



Subject, Object and Reader

Rabbi Avital Hochstein – hochstein@hadar.org

Parashat Tazria-Metzora 5777

The thirteenth chapter of Sefer VaYikra talks about *tzara'at*, among other surface afflictions of the human body and of physical property. There are two verbs that appear repeatedly in this discussion—the first is “to quarantine,” s.g.r. In addition to evaluating the identity and severity of the affliction, “the *kohen* (priest) will quarantine the affliction” (VaYikra 13:4), “and the *kohen* will quarantine him” (v. 5) etc. The second verb that appears in almost every single verse of the chapter is “to see,” r.a.h. The verb “to see” has varied applications and meanings throughout the chapter—one of which which I will explore here. In particular, I will suggest that this verb plays a part in constructing a specific social dynamic.

There are three perspectives that are constructed through seeing in this passage: the one who sees, the one who is seen, and we, the readers who see the seeing.

Initially, we are led to believe that the subject of the story is the person who has the skin affliction, as they are the focus of the first verse: “When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration” (v. 2). However, as the chapter continues over the next sixty verses, the afflicted person is barely mentioned again. Instead, the focus of the seeing, and the attention of the *kohen* is on the skin affliction itself; the person who bears that affliction is hardly present as a subject. This tendency towards depersonalization is also present in the process of quarantine, where the lines between the person and the affliction

are blurred, such that at times the person is not even spoken about at all: “And the *kohen* will quarantine the affliction for seven days...” (v. 4). The discussion effectively erases the subjectivity of the one who bears the affliction and reduces him to a conveyance. The earliest example of this elimination of subjectivity is evident in the continuation of the second verse in the chapter discussed above: “When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of his body, it shall be brought to Aharon the *kohen* or to one of his sons, the *kobanim*” (v. 2).

It is not clear who or what is the object of “and is brought”—is it the person or the affliction? And even if you read the verse as speaking about the person, the verb is passive—he does not come, rather he is brought.

Although it appears that the focus of the chapter is the *tzara'at* itself, I would like to center our attention on the people who are involved in the process. It appears that the central human figure in the chapter is the *kohen*. He is the one who is most active in the process of seeing and identifying:

ויקרא יג, ג' – ו'

"וראה הכהן ... וראה הכהן וטמא אותו... והסגיר הכהן... וראה הכהן... והסגירו
הכהן... וראה הכהן... וטהרו..." (שם, ג' – ו'):

VaYikra 13:3-6

³The *kohen* shall see... when the *kohen* sees it, he shall pronounce him unclean.

⁴...the *kohen* shall quarantine... 5...the *kohen* shall see him... the *kohen* shall quarantine him... 6...the *kohen* shall see him and shall pronounce him clean.

The *kohen* is the one who examines all of the afflictions and diagnoses them. He looks at the color of the affliction and its depth, the hair inside it, and also how the rash behaves:

ויקרא יג, ג' – י"ז

וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֶת הַנִּגְעַת בְּעוֹר הַבָּשָׂר וְשָׁעַר בַּנֶּגַע הַפֶּה לְבָן וּמְרָאָה הַנִּגְעַת עֲמֹק מֵעוֹר בְּשָׂרוֹ נִגַע
צָרְעַת הוּא וְרָאָהּ הַכֹּהֵן וְטָמֵא אֹתוֹ: וְאִם בַּהֲרֹת לְבָנָה הוּא בְּעוֹר בְּשָׂרוֹ וְעֲמֹק אֵין מְרָאָה מִן
הָעוֹר וְשָׁעַרָה לֹא הַפֶּה לְבָן: ... וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֹתוֹ בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׂבִיעִי שְׁנִית וְהִנֵּה כִּהָה הַנִּגְעַת וְלֹא פָשָׂה
הַנִּגְעַת בְּעוֹר: ... וְאִם פָּשָׂה תִּפְשָׂה הַמִּסְפַּחַת בְּעוֹר: ... וְאִם פָּרוֹס תִּפְרַח הַצָּרְעַת בְּעוֹר וְכִסְתָּהּ
הַצָּרְעַת אֶת כָּל עוֹר הַנִּגְעַת מֵרֵאשׁוֹ וְעַד רַגְלָיו : ... אוֹ כִּי יָשׁוּב הַבָּשָׂר הַחַי וְנִהְפֶּה לְלֵבָן: ...
... וְרָאָהּ הַכֹּהֵן וְהִנֵּה נִהְפֶּה הַנִּגְעַת לְלֵבָן ...

VaYikra 13:3-17

³The *kohen* shall see the affection on the skin of his body: if hair in the affected patch has turned white and the affection appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a *tzara'at* affection; when the *kohen* sees it, he shall pronounce him unclean. ⁴But if it is a white discoloration on the skin of his body which does not appear to be deeper than the skin and the hair in it has not turned white... ⁶On the seventh day the *kohen* shall see him again: if the affection has faded and has not spread on the skin... ⁷But if the rash should spread on the skin... ¹²If the eruption spreads out over the skin so that it covers all the skin of the affected person from head to foot... ¹⁶But if the undisclored flesh again turns white... ¹⁷the *kohen* shall see him: if the affection has turned white...

The *kohen*, then, is the most central and active person in this passage. Through his different seeings, he defines the status of the affliction and, consequently, the social status of the one who is afflicted—whether pure or impure, quarantined or not. The act of seeing constructs and preserves a power structure, in a society in which there are those who do the seeing and those who are seen; there are those who are active subjects who choose where and how to look, and those who remain passive objects of sight, dependent on the assessing eye of their beholders.

A text, though, does not stand alone; it encounters its readers and affects them. What

process do we, the biblical readers, go through as we read this chapter? With whom do we identify and how is this identification constructed? Where do we fit into the power dynamic that this chapter describes?

In some respects, we are most like the *kohen*, being called in to learn about and examine the affliction. Whatever information is revealed to him in the verses is also revealed to us as readers; in fact, we only have whatever details he has been given. We are invited, as it were, into the work of the *kohen*, to perform the examination with him—to decide, to evaluate, to quarantine, to establish purity or impurity. This chapter creates an identity and identification of our perspective with the priestly perspective.

The afflicted person is compelled to stand before both the *kohen* and the readers as an object, nothing more. It is not only that he is described in the third person—“When a person has” (v. 1)—with passive language applied to him, but he himself is never described as a whole person; the only thing that is deemed worthy of description is the affliction that he carries. Furthermore, the body of the person who has *tzara’at* is the object of observation in the chapter, and he is compelled to submit to the gaze. He is not described as choosing to approach the *kohen*, nor does he volunteer to be subjected to the reader’s scrutiny.

The text aligns our gaze as the readers of the text with the viewpoint of the *kohen*. There is something aggressive and voyeuristic in this role. Voyeuristic because our participation is uninvited, and aggressive because the reader is evaluating the proper fate of another. Within this dynamic, the hierarchy being constructed relegates the *metzora* himself to the bottom rung. Not only is he likely to be declared impure and quarantined, but throughout the process, he is treated like an object of scrutiny rather than a person with his own subjective vision or agency.

This is a standard outcome of being the object of seeing: the person who is seen, like any

object that is seen, is reduced to just what is of interest to the seer, in our case the skin affliction, and nothing else.

As such, this biblical chapter ends up teaching us so much more than just a lesson in skin lesions. It is fundamentally a lesson about seeing. One of the ways in which a society builds and sustains hierarchy is through directing and restricting sight lines—determining who are the seers and who are the seen. Those who see are those who have status and power. The chapter reveals who has the knowledge and the power by highlighting the sight lines.

Seeing, then serves as a fascinating litmus test to evaluate status and values. Periodically, we should evaluate whether we are being invited to see or be seen, to be active or to be passive, to be scrutinizer or the one under scrutiny. Moreover, we have to examine whether enough social mobility exists in our society, we have to ask whether these roles are fixed or flexible? Do we open up the opportunity for those whom we stare at to glare back at us, to make demands with their eyes, to subject the seer to examination? Is there possibility for mutual seeing? And if there is, what would that seeing look like?