

# SEARCHING FOR MEANING



**PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT TAZRIA-METZORA**  
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Viktor Frankl was a famous Jewish psychiatrist and a Holocaust survivor. In his 1946 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he chronicles his experiences in Auschwitz and the tenets of his psychotherapeutic method, logotherapy, which he argues is what helped him cope through the traumatic and horrific experiences of the Holocaust. Three of his essential and related messages are that (1) we all have free will to choose our mental responses, even amidst suffering; (2) our mission in life should be to seek meaning, not to merely gain pleasure or to avoid pain; and (3) we obtain meaning by living a life that focuses on values and ideals.

In describing the wisdom, internal structure, and depth of the Hebrew alphabet, the mystical work *Sefer Yetzira* highlights the connection between the word *nega* (affliction; spelled *nun-gimmel-ayin*) and the word *oneg* (pleasure; spelled *ayin-nun-gimmel*): "There is no good higher than *oneg* and no evil lower than *nega*." The word *nega* is used often in *Parshiyot Tazria* and *Metzora* to describe the disease of *tzara'at*. Building off of the *Sefer Yetzira*, several commentators reflect on the relationship of the *nega* of *tzara'at* to the inverse concept of *oneg*.

For example, the *Chidushei HaRim* points out that the only difference between *oneg* and *nega* is the place of the *ayin* within the word. In *oneg* the *ayin* is in the front of the word and in *nega* it is at the end. When explaining the laws pertaining to *tzara'at* of clothing, the *pasuk* states that if after washing, "the affliction has not changed its appearance (*ha-nega lo hafach et eyno*)... it is contaminated... (*Vayikra 12:55*). The *Chidushei HaRim* suggests a homiletic reading. The term "*et eyno*," translated as "its appearance" can be read as "its *ayin*," referencing the letter *ayin*, with an additional layer of meaning, namely, its eye, or vision. The difference between a *nega* and *oneg* is a matter of *ayin*, or perspective.

To be clear, *oneg* in this context does not mean physical pleasure, nor does it necessarily mean a surreal, detached, obliviousness to pain. *Oneg* is a spiritual pleasure, which doesn't completely negate pain, but alleviates it by infusing meaning. It is the pleasure that comes when despite pain, one can change one's perspective and still commit oneself to living a life steeped in values and ideals.

Perhaps this is why, as the *Sefat Emet* explains, the impurity of the *metzora* lasts seven days, as it ensures that he or she experiences *Shabbat* as part of the process. The pleasure and meaning one derives from *Shabbat* are reparative. *Sefat Emet* also points out that the word *tzara'at* (*tzadi-reish-ayin-tav*) has the same letters as the word *atzeret* (*ayin-tzadi-reish-tav*), which is a reference to the holiday of *Shavuot*. *Shavuot*, representing the acceptance and study of Torah, provides the antidote for the pain and suffering of *tzara'at*.

While we generally hope to avoid pain and suffering, in cases where it is out of our control, the only thing in our control, is our response. While it is incredibly challenging, we can work on shifting our perspective and investing our lives with value and meaning, despite the pain. By suffusing our lives with the meaning that permeates a Torah lifestyle, we can hopefully change any *nega* we may experience to one of *oneg*.

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