

עדת אש קודש Adass Aish Kodesh

A POT OF GOLD FOR EACH ONE

Harav Y. R. Rubin

In the parshas of Tazria and Metzora we learn of diseases that strike in a physical sense but are in fact spiritual in nature. We all know that for certain sins rooted in anti-social behaviour, a person's skin would crawl with a leprous-like rash. A careful reading shows us that this would happen in stages: first the house would be stricken, then the clothing and finally the skin. The causative sins were basically evil slander or gossip, and the eruption of the skin was indicative of the soul not being able to contend with such base actions.

In the midst of all the Torah passages describing this process, we find a fascinating note from Rashi. He explains that in the first stage, when the person's home was stricken, there was in fact a silver lining behind the clouds. The Torah tells us that the afflicted house had to be dismantled stone by stone and taken away. However, in the walls of many of the houses there was hidden treasure, secreted there by the previous heathen dwellers. The dismantling of the family home would lead to bestow the Jewish homeowner with undreamed of riches. What kind of message was Hashem giving us? Does this mean that if you speak evil about others you will be repaid with a pot of gold?

There are many who have asked this question, and many who have given us insight into probable answers. Some explain that Hashem wanted to teach the gossip a vital lesson: those who speak evil about others fail to see the good in every human being. They prefer to look at others through their own negative viewfinder, and so wind up talking about them in a discrediting fashion. The dismantled house gave them a parallel: Yes, the visible structure may have terrifying discolouring blotches that seem to make the house totally uninhabitable, however there very well may be hidden gold within, riches far beyond expectation. Every human being has this inner gold, that bit of holiness Hashem creates us with, so who are we to seek to disparage and diminish others?



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Harav Y. R. Rubin Shlita

36 Bury Old Road

Prestwich – Manchester

M25 0FT



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כ"ק מרן אדמו"ר מפיאסצנה
הרב קלונימוס קלמן שפירא
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It makes us wonder what kind of society allows for such feelings of disdain for one's neighbors. Perhaps it's a society that doesn't allow each of its members to realize the self-worth inherent in every one of Hashem's creations. Harav Eliyahu Hoffman of Toronto Z"l spoke about this problem and shared a lovely story. A hard-working father came home from a long day at the office to find his wife at her wits' end. "Chaim is acting up again! He's bothering his brothers and won't listen to anything I say." Tatty takes the reins in hand. "Chaim, get to bed RIGHT NOW! I don't want to hear another word from you." Chaim scurries up the stairs fully aware of the trouble he is in. A few minutes pass in delightful quiet. Then a voice is heard from the bedroom. "Tatty, I'm thirsty. Can I come down for some water?" "NO! Don't start your shtick with me. Stay in bed." A few more moments pass. "Tatty, I'm soooo thirsty. Please let me come down for some water." Tatty knows his Chaim all too well. "NO! And that's final. If you don't go to sleep right now I am coming upstairs to give you a potch!" Two seconds slide by. "Tatty, when you come upstairs to give me a potch, could you bring me a glass of water?" Chaim knows that even his Tatty's potch would be served with love and care. Deep down, he knows Tatty is doing all this out of his love. Similarly, we know that Hashem doesn't want to destroy Jewish homes with tzara'as. The very eruption is caused by Hashem's love for His people. Hence the pot of gold, as if to say, "Yes, a warning has been given, but with care and attention."

In this world of dark golus, there are thousands of young people who have no conception that there are those who care or love them. They feel that no one even cares enough to give them a loving potch, and so they thief and rob at their wayward hearts' content. In a world where only material gain is important, where everything is measured by the rate of consumerism, we will continue to be burdened by such anti-social acts. If there was a feeling in every child that someone cared, that life does not revolve around what you own or what you can buy, then just maybe the potch of discipline would help.

"Fine Rubin, well said, but what you've just said applies to the outside world. We are different. We know the truth. After all, how many muggers have peyos or put on tefillin?" Correct, but how many of our own children feel that they are not really accepted or wanted? You may think I'm being overly dramatic, but believe me: I've worked with bachurim considered problematic and I've heard their cries. In our world where children are meant to be the best in yeshiva, the most intelligent in seminary, how do you think the small percentage of those who can't keep up cope? Do they feel that their rebbe appreciates the pot of gold that lies within them? Or are they convinced that they are losers who will never amount to much?

Many years ago I had the honor of building a yeshiva for bachurim who found it hard to exist in the pressurized environment that was the norm in many of our Torah institutions. I say honor because till this day I savour the lessons those unique neshamas taught me. I remember once being faced with a world-class problem kid. This fellow had a knack for finding mischief in the most innocent of situations. He was always in trouble, and, sadly, things got to a state where some of my colleagues felt that even our yeshiva shouldn't keep him.

With a heavy heart, I went to the Bobover Rebbe, ztz"l, to ask advice. He looked up at me with his warm compassionate eyes and said, "Vos? Arous varfen a Yiddisha neshoma? Chas vesholem, What? Throw out a Jewish soul? G-d forbid." The fact that said neshama had already been shown the door at several other yeshivos made no difference to this giant of compassion. From that moment on, my sense of responsibility for this child expanded. Figuratively, he may have deserved a potch (or two or even three), but he should be brought some water as well. He had to know that we loved him and that we saw the gold within his soul. If not, we had no right to be running a Torah institution in the first place.

That day, I learned a deep lesson from the Rebbe. He gave me an insight into what it means to be a real teacher, and I try to keep that lesson alive till this day. It isn't always easy. Life throws plenty of nudnicks in one's way, but that's the point. It was the Kohen who had to deal with the metzora. That's what he was there for, and that's what leadership is all about. As long as society can allow its youth to feel that they have no place, no love, then we will have emotional muggings and other crimes, along with all the inherent pain they produce.

This holds true for all societies and all muggings — both physical and emotional.