

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI ARI KAHN

MeOray HaAish

One of the main topics of this week's Torah portion is a skin disease called tzara'at, which is often translated as leprosy, but virtually all commentators tell us that this is not the type of leprosy which exists today. This leprosy is a spiritual nature, consequently, the Kohen, the priest who deals with issues of spirit, and not a doctor, "treats" the victim.

The spiritual implication of tzara'at is that the person, who suffers from the malady is guilty of slanderous speech. The term metzora is connected with the term motzie shem ra, which describes the classical case of slanderous talk. (See Erachin 15b.)

There are two sections of the Torah where we can see this association, the more prominent one is the section dealing with Miriam's slander of Moses, where she is punished by this type of leprosy. (See Numbers, Chapter 12.) In the other instance, the one affected is Moses himself as he stands in front of the "Burning Bush." Having stated that the Jewish people will not believe him to be a messenger of G-d, he is instructed to put his hand into his cloak. When he removes the hand again, it has become infected with this type of leprosy, ostensibly because he spoke slander against the Jewish nation. (See Exodus, Chapter 4.)

One question which arises is why should slander have such a direct effect on its perpetrator? Perhaps if we go back to the origins of speech we will better appreciate this issue. "The Lord G-d then formed the man [from] the dust of the ground, and He blew into his nostrils the breath of life. And so man became nefesh chayah." (Genesis 2:7)

The Targum translates nefesh chayah as "the spirit of speech." According to this approach, the ability to speak is the result of the merger of the physical and the spiritual within man. Man alone among creation is endowed with this ability, a result of having a soul.

Speech itself makes an earlier appearance in Genesis. G-d Himself speaks the world into existence. The Mishna (Avot 5:1) teaches that by virtue of 10 sayings was the world created. Thus we find G-d the Creator speaking and man created in the image of G-d is likewise endowed with the ability to speak.

The first time man speaks is when he gives names to the animals. And so we see that man's creativity is unlike G-d's. G-d creates something from

nothing by virtue of speech, and man creates categories and names of animals by virtue of speech.

Man's creative ability surely differs from G-d's, but we can gain an appreciation for speech based on the comparison-man's speech is a "G-dly" activity.

The first time that speech is misused is, of course, in the sinister seductive comments of the serpent. This is therefore the archetype for evil in general, and misused speech in particular.

The response of G-d to man's sin may be better understood based on the holiness of speech. After eating from the tree, man feels alienated and hides from G-d. For His part G-d tries to engage man in dialogue in order to give man the opportunity to admit his guilt. "Where are you?" G-d asks man. "G-d of course knew where he was, rather He engaged him in dialogue so as not to shock him." (Rashi Breishit 3:9) Only when man fails to find the proper words, and blames his mate or perhaps even G-d for giving him his mate, is man expelled from the Garden.

The laws of repentance include the requirement to verbalize one's sins. (See Maimonides, "The Laws of Teshuva.") This is a necessary requirement, which, when understood in this light, will enable man to reacquire his exalted status of image of G-d. The people of Israel were guilty of many transgressions during the 40 years in the desert. In the course of the first few months alone, on numerous occasions, the Jews rebelled, but one transgression stands out from all the others- the sin of the spies.

The Zohar explains: "Come see how insidious evil speech is, because of it our ancestors were forbidden to enter the land, and because of it there was crying for many generations." (Zohar 3, 161a)

The sin of the spies was speaking badly about the land of Israel. G-d readily forgave the Jews many transgressions, including the sin of the Golden Calf. But for speaking evil about the land of Israel, the Jews are punished for millennia! "The Zohar explains that this sin of misusing words-lashon hara, "evil speech"-is the sin of the serpent, and G-d will forgive all except the sin of lashon hara" (Zohar ibid). The Zohar adds that the 9th of Av, the day the spies returned and advised others not to enter the land, became the saddest day in the calendar due to evil speech.

This may be understood, that had the spies not said these terrible things, and had the people not believed them, then the Jews would have entered into

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Israel immediately, but instead that generation died in the desert and entry into the land of Israel was delayed for some 40 years.

There may however be deeper meaning to this passage. Rabbi Yisrael Meier Kagan, in his monumental work, "Chofetz Chaim"-which gave him the name he is generally known by-notes that according to the Talmud the First Temple was destroyed (on the 9th of Av) because of sexual crimes, murder, and idolatry, and that the Second Temple was destroyed (on the 9th of Av) because of baseless hatred. Therefore, states the Talmud, we see that baseless hatred equals the other three offenses. (See Yoma 9b.) And in a separate discussion the Talmud teaches that lashon hara is equal to sexual crimes, murder, and idolatry.

This leads the Chofetz Chaim to conclude that lashon hara is identical with the sin of baseless hatred. Indeed, the motivation for evil speech is baseless hatred. Therefore the Zohar states that lashon hara causes the 9th of Av to be a day of crying throughout millennia, the past 2000 years.

The Talmud discusses the possibility of a cure for lashon hara: "If he is a scholar then let him be occupied with Torah... a common person, let him humble himself." (Arachin 15b) When a person who speaks lashon hara misuses his mouth and words, which were given to speak Torah, the cure is obviously correcting the flaw and spending one's energies on Torah. The simple, or common person, of course, should endeavor to spend his time with Torah as well, but until the point when he is proficient, let him at least humble himself. How will humility help? If the core of lashon hara is baseless hatred, then when a person practices humility he will avoid the jealousy which leads to hatred.

Speech is the defining capacity of man. At the moment when the soul and body merge speech is the result. Speech is the ability to take the Divine and put it in this world. This is why misusing speech is so evil. The sin of evil speech tarnishes the image of G-d within us. Furthermore, to speak about another person in a negative manner is tantamount to rejecting the image of G-d in that person. Therefore we may say that evil speech is the misuse of our divinity in order to reject the divinity of G-d. No wonder the Temple was destroyed because of lashon hara.

This awareness of the sanctity of speech will also give us an appreciation of another passage in the Torah. When the people complain about not having water, G-d tells Moses: "'Speak to the rock in front of them (The congregation) and it will yield its water'... Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock with his staff... And G-d said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you didn't believe in Me to sanctify Me in front of the children of Israel, you will not bring this nation to Israel.'" (Numbers 20:8-12) What was the great offense which Moses and Aaron committed?

They were told to speak to the rock, to sanctify G-d by speech. Had they done so, this would have cured the lashon hara uttered by the spies. But they did not and they lost the opportunity to enter the land.

Perhaps now we understand why the mitzora, "the leper" would have to come to the Kohen for healing. The role of Aaron, as the High Priest, was to "love peace and pursue it." The person guilty of misusing speech needed to spend time in the presence of a Kohen in order to learn how to love. The Sages also explain that the various rites prescribed are meant to bring about humility.

Additionally, we can understand why the Sages say that when we speak in an evil manner our homes are affected. This seems to be teaching us that if we are not careful, and lashon hara and baseless hatred spread, then G-d's house will be affected as well.

In a "normal year" this Torah portion is read after Passover. This time of year is known as the Sefira. The Sefira is a time of mourning for the students of Rabbi Akiva, who did not treat one another with respect. Perhaps this is the perfect time to think about the value of each person, the image of G-d of each person, and use our words judiciously, for that which they were intended-Torah. © 2008 Rabbi A. Kahn & aish.com

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd [the kohain] shall send the live bird [away]" (Vayikra 14:7). Part of the process of a "metzora" (one who has the skin disease "tzoraas") becoming "tahor" (ritually clean) includes taking two kosher birds; slaughtering one and setting the other free. The Talmud (Kiddushin 57) quotes the Sifray, which teaches (based on Devarim 14:11) that it is permitted to eat the one that was set free (if it is ever recaptured), and (based on 14:12) that it is forbidden to eat the one that was slaughtered. It then questions how the Sifray knows which one is being permitted and which one is being forbidden (as the verses aren't specific). After providing a means to prove that it is the one sent away that is permitted, Rava suggests an alternative way of knowing this, as "the Torah would not tell us to send it away to cause problems," and if this hypothetically non-kosher bird were set free, an

unsuspecting person could inadvertently eat it. Therefore, if the Torah tells us to set it free, it must be kosher, and the slaughtered one must be the one that can't be eaten.

The notion that the Torah would never tell us to send something away that wasn't permitted is employed several times throughout the Talmud. The rejection of Rav Nachman bar Yitzchok's suggestion (Chulin 140a) that the adjective ("tehoros") describing the birds used by the "metzora" (Vayikra 14:4) comes to exclude using birds from an "ir hanidachas" (a city of idol worshippers that must be destroyed, with no form of benefit allowed from anything from that city) is based on the fact that we would never even consider using such a forbidden bird, as "the Torah would not tell us to send it away to cause problems, but for [it to be allowed to be eaten, after it was] slaughtered." The same is true for Rav Papa's suggestion (ibid) that "tehoros" comes to exclude birds that were exchanged for something used for idol worship, as "the Torah would not tell us to send it away to cause problems." Similarly, we would never consider the possibility that the mother bird that must be sent away before taking her eggs or chicks would be not be allowed to be captured, slaughtered and eaten (at a later date), since "the Torah would not tell us to send it away to cause problems" (Chulin 115a). It would seem, then, that this concept is solid enough to "prove" that anything the Torah tells us to "send away" must be subsequently permitted. However, if this is the case, why did the Sifray need to bring a verse in the first place to "prove" that the bird sent away was still kosher? Why didn't it (and/or the Talmud) simply state that it must be permitted since the Torah told us to send it way, and it wouldn't have done so if it wasn't permitted?

This question is not limited to the bird of the "metzora" either. There is a dispute between Rav and Shemuel (Yoma 67) whether or not one can have any benefit from the limbs of the goat thrown down the mountain as part of the Yom Kippur service. Rava concludes the discussion by saying "most likely the one who says they are permitted [is correct], [as] the Torah would not tell us to send it away to cause problems," i.e. one could subsequently find these limbs and feed them to his animals (or find some other use for them), unaware that they were off-limits. "Most likely?" How could Rava say it was only "most likely" if he (and the Talmud) was so sure of it elsewhere? And how could anyone be of the opinion that these limbs were prohibited if the Torah tells us to "send them" down the mountain? Either the possibility exists that the Torah would tell us to send something away despite it being prohibited, or it doesn't. How can the Talmud indicate in some places that it is not possible, while offering such a possibility in others?

I would like to suggest that this possibility depends on whether or not the prohibition would come

about because the bird (or animal) was part of the service in the Holy Temple. The mother bird being sent away may be a mitzvah, but it was not something done as part of the service in the Temple. Although the bird of the "metzora" that is sent away is part (along with other offerings) of the service done for the "metzora" in the Temple, the prohibition against benefiting from anything from an "ir hanidachas" or from anything that was used for idol worship or exchanged for something used for idol worship does not stem from it's attempted use for the "metzora." Therefore, we can be sure that the Torah would not allow us to "send" something "away" if it can lead to potential problems, and these already prohibited birds would not qualify to be used for the "metzora." Prohibitions that stem from designating something for Temple use, or from being part of the Temple service, are normal and expected. It would therefore be very possible (perhaps even likely) that something used as part of the Temple service would become prohibited, even if it can potentially lead to someone inadvertently using it.

When the goat was chosen for the Yom Kippur service, it became prohibited for personal use. Would its utility being complete allow it to become permitted? We can understand why it wouldn't, but also why it could. Rava comes along to tell us that the concept so widely accepted for non-Temple related things, that the Torah would not tell us to send something away if it had the potential to cause problems, can apply here as well; being that it is possible that the limbs of the goat can theoretically become permitted once its service-related use is done (and is no longer really a "goat"), "most likely it is permitted, as the Torah wouldn't tell us to send it away to cause problems."

Similarly, the birds used for the "metzora" would normally both become prohibited once chosen for the service. Nevertheless, there are verses that tell us specifically that while one of them is prohibited, the other is not (or becomes permissible after it is sent away). Which one remains off-limits and which one is permitted? Once again Rava tells us that the concept so widely accepted for non-Temple uses applies here as well, and being that one bird is permitted while the other is prohibited, we would have to say that the one sent away is the one the Torah is permitting. After all, the Torah would not tell us to send it away if it could lead to problems. © 2008 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The entire subject of tzoraat is shrouded in mystery and wonderment. The exact nature of the disease is not really known to our medical practitioners.

The traditional translation of tzoraat as leprosy is undoubtedly misleading and inaccurate. The rabbis of the Talmud treated this disease as mainly a spiritual one, albeit reflected in actual physical symptoms.

Slander, narrowness of vision, jealousy of others and bad character traits were assigned by the rabbis as being some of the potential causes of the onset of the disease.

Since tzoraat could occur not only on one's body but on one's clothing and in the walls of one's house, it made everyone vulnerable-stripped bare of the veneer of possessions and false appearances that characterize human life. They are exposed publicly as being people of poor character, greedy, self-centered and even malicious towards others.

In the haftorah of the week we read of the four metzoraim-Gechazy and his three sons-who were cursed by Elisha for their greed and for the desecration of G-d's name when Gechazy pursued Naaman, the Aramean general, and asked for the wealth that Elisha had refused to accept. Even in the moment of triumph when they discovered the encampment of their enemy to be deserted and abandoned, they could not restrain their impulse of greed and proceeded to loot the camp before reporting their discovery to the king of Israel.

Apparently it is easier to cure tzoraat itself than it is to remove the character flaws that brought about the tzoraat in the first instance. Since tzoraat was a disease of character traits and flaws, it is natural that the Torah placed the responsibility of diagnosing and curing the disease, not upon doctors or healers, but rather on the kohein-the priest of Israel.

The kohein was to be the spiritual mentor and guide for Jews. The prophet proclaimed: "For the lips of the kohein shall guard knowledge and wisdom and people shall seek to learn Torah from him for he is likened unto an angel of G-d."

The kohein was the sole healer of these hidden character weaknesses that lay deep within a person's soul and personality. Apparently with the decline of the spiritual strength of the kohanim in Second Temple times, the disease of tzoraat also disappeared.

We have no record of its actual appearance in Second Temple times, though the rules of purification enumerated in this week's parsha were continued to be studied and appear as a separate mesechet in the Mishna. The rabbis always spoke of tzoraat as something that required study and analysis-drosh (to search and analyze.) If one actually did that and underwent the searing self-analysis that is required to uproot the possibility of tzoraat in one's person then in the words of the rabbis "vkabel sachar- one will be rewarded and receive payment."

That lesson remains valid for all times and under all circumstances. We no longer have any kohein capable of discerning tzoraat nor do we actually have tzoraat itself in our midst. But, the root causes of tzoraat still exist abundantly within us and our society.

Before the coming of the great Pesach holiday let us attempt to purify ourselves from those negative causes and traits. © 2008 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Those who seek reasons for Jewish ritual (ta'amei ha-mitzvot) by and large view such observances as a conduit to better feel the presence of G-d. But ritual can also have an alternative goal - to teach ethical lessons in accordance with G-d's will.

A good example is the laws of family purity found in this week's reading (Leviticus Chapter 15) which can be viewed as teaching the Torah ethics of love. The laws include immersion in a mikveh (a natural pool of water) which permits husband and wife to re-engage in sexual relations. This can be seen as a tool through which couples can learn basic lessons about love.

On its simplest level, water is associated with birth. Consider the following: the world begins as G-d hovers over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:2) We become a people as we march through the split sea. (Exodus Ch. 14) We enter Israel as a Jewish people, after crossing the Jordan River. (Joshua Ch. 4) Bearing in mind that marriages too often become monotonous and even boring, can it be argued that immersion is an attempt to inspire husband and wife to rekindle their love-as if it was reborn?

No wonder, water in the Bible, is often associated with the exciting onset of love. Yitzhak's (Isaac) wife, Rivka (Rebecca) is found at the well. (Genesis Ch. 24) Yaakov (Jacob) meets Rachel as flocks gather around the water. (Genesis Ch. 29) Moshe (Moses) comes in contact with his wife to be, Zipporah, after saving her and her siblings at the river. (Exodus Ch. 2) From this perspective, immersion may be understood as an attempt to mystically bring husband and wife back to those Biblical moments suffused with beautiful romance. The moments surrounding mikvah should evoke memories of the first natural bodies of water mentioned in the Torah-those in Paradise, in the Garden of Eden. (Genesis 2:10-14)

Not coincidentally, water and love have much in common. Without water, one cannot live. Without love, life is virtually impossible.

But, as my dear friend Dr. Bob Grieff pointed out, water, like love, can be fleeting. As water can slip through one's fingers, so can love, if not nurtured, easily slip away.

Ritual requires meticulous Halakhic observance; but this external observance should be a manifestation of a deep internal message. In the case of mikvah, the immersion can remind us that relationships must be nurtured, and that each and

every day couples ought strive to love each other more deeply than yesterday - as if their love is born anew. © 2008 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI ZEV LEFF

Outlooks & Insights

“When you arrive in the land of Canaan that I give you as a possession, I will place a tzora'as affliction upon a house in the land of your possession." (Leviticus 14:34)

The last of the various forms of tzora'as is that which affects homes. That form of tzora'as was unknown until the Jewish people entered Israel. According to the Sages, the previous inhabitants hid their valuables in the walls of their homes to prevent them from falling into the hands of the conquering Jewish army. When the walls of these houses were subsequently struck with tzora'as, necessitating the removal of parts of its walls and, in some cases, the destruction of the entire house, these hidden treasures were discovered by the new house owners.

This is extremely puzzling. We are also told that tzora'as in the walls of homes was a punishment for selfishness. Why should those who displayed the extremely negative characteristic of selfishness have been rewarded with the discovery of hidden treasures?

The Torah tells us that before the Kohen comes to inspect the suspected discoloration to determine whether there is in fact tzora'as, all the contents of the house are to be removed (Leviticus 14:35). That way they do not become impure if the house is declared to have tzora'as.

The Midrash, however, adds another reason for removing all the vessels: It is a corrective for the selfishness which causes tzora'as in the first place. Selfish people often pretend that they have less than they do, to avoid lending others their possessions or giving tzedakah. Having to remove all his possessions in public causes him acute embarrassment and helps to atone for and correct his selfishness.

The Mishnah (Nega'im 12:5), however, gives a totally different explanation of the removal of the contents from the house: Divine concern for the property of a Jew. Only relatively inexpensive earthenware vessels cannot be easily purified by immersion in a Mikveh. Nevertheless, G-d is concerned with even this small loss, and allows the removal of all vessels before the house is declared impure.

One might have thought that if the intention was to cure selfishness, a lesson on the unimportance of material possessions would be more fitting, and not one which conveys the value of every penny! The truth, however, is that selfishness-literally tzoras ayin, a narrow\ eye-is the result of not appreciating the true

value of material possessions, and viewing them from a very narrow perspective. We are taught that tzaddikim value their material possessions even more than their lives. Thus, Yaakov put his life in danger to retrieve some inexpensive earthenware vessels.

Earthenware is unique in that it contracts tumah, spiritual impurity, only through exposure (of the source of impurity) to its inside surface, but not through contact with the outside walls of the vessel. Why are earthenware vessels singled out in this fashion?

The value of any vessel can be measured in two ways: in terms of the intrinsic value of the material from which it is made, or in terms of its functional value. The materials of an earthenware vessel have little intrinsic value. Their utility alone gives earthenware vessels their value. In order for something to contract ritual impurity, it must have a value. Hence, an earthenware vessel becomes impure only through contact with its functional part-the inside-and not through contact with the materials of the outside wall.

A tzaddik views his material possessions as earthenware vessels-i.e., of no intrinsic value themselves, but rather deriving their importance only from their function. Material possessions, in his view, are tools in the service of G-d. They may, for instance, allow him to do acts of kindness and benefit others. Both his body and his material possessions are means to serve G-d. They differ only in that the body is acquired as a "birthday present." The acquisition of material possessions requires effort. Thus his material possessions are more precious to the tzaddik than his own body because their acquisition required more effort. The tzaddik's perspective on possessions contrasts with the narrow perspective of the one who sees only the personal benefit his possessions can bring him.

When the person whose house was afflicted with tzora'as was made aware of G-d's concern for every Jew's material possessions, his selfish view (tzaras ayin) was challenged and the corrective process begun. The embarrassment of being exposed to the neighbors' scrutiny was another aspect of the same process. The removal of the vessels to the public domain hints to the fact that their purpose is not just to serve oneself.

The valuables hidden by the Emorites (Canaanites) were tainted and contaminated by intense selfishness. The Emorites hid them to deprive the Jews from benefiting from them, even though they were doomed to lose them anyway. In the hand of people with a tendency toward selfishness, this wealth would have been terribly detrimental. Therefore G-d utilized the tzora'as as a vehicle to provide the wealth in a manner designed to correct the evil of selfishness. The victim of tzora'as was forced to recast his attitudes toward material possessions prior to receiving this new bounty.

If one fails to learn the lesson of tzora'as afflicting the house, his selfishness will grow into haughtiness. Then his clothes, called by the Sages the instruments of honoring a person, will be afflicted as well. If he still does not heed the warning, he will descend yet further until he acts with total disregard for anyone but himself. That latter attitude is manifested as lashon hara and motzi shem ra, speech designed to denigrate others. As a punishment the perpetrator's very body will be scourged with tzora'as.

We can now understand what appear to be conflicting opinions regarding the deaths of the students of Rabbi Akiva. The Talmud (Yevamos 62b) says that they did not treat each other with respect. The Midrash (Bereishis Rabba 61:3) says that they exhibited tzarus ayin, selfishness, with regard to their Torah and did not share it with one another.

Torah is one's most precious possession, but it must not become a means of personal aggrandizement. When one truly appreciates his fellow Jew and honors him, he desires to share with him his tools for service of G-d. In this vein, sharing one's Torah is the supreme expression of honor for one's fellow man. Hence the two descriptions of the faults of the students of Rabbi Akiva are in fact one. © 2008 Rabbi Z. Leff & aish.com

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“This shall be the law of the leper in the day of his cleansing, he shall be brought unto the priest" (Lev. 14:2) Do houses have souls? Do nations?

In the opening of this week's portion of Metzora, the Torah introduces us to the law commanding a person to go to the priest who determined the nature of his 'plague of leprosy' (nega tzoraat). If the scab was diagnosed as tzoraat, the development of the disease required the constant inspection of the priest. Our portion of Metzora opens with the complex details of the purification process once the disease is over. This ritual requires two kosher birds, a piece of cedar, crimson wool, and a hyssop branch. One bird is slaughtered while the other is ultimately sent away. But this is only the beginning of a purification process that lasts eight days, culminating in a guilt offering brought at the holy temple.

Only after the entire procedure was concluded could a person be declared ritually clean. But if this all sounds foreign, complicated and involved, the Biblical concepts appear even stranger when we discover that this "plague of leprosy (nega tzoraat)" is not limited to humans: "G-d spoke unto Moses and Aaron, saying: 'When you come to the land of Canaan, which I give to you as an inheritance, and I put the plague of leprosy (nega hzoraat) in a house of the land of your

possession, then he that owns the house shall come and tell the priest...." (Lev. 14:33-35).

How are we to understand that the very same malady-nega tzoraat-that describes what is generally referred to as a leprous ailment of a human being, has the power to also afflict the walls of a house! A person is one thing, but a house suffering a plague of leprosy?

Secondly, when we examine the text we find an interesting distinction between these two species of tzoraat. "The plague of leprosy" that strikes people is presented in straight-forward terms: "If a person shall have in the skin a swelling, a scab, or a bright spot, and it be in the skin of his flesh the plague of leprosy (nega tzoraat)..." (Lev. 13:3)

But the plague that strikes houses is introduced by an entirely different concept: "When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving to you as an inheritance, I will put the plague of leprosy..." (Lev. 14:34).

Why is the commandment of the plagued house placed in the context of the Land of Israel? If indeed the disease can descend upon houses, why only the houses in the Land of Israel?

A third element to consider are the differences in the visible aspects of these two diseases. Regarding the person himself, the Torah speaks of a white discoloration, but as far as the house is concerned, if a white spot appeared on the wall nothing would be wrong.

"Then the priest shall command that they empty the house... and he shall look at the plague and behold, if the plague be in the walls and consists of penetrating streaks that are bright green or bright red...." (Lev. 14:36-37)

We must keep in mind that translating nega hzoraat as a 'plague of leprosy' is inadequate. Biblical commentaries ranging from the 12th century Ramban to the 19th century Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch claim that nega hzoraat cannot possibly be an illness in the classic sense, for if that were true, why does the Torah assign the 'medical' task of determining illness to a priest? Priests were teachers and keepers of the religious tradition, not doctors or medical experts.

If nega hzoraat is a spiritual illness, a metaphor for the state of the soul, then just as one soul is linked to one body, the souls of the members of a family are linked to the dwelling where they all live together. And the walls of a house certainly reflect the atmosphere engendered by its residents. A house can be either warm or cold, loving or tense. Some houses are ablaze with life, permeating Jewishness and hospitality: mezuzahs on the doorposts, candelabra, menorahs and Jewish art on the walls, books on Judaism on the shelves, and place-settings for guests always adorning the table. But in other homes, the silence is so heavy it feels like a living tomb, or the screams of passionate red-hot anger which can be heard outside frighten

away any would-be visitor, or the green envy of the residents evident in the gossip they constantly speak causes any guest to feel uncomfortable.

Now why should this "disease" be specifically connected to the Land-or more specifically, the people-of Israel? To find the unique quality of Israel all we have to do is examine the idea of Bet Yisrael, the House of Israel. The nature of a household is that as long as there is mutual love and shared responsibility, then that house will be blessed and its walls won't be struck with a plague of leprosy. To the extent that the covenant of mutual responsibility is embraced by the people, then the house of Israel will be blessed. We must act toward each other 'with the same morality, ethics and love present in every blessed family. If not, a nega tzoraat awaits us. And our holy land of Israel is especially sensitive to any moral infraction. © 2008 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by *Rabbi Amnon Bazak*

With respect to the laws of a "nega"? a ritually impure blemish? there are three main types which can be graded according to how serious they are: on a person, in a house, or on clothing. With respect to the processes for returning to a pure state, the simplest one involves clothing. In situations where a garment can be returned to its pure state, all that is needed is to wash it (Vayikra 13:58). The process for a human being takes much longer, with three related stages described in the beginning of this week's Torah portion. In the first stage, the one who wants to become pure must bring two birds, some cedar wood, a bunch of hyssop, and a red string. He must slaughter one bird and then dip it and the other objects in the blood of the dead bird and sprinkle the blood on the person who is to be purified. In the second stage the person shaves off all his hair, and then in the final stage he must bring three sacrifices: an Asham, a Chatat, and an Olah. The case of a contaminated house is simpler. Just as for a person, it is necessary to bring two birds, cedar wood, hyssop, and red string, and to sprinkle the blood on the house, but no sacrifices are needed. This emphasizes that the home is more important than a person's clothing, which is reasonable.

In addition, there is another significant aspect of the purification process of a house. It is the only case outside of the Temple where there is a command to sprinkle a holy substance on an inanimate object. In the portion of Acharei Mot we will read about the Yom Kippur rituals performed by the High Priest, where he atones for the Altar: "Let him sprinkle on it from the blood with his finger seven times, and he will purify it, and sanctify it from Bnei Yisrael's impurities. And let him finish atoning for the holy area and the Tent of Meeting and the Altar..." [16:19-20]. This is similar to

the purification process described in this week's portion with respect to a nega: "He shall dip them in the blood of the slaughtered bird... and sprinkle on the house seven times... and he will atone for the house, and it will be purified." [14:51-53]. Sprinkling blood on the Altar that has symbolically been contaminated by the impurities of Bnei Yisrael and on a house which has developed a nega both lead to atonement and purity. This implies that the Torah views a person's home as similar to an altar, at least with respect to guarding its purity and the methods of mending the fault if it becomes ritually impure.

This relationship also explains the special phrase used with respect to a house that has a nega, "vechitei? Let him cleanse the house" [14:52]. The only other place in the Torah where this term is used is in relation to the Tabernacle and the Altar, as for example, "You shall cleanse the Altar when you atone for it" [Shemot 29:36]. The meaning of the term is to cleanse and to purify something, since ritual impurity causes the Tabernacle, the Altar, and the home itself to be spiritually tainted, and this can be overcome in the ways that the Torah describes.

The subject of a nega in a house is one of the most serious matters in the Torah, and there is even an opinion among the sages that "a house with a nega has never occurred and will never happen in the future" [Sanhedrin 71a]. But in spite of this the central theme of the passage continues to be relevant for all generations? impurities must be removed from the home and every house should be viewed as a small model of the Tabernacle and as a place where the holy Shechina can be revealed.

RABBI BORUCH LEFF

Kol Yaakov

Something is strange. The arrangement throughout the Parshas of Tzaria-Metzora is unusual.

These Parshas describe the laws of tzaarat, a leprosy-type disease that afflicts a person primarily as a result of gossip and slanderous speech, lashon hara. There are three locations where this leprosy can be found: on someone's body, clothing or walls of one's home. The Torah first teaches the laws concerning leprosy and its impurity on the body and then instructs regarding clothing. At this point, Parshat Tazria ends.

Parshat Metzora then opens with a description of the procedure of how one who has tzaarat on his body returns to purity through a sacrificial service. After this long service is discussed, only then do we learn about the laws of leprosy in the walls of the home.

Wouldn't a more logical format have been to discuss the laws of the body, clothing, and the home and only then to discuss how a leper reverts back to purity? Another option would have been to explain the laws of purifying body leprosy together with the laws of

becoming a leper of the body. Why does the Torah interrupt the logical flow and only mention the house laws as a last topic, isolating the home leprosy laws from the rest? It would appear that the laws of house leprosy are in a separate category, but why?

A second question, which we will answer first, is the following: The law is that household leprosy can only occur in the Land of Israel and not in lands outside Israel, in exile (Tractate Nega'im 12:4). This is due to the language in the verse, "I will place an affliction upon a house in the land of your possession" (Leviticus 14:34). This is not the case regarding the laws of clothing and body where leprosy can appear even outside Israel. What is the reason for this distinction? If the laws of house leprosy exist as a deterrent and purification process for violations of slander and evil speech, why wouldn't they appear outside of Israel as they do for body and clothing leprosy?

The difference is that we have no real habitations or homes outside Israel. We don't own them. We own our clothing and our bodies wherever we are, but not our homes outside of Israel. We are always hoping and planning to return to Israel and we live in our homes in exile on a temporary basis.

Only that which is truly ours forever is afflicted with leprosy.

We must understand that G-d was not haphazard in designing the laws of leprosy as a punishment for lashon hara, slander. He was also not being arbitrary to apply leprosy only to bodies, clothing, and homes. These laws could have easily occurred to silverware, animals, and books, but they didn't. Obviously, there is a strong relationship between slandering and gossiping about someone and receiving leprosy in general, and in specifically receiving it on body, clothing and home. It is measure-for-measure.

Leprosy is the appropriate consequence for lashon hara because it invades your intimacy and forces you to become humiliated in public-which is what the original gossip did to its victim. Clothing grants a person dignity and the lashon hara invaded the dignity of the one spoken about. Therefore, we strip a gossip of his clothing.

Similarly, we are driven out of our homes when we speak lashon hara because through our lashon hara we have denied our victim his comfort and privacy in his home. In some cases, he may feel that he must relocate due to the embarrassment that our lashon hara has caused him. At the very least, he does not feel as safe and relaxed in his home as he did before the lashon hara. He may feel somewhat paranoid now that everyone has been talking about him.

So if our lashon hara has removed dignity and privacy from the victim which was truly his own, then the affliction of leprosy can only appear in kind. It will not appear outside Israel in a home that is not truly ours because the consequence does not fit the crime. Even

in a case where the subject of the lashon hara also lives in a home outside Israel, leprosy will not come to the gossip's home. This is because the victim was not stripped of his comfort in his real home. In a sense, he has no actual and real rights to his home outside Israel so he hasn't done much damage within the realm of home. But the damage done to his general dignity and privacy does warrant leprosy appearing on clothes and body since he does truly own his body and clothing no matter which land he lives in.

We derive from all this that the only place where Jews really belong and the only land which we truly own is Israel. Yet, unfortunately most of us who live in the Diaspora don't usually think of our homes as temporary and we rarely contemplate abandoning our comforts in exile in order to fulfill the commandment of living in Israel.

At the very least, we should be hoping and anxiously anticipating returning to Israel when the Mashiach (Messiah) comes. We derive this from Maimonides (Laws of Kings 11:1) "Anyone who does not believe that the Messiah will come or who does not await his coming denies Torah." We must be aware that we are lacking something significant in our lives without Mashiach. There is no greater destruction to the Jewish soul than to lose the awareness of the bitterness of exile and the Diaspora.

There's a story told about a rabbi who was building a yeshiva in America, who appreciated this idea. The contractor offered to use Finnish wood that lasts 150 years, instead of regular wood which usually lasts 90 years before it begins to rot. The rabbi said, "Use the regular wood. We don't want to make our stay outside Israel too permanent."

One of the questions that we will be asked after our 120 years in this world is whether we "yearned for the salvation (of G-d and Israel)" (Shabbat 31a). What does yearning means? It's when a patient takes a biopsy exam and needs to wait 3 days for the results to see if the growth is benign or not. How he yearns! Those 3 days last forever! And on the 3rd day, every phone ring is met with anticipation-will this finally be the call he's been waiting for?

Do we yearn for Mashiach? Often we ask ourselves why do we even need Mashiach? What are we missing? This is a symptom of our spiritual malady. We no longer recognize the need to relate to G-d in the holiest place and in the closest manner, which is what Mashiach will bring to the world.

We utilize our comforts and freedom in exile to serve G-d better but we must never feel too attached to our culture and land. We should yearn for the time when we will leave the exile forever and unite with our land, our nation, and G-d once again. Someday we will all be together in Jerusalem. May it be soon. © 2008 Rabbi B. Leff & aish.com