

Parshat Tazria:

The mystery of Tzara'at.

Most people enjoy reading about the disease of Tzara'at about as much as they enjoy visiting the dentist! We read the Torah text about white patches and red blotches on the skin, bodily inflammations and distortions; examinations by a Kohen, the ejection of the "leper" from the Israelite camp. It is enough to make a person turn green!

Now, we have all heard about the connection between Tzara'at and Lashon Hara. The indication is that the roots of Tzara'at are Godly rather than medically explained. From our earliest Jewish education it has been drummed into us: Tzara'at is not Leprosy. Leprosy is a biological disease, Tzara'at is a biblical, spiritual disease. But how do we know this? Is it not possible that the Rabbis, due to their poor knowledge of physiology, viruses and bacteria, saw physical ailments in a spiritual context? How can we tell that this ailment is a spiritual symptom rather than a straightforward medical condition?

Now how does one go about trying to answer such a question? One way could be to look through the works of medieval Jewish philosophers such as the comments of the Sefer Hachinuch, the Ramban, Rambam etc. This will not be our method (although we will give you some references to these in our "Chavruta study section".) Instead, our methodology for attacking this topic will be to look at the Tanach itself. We will examine the simple text of the Torah and the Navi and, with some extra help from Chazal, we will use story and structure to give us an insight into this most perplexing of Biblical phenomenon.

MEKOROT FOR CHAVRUTA STUDY

1. First, it would be nice to see two stories (stories are always a good thing) which should shed light on our problem.
- Miriam: Bamidbar. Chapter 12 and Devarim 24:8-9
- Na'aman: Melachim II. Chapter 5 (not so well known because we usually read the Haftara of Metzora and not Tazria.)

For each story examine what is going on, the role of Tzara'at etc. If you cannot come up with your own questions, then the following might just be of some assistance:

- What is the "problem" or "sin" in each case?
- How is the Tzara'at dealt with?
- Does the "resolution" seem to solve the problem?

What does this story tell you about the phenomena we call Tzara'at?

2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE PARSHA:

Read through the parsha (from 13:1 to 14:57). A superficial review should suffice.

Give a heading to each section / paragraph.

What types of Tzara'at are joined together?

What type of Tzara'at is clearly put into a separate section?

- Can you give a reason for this?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

a. What colour is Tzara'at? See:

- Shemot 4:6, Bamidbar 12:10, Melachim II 5:27.

But in our parsha other colours are evident: 13:9-17, 13:24, 13:30, 13:49.

b. For a philosophical view, see the Rambam: Mishne Torah, Hilchot Tumaat Tzara'at (in Sefer Tahara) Chap 16. Halacha 10.

THE SHIUR SECTION:

When looking at the Biblical "unit" which is defined by our Parshiot, we can denote a clear symmetrical (or "chiastic") structure with the laws of Tzara'at at the centre of two areas of purity laws.

- i. Ch.12 Purity laws of the mother after childbirth
- ii. Ch.13-14 Tzara'at
- iii. Ch.15 Purity laws of Nidda and Zavva

But internally, there is some confusion as to the appropriate place of each parsha:

- i. 13:1-46 Tzara'at of the body
- ii. 13:47-59 Tzara'at of Clothing
- iii. 14:1-32 Purification process for Tzara'at of the body
- iv. 14:33-57 Tzara'at of Houses - and its purification

The topics here seem somewhat out of order! Should we not first describe the three types of Tzara'at: body, clothing, house, and then move on to the process of purification? Why does the purification process interrupt the list of Tzara'at types?

The grouping is interesting too. We see that Tzara'at of clothing is grouped with the Tzara'at of the body. This might seem sensible. However we have to ask whether there is logical connection here. I say this because in a way, these two types of Tzara'at (body/clothing) do not share the same properties. Why? Because clothing that is "infected" must be disposed of; it is burnt. But the procedure for both the human body is one of repair. In fact, if we look at the "recovery" process, the body has more in common with the house. With both, there is a process of repair and recovery. Thus House Tzara'at is closer in its treatment to Human Tzara'at than Tzara'at of clothes. Why are they not placed in direct proximity to each other?

Why is the Tzara'at of a house detached and deliberately separated from the details of human Tzara'at?

THE LAND OF ISRAEL

For those of you who have looked into the pesukim, you will immediately notice a clue in the text. The opening line of Parshat

Tzara'at Habayit gives us the beginnings of an answer. In general when learning Tanach, opening verses (headers) and concluding verses to parshiot will frequently assist us in defining the place or context of a particular parsha. This time too, we find that the heading assists us in understanding the structure. We read (14:34):

"When you enter the Land of Canaan which I am giving to you as possession, and I will place the Tzara'at plague upon your homes of the Land of your possession..."

The passuk is suggesting that the plague which affects the house is limited to the holy land. How are we to understand this? Why is this Tzara'at limited to a particular locale?

Rashi - quoting the Midrash - offers quite an interesting suggestion. The Midrash reads this opening verse quite literally, as if it were a promise: "When you come into the land - I will put Tzara'at on your homes!" What sort of a promise is that?

"This is a promise of good tidings... because the inhabitants of Canaan hid their treasures in the walls of their homes during the 40 years of wandering. Now, through the plague the wall is knocked out and the treasures discovered."

This rather fantastic Midrash suggests that the entire House Tzara'at is a ploy by God to help the Israelites locate "buried treasure". The Canaanites, worried about an impending invasion, hid their precious possessions in their walls (wall safes were around then too!). After the conquest of Canaan, when the Jews are living in their homes, the Tzara'at plague will come as a blessing to expose the treasure. This explanation also answers our question. The Tzara'at of the body and clothing are "bad" tzara'at, but this Tzara'at of homes is positive; a blessing. Hence the division.

This approach is interesting, but from a perspective of "p'shat", it would seem rather strange. After all, Tzara'at is described as a "plague" (Neg'a)! It is a punishment of sorts. Miriam was affected for talking badly about her brother. The king Uzziyahu is also punished with Tzara'at (Chronicles II 26:15-20). How can it be seen as a blessing?

The ibn Ezra (14:34) offers a more realistic approach:

"This classification of (House) Tzara'at manifests itself in the Land of Israel exclusively, due to the elevated status of the land and the Divine presence which is manifest in the Temple."

So God's intense presence in the land means that Tzara'at doesn't just "hit" close to the person: in his body and clothing. Rather it affects even a person's wider surroundings.

Some use this verse to explain and understand the division of "House Tzara'at" They suggest (see Hirsch for example) that clearly Tzara'at of clothes and body affected the Israelites in the

wilderness, but Tzara'at of the House was applicable only after 40 years, hence the division. But even this explanation is somewhat unfulfilling. Torah laws are interspersed irrespective of whether they are laws limited to the boundaries of the Land of Israel or not!

REVERSE MECHANISMS.

But maybe, we can answer our question with an understanding of the mechanism for each Tzara'at and we will realise that the Tzara'at of the body and the Tzara'at of the home are very different in their message.

Let us try to visualise the process which the unfortunate victim goes through for each case. Someone sees a white blotch on his skin or some other symptom of Tzara'at. He calls for a Kohen. The Kohen might put him on hold for a week or two and if it is diagnosed as being Tzara't he must leave the "camp" or the town for an entire week. For a week, he lives outside any societal structure, away from people, and only afterwards does he re-enter the camp but a protracted process of purification is begun which takes a week. The focus here would seem to be his exclusion from society (as with Miriam.) He is temporarily ejected. For a week he must become an outsider, an outcast. He sits on the outside, alone, secluded, looking in.

But with the House Tzara'at, he never leaves the town. He is not excluded from society. What happens in this situation? The priest is called when certain coloured markings are noticed on the walls of the house. Before the Kohen begins his examination of the house, the house contents are emptied so that the furniture and home contents do not become "impure". If and when the "plague" is diagnosed, the house walls must be broken down in the infected spot and replaced with new stones. No-one is allowed to enter the house until we are sure that the Tzara'at has not spread.

Maybe the contrast can be expressed most poignantly by the following statement in the Gemara (Yoma 11b):

"He who keeps his house to himself, not wanting to lend his possessions to others, telling people that he does not have; God exposes him by taking all his house contents out of his home."

House Tzara'at throws a person INTO society. The victim of Tzara'at is forced to a certain degree of personal exposure in the public eye. All the neighbours watch the removal van coming. They see the Kohen inspector pile all the house contents at the side of the street. The person who claimed that he could not lend to his neighbours, that he did not have the means to take up his share of responsibility for society, this person is now forced to stride, in broad daylight, outside of his protective walls. The House Tzara'at pushes a person out of his house - his ivory tower - and forcibly confronts him with his townfolk. He must find a new place to live for a while, in the town. He must connect with others, maybe even move in with another family. The walls of his house has been broken down in more ways than one.

This Tzara'at then, is a test of our personal space, our privacy. In the Talmud, it is seen as a punishment for someone who refuses to act in the most elementary neighbourly fashion. This person won't lend a broom, or a cup of milk to his neighbours. He won't participate in communal life. He wants his privacy, and more than that, he doesn't want anyone to know what he really has. He keeps to himself and doesn't want anyone to bother him. The walls of his home are the focus here. These walls do not simply ensure his privacy, they seclude him in an impermeable membrane so that he can live for himself and by himself. No societal concern is his concern. We wonder what leads him to this anti-social behaviour. How did he become so aloof, so selfish? Is it so bad if somebody uses his plate? his lawnmower? Are we so protective of what is ours, so entrenched in personal ownership? Why do we value our material possessions over our social responsibility?

But the opposite is true for the Tzara'at of the body. Here the victim is secluded from society. This victim is put into isolation for a week. He has to sit alone, outside the support system and social set-up of the community. He is being taught a lesson by being pushed AWAY from society.

TWO SINS.

The Midrash (Devarim Rabba 6:8) supports our observations and links these two types of Tzara'at to two specific sins.

"Rabbi Meir says ... For what sin do plagues come? - For selfish behaviour... A person asks his neighbour 'lend me an axe to cut some wood'. He replies, 'I don't have one', out of his selfish disposition (lit. ayin ra'ah - evil eye); 'lend me your sieve?'. He has one, but replies 'I don't own one', immediately his home is attacked by the plague ... and they empty his house contents, axes, sieves and all!
Rabbi Hanina says: Plagues visit a person because of slander (lashon hara), for Miriam the righteous' slander of her brother Moses brought her to the plague."

Lashon Hara gives you bodily Tzara'at. Selfishness leads to home Tzara'at. How might we explain this difference?

Lashon Hara is when a person oversteps the boundary of his own personal space and enters the world of another, intruding into their life uninvited, to critique and comment about matters which should be of no concern to him

Selfishness is the opposite motion. A person recedes into their own four walls, ignoring the basic assistance he can offer to others. This person will not be harmed in any way by lending an object to another. It is true; maybe the neighbour will damage the sieve or the axe. Is it not safer just to keep it for me? If I keep to myself, I can retain my neat perfect world! Selfishness is when I do not know how to give to the world.

The punishment fits the crime. The selfish person is taught to be less up tight, to realise that he can live in a social sharing environment. The slanderous person is taught that he can exist outside society. He doesn't need to comment on someone else's

life this week. He can live by himself without prying into anyone's life, and he will still survive the week. He can look at society from the outside, with no-one to tell, just thinking about how everyone, including himself, has things the one wishes to remain private.

BACK TO THE STORIES

The story of Miriam clearly illustrates the Lashon Hara example. The story is startling in the suddenness and severity of God's response. The text never reveals to us the content of her comments regarding Moshe or his wife, but we deduce from the story that what she whispered to Aaron was some sort of criticism. This type of talk was grossly inappropriate when applied to the "Man of God". God's immediate summons and his swift punishment are striking. Was He trying to "contain" the rumour, preventing a bad word about Moses from spreading around the Israelite camp? Or are there other reasons here?

God's rebuke talks about one thing only. It can be summarised in one phrase: Moses is different. God is saying to Miriam, "You think you can intrude on Moses' life with your standards? - You are wrong. You are not party to his mindset."

The story of Na'aman in Sefer Melachim illustrates the other side of Tzara'at. Na'aman, the proud army general will not lower his proud demeanour and bathe in the Jordan River. He exclaims, "I thought that he (the Navi) would approach me and wave his hand calling in the name of God and the Tzara'at would be gone! Are ... the rivers of Damascus not superior to all the rivers of Israel? ... He left in a temper." (5:11-12). The test here is whether he can do exactly that, to lower his pride, strip down and dip seven times in the unimpressive Jordan river. Na'aman wants a grand dignified cleansing of his plague. But it is only by lowering himself that he can become cured of his Tzara'at.

CONCLUSIONS

This "disease" strikes people with an "unhealthy" social attitude. It doesn't seem to be a medical condition at all! In an age where sensational gossip sells millions of magazines and newspapers, when personal privacy is regularly ignored, when language has been cheapened and abused, let our parsha inspire us to more responsible social living.

Shabbat Shalom