsch would analyze this as follows: The husband neither explicitly states that the 7 roses are a symbol nor explicitly states that 7 roses should remind his wife of their seven years together. However, i) a very powerful and strong emotion, love, is mentioned, and ii) the objects presented, resemble linguistically or in form or function, a known association (roses are 7 in number identical with the number of years of their marriage). In such a case, argues R. Hirsch, the object is deemed symbolic.

To clarify R. Hirsch's observation, we connect them with the ideas of *peshat*. According to R. Hirsch, the natural straightforward way to interpret the husbands' gift and statement, the *peshat* of his actions, is that object is symbolic. That is the way we would all hear it. It is clearly intended and in discussing the husband's text we must treat it that way.

R. Hirsch applies this to the vast biblical domain of Temple Offerings. These Temple offerings are relationships between the Israelite and His Deity. They involve strong and powerful emotions such as thankfulness, guilt, remorse on sin, peacefulness, aspiration; additionally, the component parts of the offering items are, as we shall see, connected linguistically, by form, or by function

to the particular emotion involved. In such a case, the *peshat*, the simple straightforward meaning of the procedure is symbolic. The job of the interpreter is simply to document the known symbolic associations of the component parts and show how they fit in to the overriding emotional theme.

The example, of today's chapter, the Lepor Purification ceremony, will enable us to illustrate this important symbolic category. For reasons, of Chapter length, the basic ideas and theory of symbolism is being presented in this chapter while the analysis of the lepor purification proper will be done in the next chapter.

**AF.7 – The Lepor Symbol:** Rashi, following the Talmud and Midrash identifies a lepor as a person who has psychological imbalances manifesting themselves in slander or haughtiness. This interpretation is without dissent among biblical commenters. We therefore have an opportunity to objectively justify this identification.

We have just enumerated three methods, presented in responses #1 - #3, of identifying biblical symbols. The method mentioned in Response #2, explicit association, justifies the identification of leprosy with slander. This explicitly association is indicated by subsuming leprosy and slander in one paragraph (Dt24-08:09)

Be watchful about leprosy, to watch a lot and do; as the Priests-Levites instruct you, watch to do. Remember what God, your Lord, did to Miriam on the road, when you left Egypt [Recall: Miriam spoke against Moses and was punished with leprosy]

This explicit connection in one paragraph of leprosy and slander justifies the symbolic connection made in the Talmud, Midrash, and Rabbis.

**AF.8 – Symbolic Interpretation:** Once we establish the symbolic nature of a biblical passage, by using the methods in responses #1 - #3, we must go to the next step: We must interpret the symbol. Interpretation should not be subjective; it should be objectively based on principles.

R. Hirsch identifies four methods of interpretation. They are listed in the sections below, along with examples from the Lepor paragraph.

**AF.9 – Form:** The form of a symbol justifies its association with a symbolized theme with the same form. For example, recall our example, presented in Section 6 above, where the bouquet of roses and the marriage both had the same form of seven. Two items that resemble each other in any aspect of form (size, number, hardness, shape) may symbolize each other. Here are some examples from the Lepor paragraph.

Birds, especially wild birds, who continually chirp, have the same form as the slanderer who continually talks. Thus, the birds symbolize the slanderer and the priests' activities to the birds symbolize how to deal with this natural urge to chirp and gossip.

Cedars are quite tall as trees and symbolize haughtiness, a feeling of greatness, that you are on top.

Contrastively, hyssops are typically tramped on just as worms are tramped on. They have the form of someone subdued who, as even our languages indicate in their idioms, “get trampled on.”

**AF.10 – Function:** The function and purpose of a symbolic item, justifies the association with a symbolized item or activity with the same function. For example, the function of blood is to provide life support for the host organism. Hence, throughout the Temple Offerings, blood symbolizes the personality and life essence. Additionally, the relationship between blood and the soul is explicitly indicated in Lv17-14.

The function of slaughter is to terminate the life of the target being slaughtered. Hence in function, slaughter symbolizes its function, termination. We will use this association in the next chapter when we analyze more fully the lepor symbolism.

**AF.11 – Cultural Identification of a Symbol:** Very often, a culture explicitly identifies certain icons as having symbolic significance. Such cultural identifications justify symbolic association.

We have already seen an example of this in blood. The Bible indicates that blood is the symbol of life used throughout the offerings (Lv17-14). Thus blood, as symbolizing life and the soul, has two sources of identification, the function and the cultural association.

**AF.12 – Linguistic association:** The words used to describe the symbol may already have multiple associations. These associations justify symbolic association.

For example 2C25-18 records a message sent by King Yoash to King Amatzyah belittling him:

“The thorn [Amatzyah] [dares to] send a message to the cedar [Me, King Yoash] requesting marriage to his daughter; the field beasts [however] trampled the thorn [Amatzyah].

This passage exhibits clear symbolic association of cedar and might and haughtiness justifying Rashi’s assertion that the cedar stick symbolizes haughtiness, a feeling of might and supremacy.

**AF.13 – Summary:** We have covered quite a lot in this chapter; however, this chapter suffices to unlock the key to understand all symbolic Rashi comments in the Bible. In the next chapter we will complete the interpretation of the lepor purification ceremony.

We summarize the main themes of this chapter. First, we established using simple examples from everyday speech such as the bouquet-rose example that the simple straightforward meaning of a passage, its *peshat*, may indeed *require* symbolism.

We then listed three methods that a passage requires symbolism: i) explicit declaration of the symbol, ii) explicit connection and association between the symbol and the symbolized, or iii) the use of objects with known symbolic overtones – known linguistically or by form or function – to accompany an item or procedure.

We briefly discussed the symbol-sign distinction and pointed out that we could subsume this distinction within the general discussion of how to interpret a symbol whose symbolic nature is

required. We identified four methods: i) form, ii) function, iii) linguistic association, iv) known cultural association. We also provided brief examples of each.

We close with two thoughts. I can do no better than to give the advice of the Rambam in his mighty introduction to the Kodoshim order of the Mishnah

I have listed all basic principles in this introduction. Through it you will be able to fully understand the mishnahs in the Kodoshim order. However, you must master this introduction. Therefore, go over it thoroughly, recite it daily as you do your prayers so that its principles will be second nature.

Finally, we must express awe and thanks to R. Hirsch who stood behind the great jungle of symbolic interpretation and paved a clear path that we can all walk through to benefit from the beautiful examples of this enchanted forest.

*Praise be Him who Chose Them and Their Learning.*