



Metsora-Shabbat Hagadol 5776: Rule of Thumb

"In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence."

— Sir Isaac Newton

The condition of the *Metsora* is one that is a spiritual 'disease'¹ which manifests physically. The lesions that would occur on one's skin, clothing or dwelling were expressive of personal issues relating to one's interaction with others. It was specifically related to the manner of one's speech.²

It was a sign to Israel to warn them away from leshon hara - evil speech...One who would speak this way would find the walls of his home discolouring. If he changed his ways the house would recover. If he maintained his evil ways...his own skin would discolour and he would become a Metsora. (Rambam, Tum'at Tsara'at, 16:10)

Beyond the havoc that slander and maligning causes in society and the damage it inflicts on those about whom it is spoken, it also destroys the one who speaks it. When we speak ill of someone or something we use language, humanity's crowning glory, to reduce, criticise and scrutinise. We use our gifts of speech, creativity and communication for dark ends and in doing so diminish ourselves.

Torah speaks in Perashat Metsora of a society that was built on maintaining human dignity, honour and integrity³. Therefore, the slanderer was to be removed from the community not only because of the pernicious effects his speech would have on society but also because he had compromised his own integrity and therefore was not yet ready to mix with the population that was striving towards virtue.

He is to be separated and alone so that he cannot engage any longer in cynical and evil speech. (ibid.)

To reconnect to the journey of humanity towards higher virtue and morality one must recognise the unique and singular nature of the human being among all other inhabitants of the planet. The foundations of our integrity, ethics and morality lie partly in the fact that the human being has the capacity to understand the world and with that understanding to think, create and communicate. When we use our thinking to plot destruction, our creativity to produce pernicious realities and our communication to harm and belittle, the unique attributes of the human being are undermined.

For this reason, upon reconnecting to the people, part of the Metsora's purification and rehabilitation process included 'highlighting' three of the most significant, albeit unimposing, of human attributes.

*From the remainder of oil that is on his palm the Cohen is to place some on the ridge of **the right ear** of the one being purified, and on **the thumb** of his right hand, and on **the big-toe** of his right foot. (14:17)*

Our thumbs are responsible for many of our greatest achievements. Humans are the only animals on the planet with opposable thumbs allowing a full range of motion across the palm. This gives humans a powerful grip and exceptional dexterity to manipulate tools with. We do not use our hands to assist in walking as the apes do; our big toes help us walk upright and balance.

¹ Torah does not react to the symptoms of the disease as if it were a biological pathology for example: a non-Jew with *tsara'at* is not considered impure and a groom need not present himself for diagnosis. (*Nega'im*, 3)

² The hakhamim learn from the manifestation of *tsara'at* in Miriam after she had spoken ill of her brother Moshe (Num., 12), that *leshon hara* - evil speech was usually the cause of *tsara'at* in most people. (Rambam, Tuma'at Tsara'at, 16:10)

³ See Deut. 20:15



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These small blessings freed the human being and allowed us to use our hands to write, draw and perform fine motor skills. Without the thumb there would be no written communication, no paintings, no sculptures, no music, no electronics or industry. Without the thumb-toe we would not stand, walk or run while upright nor look ahead⁴.

Finally, the ear is highlighted because it is with the ear that we listen to other people and grow to know and care for them as whole beings. By listening to people's stories in the many forms of speech that they reach us, we come to connect, share and become familiar with them which is perhaps the single greatest aspiration of humankind.

Perashat Metsora reminds us that the gifts of our humanity come from small and seemingly minor aspects like thumbs and big toes but they provide significant impact on our greatest achievements. With them we can either embrace greatness and virtue or we can use our gifts to create strife and discord. The magnitude of either side of such possibilities is enormous.

As the Mestora prepares to reconnect to the people he remembers that something as small as the human thumb can change the course of history and in highlighting the thumb, big toe and ear he is gently reminded that he is human and his precious gifts are to be used for light and life.

⁴ Cutting thumbs off prisoners of war was a cruel tactic of dehumanisation over much of ancient history. For a curious instance see Judges, 1:6-7.



Law and Lore

Select Laws of Pesah 2

Laws of the Seder – Part 1

Kadesh – Recite Kiddush

- 1) The Seder should begin only after the stars come out, so that the Mitzvah of the four cups can be done after nightfall. However, one who added from the weekday to the Holiday by praying early and reciting Kiddush before the stars came out, has fulfilled his obligation post factum. In any case, if the Karpas was dipped in salt water before nightfall, it is proper to be stringent and dip again after it becomes dark. This rule applies even more so with regard to eating the Matzot and reading the Haggadah. If these Mitzvot were performed before dark, they should be repeated after dark, without a blessing, for whenever there is a doubt concerning the obligation to say a blessing, we are lenient and waive the obligation.
- 2) All participants in the Seder must hear Kiddush. Both the one reciting the Kiddush as well as those hearing it must have in mind to fulfil the obligation of Kiddush. The words, Baruch Hu U'Baruch Shemo, are not said. Only Amen is answered.
- 3) Kiddush is said while standing. The order of the Kiddush is as follows: the blessing of Boreh Peri HaGefen, the blessing of Asher Bahar Banu ... Mekadesh Yisrael VeHaZemanim, and then the blessing of Shehehiyanu. When Pesah begins on Motzaei Shabbat (Saturday night), Kiddush is said in the following order: the blessing on the wine, the blessing Asher Bahar Banu, the blessing Boreh MeOrey Haesh (said on the Havdalah flame), the blessing of Havdalah, and last the blessing of Shehehiyanu. When it falls on Friday night, we begin with the words Yom HaShishi Vayechulu HaShamayim etc.
- 4) After reciting the Kiddush, the wine is drunk while reclining.

Urhatz – Washing the Hands

- 1) One must wash one's hands without a blessing before dipping the Karpas (in vinegar, salt water or lemon water) and eating it. The reason for this washing is that when one eats any wet vegetable he must first wash his hands. Being that there is a dispute among the authorities whether there is a blessing said after this washing or not, the law is not to say it, for when there is a doubt concerning the obligation to say a blessing we are lenient.

Karpas

- 1) Less than an ounce of Karpas is taken and dipped in vinegar, salt water or lemon water. The blessing Boreh Peri HaAdamah is said as mentioned above, when the blessing is said, one must have in mind that the blessing exempts the Maror eaten later in the Seder.
- 2) If Karpas (celery or parsley) is not found, another green vegetable is used. Celery is always preferable.
- 3) One is not required to recline while eating the Karpas. If one wishes to do so, he may.

Yahatz – Dividing the Matzah

- 1) From the three Matzot placed on top of the Seder plate, the host takes the middle Matzah and divides it in two. The bigger piece is saved for the Afikoman, and the smaller piece is placed back in between the other two whole Matzot. The piece of the Afikoman is placed in a napkin, in commemoration of that which is written, "Their leftover dough was wrapped in their clothes (and placed) on their shoulders. The Children of Israel did as Moses had said" (Exodus 12:34-35).



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Magid Relating the Story of the Exodus

- 1) It is a positive commandment to relate the story of the Exodus from Egypt on the first night of Pesah (first two nights outside of Israel). It is thus written "Remember this day as the time you left Egypt" (Exodus 13:3).
- 2) The Torah obligates women in the Mitzvah to relate the story of the Exodus on Pesah night. Their obligation is equal to the men's. Women can therefore exempt men from their obligation as men can for them.
- 3) Before beginning Magid, the Seder plate is lifted with the Matzot on it, and Ha Laham 'Aniya is said. After this, the plate is taken away from the table, as if everyone has finished eating. This is done so that the children will see this as strange, and ask about it. It is then told to them that we are not permitted to eat until we tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt.
- 4) After MahNishtanah, the Seder plate is replaced on the table and 'Avadim Hayinu is said. This part of the Haggadah may be recited either sitting or standing. There is a difference of opinion as to whether or not one may recline while reciting the Haggadah. One who wishes to follow the authorities who permit reclining may do so.

Parsha Perspectives

V Metzora

- 29a Ritual purification from *tzora'at* (14:1-20)
- 29b Ritual purification from *tzora'at* for poor (14:21-32)
- 30 *Tzora'at* of buildings (14:33-57)
- 31a *Tum'ah* due to a man's pathological discharge (15:1-15)
- 31b *Tum'ah* due to normal seminal emission (15:16-18)
- 32a *Tum'ah* due to normal menstruation (15:19-24)
- 32b *Tum'ah* due to a woman's pathological bloody discharge (15:25-33)

Taken from 'Torah for Everyone' by Rabbi Dr. Raphael Zarum, Dean of LSJS