

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 – Lessons from tzora’at of the house

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

These days we might find it difficult to relate to this topic because we have not experienced the phenomenon of tzora’at for thousands of years. We are no longer on the spiritual level where we merit to receive such open messages from Hashem. Nevertheless, by learning about tzora’at, we can still glean relevant lessons. This week, let’s examine some of the lessons that can be learnt from finding tzora’at on one’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 this message, Hashem may send us a harsher message. The more we ignore Hashem’s messages, the louder and clearer those messages may become. We see this process occurring in the stages of tzora’at. In some cases, Hashem started by sending tzora’at to a person’s house, which is the most external to a person. If this did not have the desired effect, then the tzora’at may be sent closer, striking their clothing. If the person still did not heed the message, then the tzora’at may strike the person’s body. This is the most extreme stage, causing the person to leave their family and to dwell in isolation. One could avoid the more extreme punishment of tzora’at on their body if they heeded the message of tzora’at early, when it was on their house. At this early stage they should seriously 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 can take this as a message from Hashem to examine our behaviour. A little bit of self-introspection never hurt anyone. The mild annoyance can be seen a reminder to examine ourselves and improve our behaviour.

Similarly, we should try to be perceptive to the subtle hints that people send out. For instance, somebody might be upset at you for something you said or did, but they may not be comfortable to confront or rebuke you. 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 save ourselves the grief of direct confrontations or machloket.

Be concerned about the little things

If one suspected that they had tzora’at on the walls of their house, they would be required to call a Kohen to inspect the walls and make a diagnosis. First, the Kohen would order all of the contents of the house to be removed. The Torah¹ explains that the reason for this is to avoid the contents becoming impure. If the Kohen 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

¹ Vayikra 14:36.

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.

In those times, earthenware vessels were very cheap and easy to make. In today's terms they could probably be compared to disposable cutlery. On a recent daytrip, 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 scattered everywhere. So it seems that replacing earthenware vessels would be cheap and simple. Yet Hashem was 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 to us.

Don't be stingy

One reason why people may have been struck with tzora'at on their house was due to stinginess.² They would not open their homes to those in need. If their neighbours asked to borrow certain items, they would claim that they did not own such things. As explained above, the house struck with tzora'at would then need to be emptied of its contents before the Kohen inspected the walls. We see how Hashem punishes us midah k'neged midah (measure for measure). One was required to display the items of their home in full view of the neighbours, including the items that one had lied about possessing!

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

One helpful way to boost our chesed and hachnasat orchim to those in need, is to imagine what it would be like to be punished with tzora'at on our house. Imagine being locked out of our own house. Imagine all of our personal belongings strewn out on the nature strip. Hopefully this will encourage us to share what we have. We should realise that everything we have is not really 'ours', but merely a gift from Hashem.

Though we may feel grateful that we are not stricken with tzora'at these days, tzora'at was actually a privilege. Tzora'at was a mechanism through which Hashem could point out our erroneous ways and thus keep us travelling the correct path in life to merit our ultimate reward in the World to Come. These days, we can be compared to someone who lives in a dark dungeon.³ Inflicting darkness on such a person would be futile, because he is already suffering from darkness and it would make no difference to him! However, a person who lives 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 mitzvot are like preventative medicine and His punishments such as tzora'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 lessons from the description of tzora'at 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 feeling merely irritated with mild annoyances, we can use such annoyances as an impetus for some self-introspection and an opportunity to try to improve.
3. Be concerned for other people's possessions, even if they seem insignificant or valueless to us.
4. Use our belongings, including 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 Tzora'at is often linked to lashon hara, however there are other sins that were also punished with tzora'at.

³ The ideas in this paragraph come from *Eretz Yisrael in the Parashah* by Rav Moshe Lichtman, p193-4.