

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Tazria-Metzora
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Tazria-Metzora – What can we learn from tzara'at of the house

This week we read the double Parsha of Tazria and Metzora. These Parshiyot deal mainly with the laws of tzara'at - a spiritual disease with a physical manifestation. Tzara'at could appear on a person's body, on their clothes or on the walls of their house. Tzara'at was a divine message, informing a person that they needed to rectify their behaviour.

It may be difficult for us to relate to this topic because we have not experienced the phenomenon of tzara'at for thousands of years. We are no longer on the level where we merit such open messages from Hashem. Nevertheless, by learning about it, we can still glean relevant lessons. This week, let's examine some of the lessons that can be learnt from tzara'at on a person's house.

Get the message early

When Hashem wants to direct us towards a certain path, He often sends us a gentle message at first. If we do not heed that message, then Hashem may send us a harsher message. The more that we ignore Hashem's messages the louder and clearer those messages need to be. Hashem starts by sending tzara'at on a person's house, which is the most external to a person. If this doesn't have the desired effect then the tzara'at gets closer, striking their clothing. If the person still doesn't heed the message, then the tzara'at may strike the person's body. This is the most extreme, causing the person to leave their family and to dwell in isolation. One could avoid the more extreme punishment of tzara'at on their body if they heed the message early, reflect on their sins and do teshuva.

We can use this as a lesson to sensitise ourselves to messages. This can apply both to our relationship with Hashem and our relationship with people. If little things happen that are annoying, we should take this as a message from Hashem to improve our behaviour. A little bit of self-introspection never hurt anyone, and the mild annoyance can be seen a reminder to examine ourselves.

Similarly, we should try to be perceptive to the subtle hints that people send out. For instance, somebody might need some emotional support or a person to talk to but they may not be comfortable asking in a direct manner. Or a sick person may not want us to visit them because they need some privacy or are feeling tired. If we are open to receiving other people's subtle hints we can perform "v'ahavta l're'echa kamocho" and truly love our neighbours like ourselves.

Be concerned about the little things

If one suspected that they had tzara'at on the walls of their house, they would be required to call a Cohen to inspect the walls and make a diagnosis. First, the Cohen would order all of the contents of the house to be removed. The Torah¹ explains that the reason for this is to avoid everything becoming impure. If the Cohen were to pronounce the house impure then the contents of the house also become impure. By taking the contents out first we can ensure that they remain pure.

Rashi asks which contents of the house we are concerned about. Most utensils that become impure can very easily be made pure again, by immersing them in a mikveh. And food and beverages that become impure can still be consumed. Rashi explains that it is only earthenware utensils that cannot be made pure. The only solution for earthenware vessels that become impure is to break them.

¹ Vayikra 14:36.

In those times, earthenware vessels were very cheap and easy to make. In today's terms they could probably be compared to disposable cutlery. Recently, my family explored an ancient Roman city not far from where we live in Eretz Yisrael. Without even trying we found dozens of pottery shards – the broken remains of the earthenware vessels that were everywhere. If someone's earthenware vessels became impure, they could very easily be replaced. Yet Hashem is concerned even for these cheap vessels. We can learn from this that we should also be concerned for each other's property. Even for the little things that may not appear to be so valuable.

Don't be stingy

One reason why people may be struck with tzara'at on their house was due to stinginess. They would not open their homes to those in need and if their neighbours asked to borrow certain items, they would claim that they didn't own such things. As explained above, the house would need to be emptied of its contents before the Cohen inspected the walls. We see how Hashem punishes us middah k'neged middah (measure for measure). Imagine the feeling if one was required to display items of their home in full view of the neighbours when one had lied about possessing those items.

A person who has tzara'at on their house could be banished from their house for a week or more while the house was in quarantine. And if the tzara'at returned the whole house may need to be demolished. If a person did not use their house to welcome people in need, then they themselves will be denied the use of their house.

If we are reluctant to use our houses for acts of chesed and to lend our possessions to those in need, we should try to imagine what it would be like to be punished with tzara'at on our house. Imagine being locked out of our own house. Imagine all of our personal belongings strewn out on the nature strip in front of our house. Hopefully this will encourage us to share what we have and realise that everything we have is not "ours" but merely a gift from Hashem.

Though we may feel grateful that we do not have tzara'at anymore, we actually do not appreciate the privilege of tzara'at. Tzara'at was a mechanism by which Hashem could point out our erroneous ways and help keep us travelling along the correct path in life so as to merit our ultimate reward in the World to Come. These days, we can be compared to someone who lives in a dark dungeon.² It would be futile to punish such a person by inflicting darkness upon him because he is already suffering from darkness and it would make no difference to him! However, a person blessed to live in a well-lit house would suffer from any darkness inflicted on him. Similarly, only someone living in Hashem's Divine light is "worthy" of being banished from His presence when he misbehaves. Hashem's commandments are like preventative medicine and His punishments such as tzara'at are like emergency medical treatment after the fact. Though today we are not blessed to receive "the emergency medical treatment" in an open way, at least we can still learn whatever lessons we can from the description of that treatment as it appears in the Torah.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be perceptive and sensitive to subtle messages that we receive from others.
2. Instead of ignoring or being merely irritated with mild annoyances, we can use such annoyances as an impetus for some self-introspection and an opportunity to try to improve our behaviour.
3. Be concerned for other people's possessions, even if they seem insignificant or valueless to us.
4. Use our belongings and our houses as much as possible for acts of kindness and hospitality. Remember that everything really belongs to Hashem, not to us.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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² The ideas in this paragraph come from *Eretz Yisrael in the Parashah* by Moshe Lichtman, p193-4.