

PARASHAS METZORA

Plants and Wheelchairs

There is an old saying that a candle in the sunlight serves no purpose. Dazzled by the bright illumination of the sun, we really gain nothing from one small candle. But does this always hold true? The Passover Seder would seem to contradict this concept.

What happens at the Seder? We read the Haggadah, which tells the magnificent story of the Exodus, the pain and suffering in bondage, the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb, the glory of our redemption. But we also place a whole array of symbols on the table. Bitter *marror* herbs to remind us of the bitterness of our suffering. Wine to remind us of the blood that was spilled. The *matzah* and the Seder plate to remind us of the Paschal sacrifice. What do we need these symbols? What do they add to the dramatic and magnificent story? Do we need candles in the sunlight?

The commentators find a strong parallel to this issue in this week's Torah portion. We read about the purification process of the metzora, a person afflicted with lesions because he spoke improperly about other people. One of the items he must take is the hyssop, a lowly plant that grows close to the ground. Why the hyssop? Our Sages observe that the hyssop symbolizes the metzora's lowly stature. It reminds him that he is a speck in the universe and teaches him humility, the first step in his spiritual rehabilitation.

But the question still remains: Why isn't it enough for the priests to take him aside and talk to him about the virtues of humility and the evils of malicious speech? Why is there a need for the hyssop?

The commentators explain that true change must come from within. The priests could talk to the metzora endlessly about the importance of being humble, about how insignificant he is in the grand scheme of things, and it would have no genuine effect. No matter how much lip service he will pay them, in his own mind he will remain arrogant. But when he considers the hyssop in the privacy of his own thoughts, he embarks on a journey of introspection, reflection and self-analysis. And when he arrives at his destination, he will have achieved true humility.

At the Passover Seder as well, the mere telling of a story cannot penetrate to the very depths of our hearts. Therefore, we have the symbols that lead us to associate with the experience of our ancestors and to reflect deeply on their significance. Only in this way can we achieve a true feeling of personal redemption.

A teacher was telling his students about the dangers of riding a bicycle without the protection of a helmet. In case of an accident, he warned, head injuries were very likely to occur. He then told them a number of stories about teenagers who had been paralyzed by falls from bicycles.

The students listened to the stories wide-eyed and open-mouthed, but the next day they were again riding blithely down the road, their helmets dangling from their bicycle seats.

The frustrated teacher sought the principal's advice.

"I know they believed the stories," he said. "I could see it in the shock and the concern on their faces. If so, why didn't they start wearing their helmets? I don't understand it."

"It's just human nature," said the principal. "You hear the stories, but somehow, you never relate them to yourself. Listen to me. Tomorrow, bring a wheelchair into your classroom and leave it there for a few days. In their own minds, they will begin seeing themselves in the wheelchair. Mark my words. In a week, they will all be wearing their helmets."

In our own lives, we have an intellectual understanding the Almighty's goodness and kindness, but sometimes that awareness does not penetrate to the depths of our hearts. How then do we accomplish this? By taking note of the myriad symbols of His benevolence that surround us; everywhere we turn, everywhere we look, we encounter manifestations of it. Let us not take for granted our health, our families, our homes, the birds in the sky, the very air that we breathe. Let us rather reflect on these symbols of His presence and engender awareness at the core of our being.