

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Tazria/Metzora, April 2017

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Tazria/Metzora – tzora’at on one’s house

In this week’s double Parsha of Tazria/Metzora we learn about the laws of tzora’at. This was an affliction that is often translated as leprosy. However, it was actually a spiritual affliction with a physical manifestation. As a result of certain sins, tzora’at could afflict a person’s body, clothes or house. If one had tzora’at on the walls of their house, they would have to remove the affected stones. If the tzora’at returned, the Torah required them to demolish the entire house.

Anyone who has lived through renovations would know that it can be a very stressful time. Thus, being forced to ‘renovate’ walls due to tzora’at is a significant punishment indeed. Let’s explore some lessons we can learn from this case of finding tzora’at on one’s house.

#### Everything is for the best

If someone was told that he had to demolish his house, his first reaction would probably be distress or anger. However, Rashi<sup>1</sup> explains that in actual fact there was often a silver lining to these cases. While Bnei Yisrael were wandering in the desert for 40 years, the Amorites (Canaanite locals) hid their treasures of gold inside the walls of their houses. Subsequently, when the Jewish owners moved in and the walls became affected by tzora’at, they tore down the walls and often discovered the hidden gold.

This reminds us that even things that appear very bad are always ultimately for the best. Sometimes we don’t see the good at first. Sometimes we don’t even see the good at all. But emunah means trusting that even if we don’t see or understand the goodness, it is always there. This reminds me of a humorous story<sup>2</sup>:

*Once there was a king who had a favourite adviser. No matter what happened, the adviser would always say “this is for the best”. This was usually a source of comfort for the king, but sometimes it made him annoyed. One day, the king was out on a hunting expedition. There was a terrible accident and the king lost one of his fingers. As he was writhing about in agony, his adviser said “this is for the best”. The infuriated king was so angry that he threw his adviser into prison. Some time later, the king was out on another hunting trip in a distant land. This time there was another mishap – the entire party was captured by a tribe of cannibals! However these cannibals were selective and only ate humans who were free of blemishes. When they noticed that the king was missing a finger, they decided not to eat him and they set him free. As he was returning to his kingdom, the king realised that his trusted adviser had been right and the loss of his finger truly was for the best. He quickly released the adviser from the dungeon and apologised. “That’s okay”, said the adviser, “it was for the best.” The king was intrigued. The adviser was languishing in a dungeon for months! How could that possibly be for the best??? “It’s quite simple” replied the wise adviser. “If I wasn’t in prison, I would have been on the hunting trip with you and I would have been eaten by the cannibals!”*

#### The world is not black and white

There seems to be an inconsistency here. On the one hand, the owner of the house is being punished with tzora’at due to their sins. On the other hand they are being rewarded with treasure! So which is it? Are they guilty of sin or are they worthy of reward? There are a number of possible explanations to resolve this contradiction:

<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 14:34, quoting the Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 17:6.

<sup>2</sup> Different versions of this story have appeared in various places. I could not find a reliable source of origin.

- In some cases the suffering caused by the tzora'at and the forced renovations may have been sufficient to atone for the person's sin. Once the person had atoned for their sins, they may then have become deserving of finding the treasure.
- Not every person that had tzora'at on their house was fortunate enough to find a treasure. Those people who didn't repent or were not deserving would not find any treasure in their walls. For instance, Hashem could arrange for the tzora'at to be on a wall that did not conceal any treasure. Or, Hashem could make sure that the house that this person was living in did not contain any hidden treasure at all.
- In some cases a person might be simultaneously deserving of punishment and reward! We often find it easier to think in terms of black and white, however that is a very simplistic approach. The world is much more complicated than that and most things are shades of grey. Almost no-one is perfectly good or perfectly bad. We all have mitzvot to our credit and sins. Mitzvot that deserve to be rewarded and sins that need to be atoned for. Only Hashem can accurately tally up our mitzvot and our sins and mete out the appropriate reward and punishment. It is worth keeping this idea in mind when we look at those people with whom we do not get on with. They may have wronged us, they might annoy us, and they might have negative character traits. But no-one is all-bad.

### **Woe to the wicked one and woe to his neighbour**

One thing that rivals the pain of renovations is the pain of living next door to someone who is doing renovations! When one is renovating their home, they often pack up and move somewhere else. But the neighbours are not so fortunate. They usually have to bear the brunt of the dust, the noise and the disruption to daily life. Those neighbours who actually shared a wall with someone affected by tzora'at would obviously be impacted to an even greater degree.

Our neighbours can have a very powerful influence over us. When the Torah describes the layout of the camp of Bnei Yisrael,<sup>3</sup> Rashi quotes the famous dictum: "Woe to the wicked one and woe to his neighbour". Rashi points out that the tribe of Reuven were located next to the wicked Korach. That explains why Dathan, Aviram and many men from the tribe of Reuben were drawn into the dispute with Korach and were punished with death. This theme is repeated often throughout Jewish writings.<sup>4</sup> The Rambam<sup>5</sup> actually advises that if one cannot find good neighbours, it is better to live in seclusion!

We can't always follow the Rambam's advice in a practical sense. For instance, Rav Zev Leff famously asks: "If we are supposed to live with the righteous, then who are they supposed to live with? Why would they agree to live with us?" Nevertheless, we need to be aware that the people we associate with and live near can have a very powerful impact. We should choose the people that we spend time with wisely.<sup>6</sup>

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that there is always a silver lining to any apparently negative experience and things are always for the best – even when we cannot see it at the time.
2. Keep in mind that people are complex creatures. No-one is 100% bad. Only Hashem knows which rewards and punishments are appropriate for each person.
3. Be aware of the people with whom we associate and the influences to which we are exposed.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder.

<sup>3</sup> Bamidbar 3:29.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Pirkei Avot 1:7 "Distance yourself from a bad neighbour; don't befriend a wicked person"; Pirkei Avot 2:10 "Which is the best trait for a person to acquire... Rabbi Yossi said "a good neighbour"; Mishlei 13:20 - "He who walks with the wise will become wise, while one who associates with fools will suffer"; Tehillim 1:1 "Happy is the man who has not followed the advice of the wicked."

<sup>5</sup> Hilchot De'ot 6:1.

<sup>6</sup> Those that are involved in kiruv often seem to be immune from such negative influences. Perhaps this is because they are busy influencing others, so they are not prone to being influenced themselves. This concept is like the well-known dictum from the laws of kashrut "idi d'tarud liflot lo bala" – a utensil that is busy giving off taste cannot at the same time absorb taste.

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## **About Darchai Noam**

The pasuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: “Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace”. The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem’s help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of ‘v’ahavta l’re’echa kamocho’ – loving one’s fellow as oneself.

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