

BIASES OF THE SELF



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAS TAZRIA
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Precise and accurate knowledge of the self is illusive. Psychologists have identified a number of self-serving biases, which function to protect our egos. The fact that most of us attribute successes to our abilities and mistakes to matters beyond our control, or that the majority of us think we are above average, are reflective of this tendency. In fact, some cleverly designed studies demonstrate that we even have a bias to deny the fact that we have biases. We are quick to identify the self-serving bias in others but think that we are immune.

This idea is alluded to in a law that is sourced in Parshas Tazria. Kohanim were responsible for diagnosing and overseeing the purification process of tzara'as. Even if a person presented with all of the symptoms, if a Kohen did not officially declare the affliction as tzara'as, it lacked the status of the disease. However, a Kohen did not have the ability to self-diagnose. Even if he "knew" he had the illness, a different Kohen needed to assess it because of the rule stated in the Mishna (Negaim 2:5) - כל הנגעים - אדם רואה חוץ מנגעי עצמו - "a person may inspect anyone's afflictions, other than his own." Rabbi Menachem Meiri (b. 1249, France) interprets this legal ruling homiletically. The word negaim is literally a reference to physical afflictions like tzara'as, but could also be interpreted as shortcomings, inadequacies and failings of personality. We can see the flaws of others, but we can't detect those same defects in ourselves. As a consequence, we are encouraged to "acquire a friend" (Pirkei Avos 1:6) so he or she can help identify our weaknesses, which can inspire self-improvement.

Being aware of and trying to change our self-serving biases is essential for religious growth and helps stave off arrogance, which is perhaps the most strongly condemned character trait throughout Jewish literature. Coming to the realization that we may not be as great and faultless as we think is important for the inculcation of humility and an accurate, not inflated, sense of self. However, there is a whole category of biases that are the opposite of self-serving. Instead of mistaken thinking about the self that leads to arrogance, many people make inaccurate conclusions about the self that lead to depression. Instead of attributing success to ability and failure to circumstance, they think failures are related to ability and successes to chance. Instead of thinking they are above-average, they think they are worthless and hopeless.

Just like self-serving biases are hard to identify by one's self, the same is true with self-downing biases. People tend to be inaccurate judges of their selves, whether in the positive or the negative direction. Having another person, whether a teacher, friend, family member or therapist, who can help identify our self-related biases is essential for spiritual, emotional and personal growth.

Confronting our biases and striving for accurate self-awareness is an emotionally daunting task. If we feel that our core sense of self is ever threatened, a deep anxiety will manifest, and precise self-analysis will be difficult. Perhaps another lesson from this week's parsha can help create the right emotional context conducive to self-reflection. When describing someone who sees symptoms of what might be tzara'as, the verse states (Vayikra 13:2) – "When a person shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising, or a scab, or a bright spot, and it became in the skin of his flesh the plague of tzara'as..." The fact that the verse uses the words "in the skin of his flesh" - בְּעוֹר בְּשָׂרוֹ – writes the Ohr HaChaim, teaches us that the tzara'as is only skin deep, so to speak. It does not permeate the essence of a person's being. This message is essential if we want to work on our own biases or help others with theirs. Never, does someone's flaws become the entirety of his or her identity. This realization could help us loosen our defenses and be more receptive to scrutinizing our self-related biases, with the ultimate goal of an accurate sense of self conducive to a more authentic religious persona.

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