

CHAPTER AG: **SYMBOLISM of the LEPER PURIFICATION, II**

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AG.1 – Review of Symbolism: We continue the thread begun in the last Chapter on the meaning of the Leper Purification ceremony. We present the details of this ceremony in this Chapter. We also include another symbolic example from the following biblical chapters. First however, we review the basic ideas and theory of symbolism presented last Chapter; we urge the reader to re-read that issue. Key points are as follows:

- 1) Symbolism as Peshat: The *peshat*, the straightforward meaning of certain passages, is symbolic. A simple example would be a man telling a woman, Rose, at a dinner date, “Pass me the rosens” punning her name on raisins. Such a pun *clearly* has symbolic meaning: *clearly*, he wants both the raisins and Rose herself. Here, *peshat*, is used in the sense of speaker intent. It is the way everyone hears the speaker’s intent.
- 2) The Bible requires us to interpret symbolically: The Bible may require us to interpret passages symbolically. Three methods of the Bible requiring symbolic interpretation are :
a) Explicit declaration: For example, we are told to observe the Sabbath as a symbolic affirmation of God’s resting on the Sabbath; b) Explicit requirement of mental association: For example, even though Tzitzith is never called symbolic, the Bible explicitly asks us to associate the sight of the Tzitzith with remembering God’s commandments. This requirement to associate, is the essence and definition of symbolism; c) The bible may use clearly symbolic objects like blood symbolizing the soul, when it talks about deeply emotional items like love, guilt, peacefulness, aspiration. A simple everyday example is the husband who gives his wife 10 roses on their 10th anniversary. Even though the husband did not declare the roses symbolic, and even though he did not require association of the 10 roses with the 10 years of their marriage, this is the way everyone hears the gift, that is, it is the natural interpretation of the gift, the *peshat*.
- 3) Methods of symbolic interpretation: Given that the bible requires symbolic interpretation there are four methods to ascertain that symbolic meaning: a) association of form, b) associations of content, c) the language (in this case Hebrew) associates two items with the same root, d) the culture and literature associate two items.
- 4) Examples: Several examples were given from the Leper Purification ceremony (Lv14). a) In English when we want to put down someone we say, “You worm”. In Hebrew we say “You thorn” or “You grass” or “You hyssop” (or any other low plant). Examples were brought of dialogues between Kings that naturally use this type of symbolism (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].”). b) We brought numerous passages (explicit passages also) showing that

blood symbolizes life and the soul. C) Leprosy symbolizes the sin of slander (Dt. 24-08:09, Nu 12)

AG.2 – The cedar stick, the hyssop, and the worm-red dyed wool: Last week, we cited Rashi as stating, “The Leper to cure his haughtiness must lower himself like a hyssop and worm”. We justified the symbolism of the hyssop last week and now continue. The ideas here are based on the writings of Rav Hirsch.

Rav Hirsch points out:

The hyssop and cedar span the spectrum of the plant world (smallest to highest); the worm and sheep span the spectrum of the animal world

We can continue the symbolic investigation by pointing out that throughout the bible, sheep are a symbol of loyal social creatures. Numerous verses refer to the Jewish people as God’s flock (e.g. Jer. 23:3, Jer. 50:6, Ez. 34:6, 34:11, Ps. 79:13, 95:7).

Worms in both English and Hebrew are symbolic of the low life. For example

Ps 22:7 I am a worm, not a man

However, symbolic interpretation is not simply a dictionary of what each word means. The symbols are the fabrics of a wider story. In a certain sense then, we are treating Lv14 not only as symbolic but as a *parable*, an extended symbolic passage.

To do this we recall that per Dt24-08:09, leprosy is a punishment for slander. Let us therefore tie together the above symbols with the slander theme.

Sheep tend to gather in herds and help each other while contrastively worms work independently (e.g. the leech worm) and at the expense of others. With regard to slander this leads to the following ideas:

- 1) The sheep people tend to slander the worm people: “They have no sense of community; every worm is for themselves; they have no sense of teamwork”
- 2) Similarly the worm people tend to slander the sheep people: “Everything is for the sake of the community. No one is ever allowed to just relax and worry about themselves and their needs.”

Items #1 and #2 are slander; they are the typical types of slander you hear in everyday speech. By binding the worm and wool (from sheep) together (by dyeing the wool with worm’s blood) we emphasize the idea of acceptance: The sheep people must accept the worm people and the worm people must accept the sheep people.

We continue with the plant world. Here already, cedars (and trees in general) are clear phallic symbols in all cultures. The area of intimacy is another area where slander is normal. Here are some typical slanderous statements.

- 1) The hyssop people complain about the cedar people: “We share with each other; there is peace among us. The cedar folks never come in herds; each one has to have their own space.”
- 2) The cedar people complain that they don’t want *them* (the hyssop) people in *our* neighborhood.

These are normal everyday speech patterns the Torah emphasizes and instructs the Leper about acceptance. Acceptance in the social sphere and acceptance in the physical sphere. The proper way to combat slander is to accept each and every individual where they are as having positive content to contribute.

Before closing this section, we should note the interaction between Rashi and later commentators such as Rav Hirsch and Rashiyomi.

Rashi made explicit the symbolism and dealt with the most common case: The Leper (who thinks he is a cedar) must humble himself like a hyssop and worm

Rav Hirsch builds on Rashi by pointing out that two spheres of life, the animal, and the plan, are mentioned.

Rashiyomi builds on Rashi and Rav Hirsch by concretizing these ideas and connecting them with normal speech and slander patterns.

Thus we have a clear progression and building. We accept the foundation of the early authorities but contribute greater detail and acuity of relevance.

We close this explanation by pointing out that the idea of *acceptance and toleration*, is a repeating biblical symbolic theme and occurs for example in the purification ceremony of someone who has had contact with a dead body (Nu 19) as well as in the lulav ceremony of Succoth (Lv23) where the hyssop and cedar are replaced with a palm branch and willow and supplemented with the Etrog fruit and myrtles. Although not the only approach, many interpret the lulav ceremony as encouraging acceptance and toleration of all forms of people.

AG.3 – Is the Torah Really Instructing the Leper with This Ceremony: We first repeat from last week’s issue:

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.

We summarize from last week: The fact that the Torah speaks about *purifying the Leper* and then uses known symbolic items which, as just shown, are clearly relevant to defeating slander, makes it clear that this is the Torah’s intent. It is the natural way that the listener hears the Torah. The priest in effect says, “You Mr. or Ms. Leper: You think you are a cedar; well I will show you that you must unite with hyssops and worms.”

This is the main argument. However, there are numerous other nuances and innuendoes showing that the Torah *intends* to instruct the Leper and that the Jews of the time of the wilderness naturally heard the Torah portion as symbolic instruction.

The Leviticus Rabbah, on Lv14-01 reinterprets the verse with a pun:

These are the principles (Torah meaning principles) of Lip-purer (Leper)

Note: I have followed one approach to the meaning of the word Torah and translated it as principles. According to this approach, Torah comes from the root, *harah*, to become pregnant, and indicates seeds or ideas that can guide in how to act in any situation. Many Leviticus chapters end or begin with the refrain, “These are the principles of...” indicating that the chapter gives principles which should be applied in each situation.

I have paraphrased the Hebrew pun in terms of an English pun: Leper = lip-purer. The above simply sounds like a pun read into the text. However, the Maharzu, one of the great commenters on the Leviticus Rabbah, points out that this pun is based on a parallelism. The Maharzu notices five passages connected with Leprosy talking about the principle-based (Torah) approach.

Lv14-54 This is the Torah (principles) for all leprosy...

Lv14-56 These are the principles (Torah) of the leprosy

Lv14-32 This is the Torah (principles): that has a leprosy in him but can't afford ...

Lv13-59 These are the principles (Torah) of the leprosy in a garment...

Lv14-02 This will be the Torah(principles) of the Leper on the day of his purification

As the single-underline passages show, Lv14-02 is the only time that the word Torah, principles, is connected with the *person* who has the leprosy. This is the principles of the Leper (not leprosy). Maharzu therefore points out that there is emphasis on the person (and his behavior) not just on his condition.

Just as Maharzu built on the Midrash, taking it from a mere word-pun, to a deep, nuanced comment on the person himself, I will build on the Maharzu. Notice another distinctness in the five parallel passages: Lv14-02 is the only passage with the double-underlined word, *will be*. The Torah is emphasized that these principles aren't something that simply exist; rather they *will be* principles for each Leper person on the day that he or she purifies (day of *his* purification).

Suffice it to say, that in terms of use of well-known symbols, the talking about deep emotions (purity) and the various nuances in the chapter, there is clear indication that the Author intends and requires us to see this passage as symbolic, instructing us on one of the most important social norms, acceptance, the vehicle for that being the avoidance of slander.

AG.4 – Other Symbolisms in the Leper Ceremony: There are many other aspects of the symbolic Leper ceremony. We have elaborated above on a main symbol since a) Rashi speaks about it, b) the symbolic ideas are reflected in both Hebrew and English, c) the theme of acceptance occurs in other commandments.

In this section let us briefly discuss the symbolism of the two birds. The symbolism of birds is easy to deal with. Recall that a fundamental symbolic method is association by *form*: Clearly, as Rashi citing the Talmud says:

We bring birds to purify the Leper since they constantly chirp the way the Leper constantly chats

In other words: The birds try and show the Leper what he or she looks like. In fact the birds must be wild birds that are kosher. The wildness is another emphasis to the Leper. It is not that he or she continuously chats like a bird, but that the chatter is very wild and brazen, attacking people instead of accepting them.

We now focus on the twoness. Why are there two birds, one of which merits to get offered as an offering on the Temple order while the other is let out in the open field? Rav Hirsch notes that a similar twoness occurs in the Torah portion of Acharay QeDoshim: During the Day of Atonement ceremony, the high priest takes two goats and casts a lottery on them: One of them will merit to be offered on the altar to God, while the other is banished to a jagged mountainous terrain where it will die (Lv16-05:10).

Twoness occurs rarely in the symbolic Torah passages. Rav Hirsch interprets the twoness using *form*: There are *two* paths before every person: The path of life and the path of death. The path of life leads to service in holiness while the path of death leads to death. This theme of choice, of two paths, one leading to life and one to death, is explicitly discussed in several Torah passages: Dt29-15:20, Dt29-26:28, Lv26,3 vs. 14).

The idea of twoness symbolizing choice occurs in literature. For example a famous poem of Wadsworth begins “I am in a forest with two paths before me....”

The idea would then be, that the Priest instructs the Leper as follows:

Choose how you want to live. If you accept discipline (symbolized by slaughter) you will merit to be in the Temple and enter a state of holiness while if you don’t, you will be cast onto the wild fields.

Since the bird is held with the cedar, hyssop, and word-dyed wool, the symbolism seems to be that:

If you accept the unity and importance of all people: The sheep and worm, the cedar and hyssop, then you can merit holiness while if you reject them you will live the wild life of the fields and lose God’s protection.

AG.5 – Is This the Peshat? Remember: Our task in these chapters, is not to sermonize or exhort about moral principles; our primary task is to define and uncover *peshat*, the natural interpretation of the biblical text.

The interpretation of the cedar, hyssop, worm and sheep was defended and supported by numerous examples, supporting verses, and linguistic associations. However, this interpretation of twoness while consistent with biblical ideas is only supported by two examples (Yom Kippur

and Leprosy) where the idea and theme of choice is important. In light of this can we claim this to be *peshat*, the natural interpretation of the verse.

The key point in this example is that the symbolism (twoness) is rare. Let us look at rarity in grammar and meaning. Although some Hebrew roots occur several hundred times in the bible, most Hebrew roots occur under 10 times; that is, most Hebrew roots are rare. For example, the book of Job, is full of rare roots and rare words; commenters are sharply divided on the meaning of such passages. To illustrate this point we examine Ps68:17 after which we will return to the *peshat* of the *two birds*.

AG.6 – Peshat of Ps68:17: The Psalmist is speaking about the fact that Mount Sinai and the Temple mount in Jerusalem were chosen by God for his dwelling place. The other nations, symbolized by mountains, are jealous. Ps68:17 speaks about this jealousy

Why *gavnunum* mountains are you *ratzdoon*?

There are two rare terms in this verse, which are italicized. Let us examine how commenters approached the meaning of these words.

Gavnunim is taken by Rashi to mean *tall* or *high* while Radaq takes this to mean *small*. Rashi argues that the root of *gavnunim*, *gavoah*, means *tall*; Radaq argues that the *gibeyn* is the hunchback, someone is height is shrunk.

Ratz is taken by Rashi to mean ambush (from a similar Arabic word). Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan, cited by Rashi, takes this to mean *to dance*. Radaq, citing the context, takes this to mean to belittle oneself. Rav Hai Gaon (cited by Rashi) takes this to mean to spy.

Based on this, various interpretations are given. Here are a few

High mountains (big nations); why do you ambush/spy on the Jews. God has chosen this to be his dwelling place (So you can't undo it) (Rashi, Radaq)

High mountains, (after the conquest of the Temple), why do you dance (rejoice on victory); God has chosen this to be His dwelling place (so the victory is short-lived) (Rav Mosheh Darshan)

Ibn Ezra/ Radaq: Small mountains (The Jewish people): Why do you belittle (Rtzd) yourselves when God has chosen here to dwell

We now raise the question of what is the *peshat*, *the natural interpretation of the verse*? Or, more to the point, with so many opinions, is there are a *peshat* to this verse.

To answer this question we suggest the following approach

- 1) All commenters agree with the idea that words have meanings and that words have roots which themselves have meaning. All commenters agree that a native speaker naturally hears the verse as saying something addressing the context of the Psalm; this is the *peshat*.

- 2) However, because there are so few examples of these words, because the words are rare, any specific interpretation of the *peshat* is *speculative*. It is not *speculative* in the sense of *homily*; it is speculative in the sense of *peshat*.
- 3) Thus we introduce the idea of *speculative peshat*: This means that the commenter has followed the *rules* of *Peshat*: *grammatical roots, dictionary meaning, fitting into context*, but that nevertheless there might be several legitimate competing alternatives to the verse meaning each one following the *Peshat* rules. This speculation is not due to a desire to exhort or sermonize but rather from a paucity of examples and ignorance. We try our best but there might still be different explanations.

In other words by calling this speculative we are not negating its *peshat* nature; we are not classifying this as *midrash* in the pejorative sense of homiletic fancy. We are simply giving *one reasonable* approach to the verse based on sound rules.

AG.7 – Peshat of Twoness in the Leper Symbolism: The above analysis also applies to the symbolism of twoness in the Leper symbolism. The interpretation brought above for the twoness as symbolic of the need to exercise choice, is speculative *peshat*.

On the one hand we have followed the guidelines of *peshat*; we are certain the passage is symbolic; we are certain that the twoness has some meaning.

However, because of the rarity of examples of twoness in biblical symbolism, we can at most speculate on what the twoness means here.

There might be other interpretations which follow the guidance of *peshat symbolism* including an emphasis on avoidance of slander. To be certain, we have backed our interpretation with other biblical verses but there still might be other interpretations with other supporting biblical verses.

As we have emphasized several times, the approach we have presented here is without dissent: No commenter disagrees with Rashi's approach (based on the Talmud) of interpreting the ceremony as addressing slander; no commenter that I know of presents an alternative to Rav Hirsch's symbolism. On the contrary, we must thank Rav Hirsch for at least opening a path on how to understand the symbolism of *two*.

AG.8 – Some Implications on Secular Biblical Scholarship: It is not the direct purpose of this newsletter to address Biblical Scholarship except when it directly affects our understanding of *Peshat* and *Derash*. Nevertheless, the ideas introduced in this and the previous chapter afford us an opportunity to address some ideas.

One branch of biblical scholarship sees the Torah as a collection of separate documents that were unified at some point in history. To defend this idea they point to the totally different nature of certain biblical books. For example, the first half of Leviticus, Lv01-Lv17 deals with offerings. Even the Rabbis call Leviticus *torath kohanim*, the *priestly code*.

Contrastively, Lv18-Lv27 deals with, by and large, a variety of civil code laws such as agricultural charity and redemption of sold land. Even the priestly parts of the last part of the

book, for example Lv22 deals with the civil aspects of priestly law (for example, a woman, a descendant of a priest, who married outside the priesthood, and then was divorced or widowed: What are her rights to eat priestly food such as Terumah). This second half of Leviticus is called the holiness code since it emphasizes those civil laws that make us holy.

We now have two possibilities:

If as scholars do, offerings are barbarically seen as attempts to sacrifice animals in order to appease a blood-thirsty deity, then indeed Lv01-Lv17, the priestly code, is in sharp contrast to Lv18-Lv27 since one deals with appeasement of a blood-thirsty deity while the other deals with social-civil laws that make us holy. No wonder then, that secular scholars, have suggested that these were originally two different books which someone unified.

But if as advocated in this and previous chapters, offerings are required by the bible to be seen as instructional material to facilitate moral and character improvement in the offering offeror, then indeed there is no difference between the priestly code and holiness code, they are both saying the same thing. For example, Lv14 in the first half speaks about how to avoid slander while Lv19 prohibits a gossip (one form of slander). The two books are part of the same whole. In the first half the priest helps the offeror to get back on his own feet while in the second half the person betters his own situation.

The point of the above analysis is as follows: How we interpret the bible depends heavily on how we hear it and how we interpret it; how we think it should be interpreted. It is important to emphasize that the *major* proof for separating texts is context. There is no archaeological evidence. As Byron Sherwin, a noted Conservative thinker once told me:

“The biblical scholars themselves acknowledge that their theory is a hypothesis; the name for the theory is the *documentary hypothesis*. They acknowledge the lack of hard archaeological finds.”

A second consequence of the above analysis pertains to Deuteronomy. A favorite mantra among the Biblical scholars is that early parts of the bible are particularistic while latter parts of the bible are universalistic and humane. They in fact use this to ascribe a later date to the writing of Deuteronomy (all this without any evidence!). However, in fact, in the analysis of this chapter we have shown three passages in Leviticus dealing with the advanced and important doctrines of *choice, tolerance, and acceptance*. We have none of the stereotype images of a bully god threatening lightning, earthquakes and destruction if his will is not followed. On the contrary, the two birds of the Leper, the two goats brought by the High Priest on Yom Kippur, and the two paragraphs of Lv26 (*if you listen to Me* followed by *if you do not listen to me*) both *offer* choice; people are supposed to choose the proper path. Although the Deuteronomic passages explicitly contain the word choice while the Leviticus passages do not explicitly mention choice, the idea of choice is very clear in the text. Indeed, this is as it should be, ancient man, no different than medieval man, or modern man, thought about the eternal questions; they are all addressed in the respective culture of the time.

AG.9 – Further Study: Due to lack of space, we cannot extensively deal comprehensively with the beautiful biblical symbolic literature. Rather, we introduced the major principles and pointed out that despite the guidance there will still be speculation. The serious reader is invited to further study the great symbolists, for example, Rashi and Rav Hirsch, armed with the methods to critically understand how the symbols are being interpreted.

AG.10 – *The Symbol's Meaning*: This chapter seems to suggest the incorrect inference that this chapter advocates understanding *the* symbol's meaning. For example, we have interpreted the cedar-hyssop to be a protest against common types of slander such as *we don't want them in our neighborhood*. Is that really in the Bible? Perhaps, the author (me) is reader into the text the context and problems of his times?

To answer this we recap what Rav Hirsch has taught us: 1) You may only interpret symbolically if the Bible requires it; 2) The symbol images are interpreted using specific methods (form, content, linguistic, and cultural association). That is the *peshat* how the people in the desert and readers of the Torah have understood the passages.

However, while the Bible identifies *cedar and hyssop* with *haughty* and *lowlife*, they are still images not verbal descriptions. Like all images, there is a certain poetic ambiguity, vagueness, and license and in how these images are interpreted. This is often seen at poetry reading sessions which resemble in form Midrashic compilations. Each person will respond to the poem with what they see; in Midrashic literature each scholar responds to a verses' image with their own experiences. These are legitimate interpretive activities.

But there is a limit in what you can read into a poetic passage such as a symbol. Unless the reading follows the rules of symbolism that we have outlined it is not *peshat*, the clear intent of the Author; rather it is a homily read into the text. For this reason, my citing the common slander *we don't want them in our neighborhood* was acceptable since it although it reflects my particular situation in the 20th century America, it follows the rules of *form and content* for the cedar and hyssop.

In conclusion, what the reader should take away from this chapter is the *idea* that symbolic interpretation is only allowed when the text requests it, and it must follow certain rules of interpretation. Any further reading of the text based on these principles is legitimate and illuminating.