

First or Last?

What is the connection between the end of Parashas Shemini and the beginning of Parashas Tazria? The Torah was not written haphazardly, *chas v'shalom* (G-d forbid); therefore, there must be a good reason for Tazria to follow Shemini. The sefer MiMamakim devotes an entire chapter to this question. Parashas Shemini ends off with the *simonei tumah* (signs of impurity) in animals. Parashas Tazria begins with the *simonei tumah* in humans. Rashi adds that just as man was created after animals, so too his laws were written after the laws of animals (Vayikra 12:2).

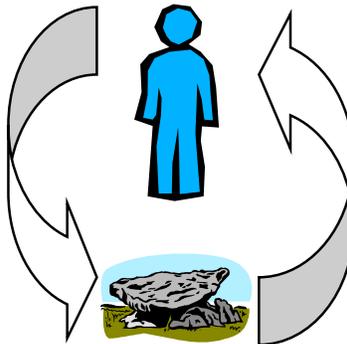
This answer leads us to a famous question. Man is the pinnacle of creation; therefore, he should have been created first, and not last. Why was the most important creation left for the end? The answer touches the very essence of the human being - his *neshama* (soul). The creation of his spiritual side preceded one of the most exalted spiritual creations - the *Maase Merkava* (Hashem's Holy Chariot)! This is an awesome thought. Man was created first and last. His soul the first, is from the highest spiritual worlds, and his body the last, is the lowest of physical creations. This leads to another question. We think of the human body as being wondrously complex. Why is it called the lowest of creations?

The Netziv, in his commentary on Shir HaShirim, sets down a very important principle. There are four types of creations: inanimate objects, plants, animals, and humans. Inanimate objects (minerals) are the least sophisticated form of creation. Plants have an advantage over minerals - they sprout and grow. However, if they are cut off from their source of life, they will decay and become even less useful than minerals. Animals have an even greater advantage - they are alive. However, when they lose their life, they become even more rotten and useless than dead plants. Humans have the highest quality - they speak. This gift of speech, and the thought behind it, allows them to reach the highest heights. Unfortunately, when people disregard their humanity by misusing their gift of speech, they abandon any advantage that they have over animals. Therefore, they revert to nothing more than their body. When the human body loses its source of life, it is the most useless thing in the universe. Worse than this, improper speech can cause massive destruction, more than any animal, vegetable, or mineral.

This concept is reflected in the laws of *tumah* of animals and people. Live animals do not become *tomei* at all. Even when they die, their *tumah* is very weak, lasting just until the end of the day. Contrast this with the *tumah* of human beings listed in Parashas Tazria. People can become *tomei* even while they are alive.

The *tumah* of *metzora* can last for weeks or months! We learn from this that a person is composed of two extremes: body and spirit. The choice is his, which side to strengthen. If he lives for his *neshama*, using his thoughts and speech to serve Hashem, then he will become the highest of all creations. On the other hand, if he lives for his body, *chas v'shalom*, he will sink to the lowest of the low.

Kinderlach . . .
 Do you want to be first or last? Do you want to be on the top or the bottom? The choice is yours. If you use your most precious gifts, thought and speech, to learn Torah, do mitzvos, and come close to Hashem; you will be on top of the world. You can reach a *madrayga* (spiritual level) that is beyond even the Heavenly Angels. You live for your *neshama*, which was created first. Therefore, you will be counted among the first ones. One who does the opposite, *chas v'shalom*, and misuses his gift of speech, drags himself down to the bottom. He is last, created after the lowest plants, animals, and rocks. Where do you want to end up? On top, *B'ezras Hashem*.



High or Low?

"Do you want to see how great I am?"

The man was a little surprised. He had never heard anyone brag like that.

"Okay."
 "Watch me eat this food."

The bragger proceeded to gulp down a thick sandwich and a bottle of soft drink.

"What do you think of that? Great, isn't it?"

The man looked a little puzzled.

"My mouth chewed all that food. My esophagus carried it down to my stomach. Now my digestive juices are taking care of it, separating out the minerals that my body needs, delivering them to the right organs, and getting rid of the rest. Isn't that a great feat?"

"It is, but..."
 "Look at that old man over there. He can barely eat. Hey, old guy! Do you want a nice big sandwich? I'll bet you do, but you can't eat it because you're too old.

Eat your heart out instead."

The onlooker was shocked. How can a person be so far out of reality? Was he really proud of his stomach? It certainly is a wondrous creation however; it has nothing to do with him. Hashem made it and gave it to him. How could he be so proud of it?

This story presents an extreme example of the type of bad *middos* (character traits) that bring on the plague of *tsoraas*. The purification process from the *tumah* (spiritual impurity) of *tsoraas* includes bringing cedar and hyssop wood. Cedar is a very tall tree, and hyssop is a very low bush. Rashi explains that the *metzora* arrogantly raised himself high like a cedar tree; therefore, to become *tahor* (pure) he must lower himself like the hyssop.

The Sefas Emmes takes a little deeper look. Why does the *metzora* have to bring cedar wood? Isn't it enough to bring hyssop, the low bush, to remind him to be humble? The Torah is teaching him a lesson. It is precisely this egotism that is so low. He was so proud of nothing. That itself is the lowliest *middah*. The opposite is also true. Humility, holding yourself low, is the most exalted *middah*. The morning prayers state, "He lowers the proud and lifts up the lowly." If Hashem is ultimately going to exalt them, why did He initially make them low? Because Hashem always wants him to retain an aspect of that lowness. He should always realize that he is ultimately nothing. All of his greatness and accomplishments come from Hashem. That is true humility. The opposite is also true. "He lowers the proud." Because of their pride, they fell low. That is the lowliest *middah* of all, to exaggerate your role in your accomplishments. That silly man in the story actually thought that he was responsible for his stomach working. Every act of false pride contains at least some of his type of foolishness.

Kinderlach . . .
 Humility is the highest *middah*. Our greatest people are the most humble. How can this be? Don't they realize that they are exceptional? Of course they do. However, they do not attribute their accomplishments to themselves, rather to Hashem. They realize that The Almighty gave them everything. All of the honor is His. They consider themselves fortunate and perhaps unworthy of His wonderful kindness. Therefore, they are eternally grateful to Him. The lowest are truly high.

Parasha Questions:

- What are the signs of *tsoraas* noshenes? (13:10,11)
- What are the signs of a *nega* on the head or beard? (13:29,30)
- Where does someone who is *tomei* with *tsoraas* have to sit? (13:46)