

Zera Shimshon

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Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XXVIII: Metzora (Lev. 14:1–15:33)

Essay 2. *Tzara'at* motivates one to repent

מדבר רבה על פסוק "וישם ה' לקין אות", ר' יהודה ור' נחמיה, ר' יהודה אומר הנזרים לו גלגל חמה, אומר ליה רבי נחמיה לאותו רשע הנה מזרים לו גלגל חמה, אלא מלמד שהנזרים לו את הצרעת כמה דאף אמרת "והאמינו לקל האת האחרון" עכ"ל.

Midrash Rabbah on the verse “And the L-rd put a mark [אות] [ot] on Cain”¹:

Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Nechemiah [disagreed about the meaning of the verse]. **Rabbi Yehudah says:** [G-d] caused the sun’s orb to shine for him. **Rabbi Nechemiah said to him:** Would the sun’s orb shine for that wicked man? **Rather, it teaches that He caused *tzara'at*² to shine upon him, as it says: “And they will believe the witness of the second mark [האת] [*ha'ot*].”³**

- Gen. Rabbah 22:27

והוא תימא דר' נחמיה מקשה קושיא גדולה לר' יהודה ואמר פה ר' נחמיה גופיה קאמר מילתא דקשיא טובא, שאם יש בו הצרעת זהו אות שחייב על הריגת הכל, שעל שפיכות דמים פא הנגע פדאמרינן בערכין, ואז יהיו סגורים ממנו אורות העליונים והיה כל-מוצאו נהרגוהו כי בדרך ישוב.

This is surprising, for Rabbi Nechemiah asks a difficult question of Rabbi Yehudah, why would G-d cause the sun to shine for Cain?

But afterward, Rabbi Nechemiah himself states a very difficult subject, for if [Cain] had *tzara'at*, this was a sign that he was guilty of Abel’s murder, for a plague comes because

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¹ Gen. 4:15.

² *Tzara'at* is a skin disease. Many English translations refer to it as leprosy and to the person afflicted as a leper. However, this skin disease was not related to leprosy. Rather, it was considered a physical manifestation of a spiritual ailment.

³ Ex. 4:8.

of bloodshed, as we say in *Arachin*.⁴ Then the supernal lights would be closed off from him, and “whoever finds him will kill him,” for he would sit in isolation.

ויש לומר דאיתא בפרק ב' דמפוז' "אז יבדיל משה שלש ערים" וכו' אמר לו הקב"ה למשה הנרחת השמש לרוצחים. והטעם דמקרי נריסת שמש צריך לומר לפי שמי שחוטא גורם שיסתלק מעליו צלם אלהים, ובפרט בעון שפיכות דמים "כי בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם", ואז הוא מוכן להיות נידון מהמזיקין השולטים בעולם כמו שכתוב בזוהר על פסוק "ומוראכם וחתכם יהיה", וכל עקר שליטתם הוא בלילה. ולכן ערי מקלט אלה שהיו קולטים מ"כל צר ומשטין" כמו שכתב שם הזוהר שזהו הטעם של "והקרייתם לכם ערים" וכו' נקרא כמו נריסת השמש, שפמו שבימים אין להם רשות לשלוט דכתיב "תשתחשף" וכו', כך בערים האלה לא היה להם רשות ליכנס.

It can be said that it is brought in chapter 2 of tractate *Makkot*:

Rabbi Simlai taught: What is [the meaning] of that which is written: “**Then Moses separated three cities** across the Jordan, toward the rising [*mizrecha*] sun, as cities of refuge.”⁵ **The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses:** . . . [In designating these cities of refuge] **you have shined** [*hizrachta*] **the sun** for [involuntary] **murderers**.

- Makkot 10a

As to the reason this is called the shining of the sun, it must be said that when a person sins, the image of G-d departs from him, especially for the sin of bloodshed, “for in the image of G-d He made man.”⁶ Then he becomes vulnerable to damaging forces that rule in the world, as is written in the *Zohar* on the verse, “The fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth,”^{7,8} and their primary dominion is at night.

These cities of refuge provided refuge “from every oppressor and adversary,”⁹ as the *Zohar* says there.¹⁰ This is the reason that the verse, “you shall provide yourselves with cities to serve you as cities of refuge”¹¹ is considered like the shining of the sun. This is like the day [the destructive forces] have no permission to rule, as it is written, “You bring on darkness and it is night,”¹² thus in these cities they have no permission to enter.

⁴ Arachin 16a: “Rabbi Yochanan says: *Tzara’at* comes and afflicts a person for seven sinful matters: For malicious speech, for bloodshed, for an oath taken in vain, for forbidden sexual relations, for arrogance, for theft, and for stinginess.”

⁵ Deut. 4:41.

⁶ Gen. 9:6.

⁷ Gen. 9:2.

⁸ Zohar III:123b (Nasso 54–57).

⁹ Avinu Malkeinu prayer.

¹⁰ Zohar II:114b (Mishpatim).

¹¹ Num. 35:11.

¹² Ps. 104:20.

ואף כּאן אָמַר ר' יְהוּדָה הַזְרִים לוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ דְּאָמְרִינן בְּיַלְקוּט עַל פֶּסוּק "אִזּוּ יַבְדִּיל מֹשֶׁה" וְכו' מִשָּׁל לְאַחַד שְׁהָרַג וְכו' כִּד פֶּל מִי שְׁהָרַג [בְּ]שׁוֹגֵג, גּוֹלָה, שְׁנֶאֱמַר "וְנָס אֶל-אַחַת מִן-הָעָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְחָי".

Even here, Rabbi Yehudah said: “He caused the sun’s orb to shine for him,” as it is said in the *Yalkut Shimoni*, on the verse, “Then Moses separated three cities across the Jordan,” this is a parable for one who kills, “which is similar to a sculptor who was making an icon of the king, and it broke in his hand. The king said: If it had broken on purpose, he would be liable to death, but now that it broke unintentionally, he is exiled.”¹³ Thus anyone who kills accidentally, goes into exile, as it is said, “he could flee to one of these cities and live.”¹⁴

וְכוֹן קִנּוּן קָבַל עֲנָשׁוֹ שֶׁהָיָה "נָע וְנָד בְּאַרְצִי", וְעוֹד שֶׁעֲצִינֵי נִשְׁאָר לוֹ חֲצֵי הַגְּזִירָה דְּכַתִּיב "וַיָּשָׁב בְּאַרְצֵ-נוֹד", וְהָיָה לוֹ לַכִּפֶּרֶת עֲוֹנוֹ, וְלָכֵן הַזְרִים לוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ שֶׁחֲזָר לוֹ דְּמוּתוֹ וְצִלְמוֹ.

Thus, Cain had already received his punishment, as he was “a restless wanderer on earth,”¹⁵ and furthermore, half of the decree still remained, as it is written, “and he settled in the land of Nod,”¹⁶ and these were to atone for his sin.¹⁷ Therefore, “He caused the sun’s orb to shine for him,” that [G-d] returned to him His form and His image.

וּפְלוּגְמִיָּהוּ דְּר' יְהוּדָה וְר' נַחֲמִיָּה פְּלִיָּא בְּטַעַם מַחְלָקוֹתָם שֶׁל קִנּוּן וְהֶבֶל, דְּר' יְהוּדָה סָבַר כִּמְאֵן דְּאָמַר בְּמִדְרַשׁ שְׁנַתְעוֹרְרוּ עַל הַפְּהוּנָה, וְקִינָה הָיָה לוֹ לְכַאוּרָה קִצְתָּ טַעַם לְהַרְגֵּי אוֹתוֹ, שֶׁהֻעְבְּדָה בְּכּוֹרוֹת וְהוּא הָיָה בְּכוֹר וְהָיָה דִּן אֲחִיו הֶבֶל כְּמִי שֶׁמְעוֹרֵר עַל הַפְּהוּנָה שֶׁהוּא חַיִּיב מִיתָה, וְהָיָה שׁוֹגֵג בְּדִין וְכָבֵד קָבַל עֲנָשׁוֹ לְגַמְרֵי, וְרַבִּי נַחֲמִיָּה סָבַר דְּמַחְלָקוֹתָם הָיְתָה אוֹ עַל הַקְּרָקְעוֹת אוֹ עַל תְּאוֹמָה יְמִירָה וְכו', וְהָיָה רָשָׁע, וּמִשּׁוֹם הָכִי פְּרִידָה לְאוֹתוֹ רָשָׁע וְכו', כְּלוּמַר שֶׁאֵינּוּ דֵּי לוֹ עוֹנֵשׁ הַגְּלוּת שֶׁהָיָה לֹא הָיָה שׁוֹגֵג אֶלָּא מְזִיד וּפּוֹשֵׁעַ.

The disagreement between Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Nechemiah depends on the reason for the dispute between Cain and Abel.

Rabbi Yehudah held like the opinion in the Midrash that they quarreled over the priesthood.¹⁸ Cain seemingly had some justification for killing him, for the service was meant for the firstborn, and he was the firstborn, and he judged his brother Abel as one who was challenging the priesthood, for which he would be liable to death. Thus, he erred in judgment and had already received his full punishment. Thus, in his view, G-d putting the mark on Cain meant that He caused the sun’s orb to shine for him, restoring to him the image of G-d that had departed from him when he killed Abel.

¹³ *Yalkut Shimoni*, parashat Va’etchanan, remez 929.

¹⁴ Deut. 19:5.

¹⁵ Gen. 4:14.

¹⁶ Gen. 4:16.

¹⁷ Sanhedrin 37b.

¹⁸ *Gen. Rabbah* 22:16.

But Rabbi Nechemiah held that their dispute was either over land or an extra twin sister who had been born with Abel, etc.,¹⁹ and that [Cain] was a wicked man, who had not been fully punished. Therefore, he challenged [Rabbi Yehudah, asking,]: “[Would the sun’s orb shine] for that wicked one,” as if to say that a punishment of exile is not sufficient, for he was not an inadvertent sinner but an intentional sinner and a transgressor. He therefore disagreed that G-d putting the mark on Cain was a direct restorative act of causing the sun to shine upon him. Instead, Rabbi Nechemiah held that the mark of Cain was *tzara’at*, which was a further punishment.

אֵלָא דְאִמְרִינן בְּבִרְכּוֹת כָּל מִי שֵׁשׁ בּוֹ אֶחָד מֵאַרְבַּע מִרְאוֹת נִגְעִים הָלְלוּ אֵינָן אֵלָא מִזְבֵּחַ כְּפָרָה, וְאִמְרִינן שֶׁם בְּמִדְרָשׁ אָמַר ר' יוֹסִי בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא הָאֵרֶת לְעוֹלָמָהּ כְּשֶׁם שֶׁהַשֶּׁמֶשׁ מֵאִיר, "מִזְרְחָהּ שֶׁמֶשׁ" בְּשִׁעָה שֶׁהַכֹּהֵן שֶׁעָרִי מְקַלֵּט שֶׁהוּא כְּפָרָה לְרוֹצֵחַ, אָמַר לוֹ וְאִם יִתְרַבּוּ הָעָרִים לְהִיכָן בּוֹרְחִים, אָמַר לוֹ יִבְרָחוּ לְתוֹרָה וְכו' עכ"ל. וּמִשּׁוֹם הֵכִי הִזְרִיחַ לוֹ אֶת הַצָּרַעַת, דְּמִקְנָתָהּ דְּמִצּוֹרַע יַעֲסוֹק בְּתוֹרָה, דְּכָתִיב "מִרְפָּא לְשׁוֹן עֵץ חַיִּים", כְּדִי שֶׁיִּבְרַח לְתוֹרָה, וְהַתּוֹרָה מְגַנָּא וּמַצִּילָא וּבָזָה יַעֲשֶׂה תְּשׁוּבָה גְמוּלָה וְיִתְכַפֵּר לוֹ עוֹנוֹ.

Rather, as it is said in *Berachot* (5b): “If one has any of the four signs of *tzara’at*, they are nothing other than an altar of atonement?”

It says there in the Midrash:

Rabbi Yossi bar Rabbi Chanina said: “You illuminated Your world just as the sun gives light, “when it rises in the east,” when you set aside cities of refuge, which are atonement for a murderer. He said to Him: “And if the cities are destroyed, where will they flee?” He said to him: ‘Let them flee to the Torah.’ ”

- *Yalkut Shimoni*, parashat Va’etchanan, remez 929

Because of this, in the view of Rabbi Nechemiah, He caused *tzara’at* to shine upon [Cain], as a further punishment, and also because the remedy of the *metzarah*, i.e., one who has *tzara’at*, is to engage in Torah, as it is written, “A healing tongue is a tree of life.”²⁰

That way, he may flee to Torah. The Torah protects and saves, and by this, [Cain] could do complete repentance, and his sin would be atoned.

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¹⁹ *Gen. Rabbah* 22:7.

²⁰ *Prov.* 15:4.