

PARASHAS TAZRIA

Big Black Holes

It was a disease unlike any other in the annals of medical history. This disease produced lesions on the skin that resembled leprosy, but it was not related to leprosy. Neither microbial infection nor systemic malfunction caused it. It could not be treated with antibiotics or medication or even hot chicken soup. It was called *tzaraas*.

This week's Torah portion describes this affliction and its remediation in great detail. Although *tzaraas* produced physical skin lesions, it was a spiritual malady. When a person contaminated his spiritual essence by speaking gossip or slander, he would become afflicted with *tzaraas* and quarantined. Because his malicious tongue had caused relationships to be broken and people to become separated from each other by barriers of hostility, he would become afflicted with *tzaraas* and forced to sit in isolation, contemplate the harm he had caused and hopefully repent.

Which brings us to the obvious mystery. Unfortunately, people in our times are not so perfect that they never stoop to gossip and slander; there is plenty of malicious verbal sniping and backstabbing in contemporary society. And yet, where is the *tzaraas*? Why don't we see people coming down with this spiritual malaise and its skin lesions?

Earlier in this week's portion, we read that a woman who gives birth because ritually impure and must go through a process of purification. How can such an event as wondrous and holy as childbirth cause ritual impurity?

The mystical teachers explain that there is constant tension in the world between holiness and impurity. When the one contracts creating a black hole in spiritual space, the other expands to fill the void, and vice versa. When a person's soul departs his body, there is a contraction of holiness, and ritual impurity flows into the void. When a woman gives birth her separation from that spark of holiness in her child diminishes her holiness, and ritual impurity flows into the void.

Over the centuries, as our experiences at Mount Sinai slips further into the past, there has been a general decline in the overall state of holiness in the world. In ancient times, people were on a very high level of holiness. When they spoke maliciously and ruinously, they tore a gaping hole in their holiness, leaving a big black hole, and the negative energy that flowed into that void manifested itself as *tzaraas*. In our day,

however, the level of holiness is not high enough to trigger such a phenomenon.

The countdown for launching the spaceship was underway. The systems were all checked and rechecked. The monitors detected no glitches. The media arrived to observe the dawn liftoff. At the last minute, however, a problem was detected. The pressure wasn't holding steady. The countdown was stopped, and the launch was aborted.

The technicians examined every inch of the rocket for hours in search of the cause of the pressure failure. Finally, they found it, and a press conference was called.

"Gentlemen," the project director announced to the assembled representatives of the media, "we have discovered the problem, and we will correct it. The launch has already been rescheduled. We will issue a press release with all the details tomorrow."

"Sir," asked a newsman, "can you describe the exact cause of the problem?"

"Yes. There was a hairline fissure in an O-ring seal."

"That's all?" the newsman exclaimed in wonder. "When my car has a hairline fissure in a seal, it can still make it halfway across the country."

"How can you compare your car with this rocket?" the project director replied. "This is such a sophisticated, complex machine that the slightest flaw upset its equilibrium. By comparison, your car is a donkey cart."

In our own lives, we often observe that our great spiritual leaders endure more than their share of suffering and sorrow, and we wonder why this is so, and we are puzzled by it. Certainly, we say to ourselves, they who are better than we are should not have to suffer more. In fact, it is their great spiritual attainments that place them at higher risk. The higher their level of holiness, the greater the spiritual black hole when they take a wrong turn, the greater the flow of negative energy in their direction.