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Parshat Metzora: On Waiting and Not Understanding

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As its name suggests, *parshat Metzora* continues the theme of *tzaraat*--imperfectly translated as leprosy--begun in last week's *parsha*. After discussing the procedures associated with *tzaraat ha-guf* (leprosy of the body) and *tzaraat ha-beged* (leprosy of the garment), the Torah turns to *tzaraat ha-bayit* (leprosy of the home).

33 And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 34 When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as a possession, and I place a lesion of *tzaraat* upon a house in the land of your possession...(Leviticus 14:33-34).

לג וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: לַד כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם לְאֶחְזָה וְנִתְתִּי נֶגַע צָרַעַת בְּבַיִת אֶרֶץ אֶחְזָתְכֶם: (ויקרא יד:לג-לד)

Upon entering the Land of Israel, the Israelites were destined to experience the phenomenon of afflicted homes. The language of verse 34 is subtly prescriptive to this effect. It refers not to a situation that *might* arise in response to human behavior, as the other cases of *tzaraat* indicate, but to one that *will* arise, seemingly regardless. "When you to come to the land," says God, "I [*will*] place a lesion."

Picking up on this surprising prescription, Rashi cites the following *midrash* from *Vayikrah Rabbah* 17:6:

"And I place a lesion of *tzaraat*. This is [good] news for them that lesions of *tzaraat* will come upon them, because the Amorites had hidden away treasures of gold inside the walls of their houses during the entire forty years that the Israelites were in the desert, and through the lesion, he will demolish the house and find them. (Rashi on Lev. 14:34)

וְנִתְתִּי נֶגַע צָרַעַת. בְּשׂוֹרָה הִיא לָהֶם שֶׁהַנֶּגַע יָבֵא אֵימָה עֲלֵיהֶם, לְפִי שֶׁהִטְמִינוּ אֲמֹרִיִּים מְטֻמוֹנִיּוֹת שֶׁל זָהָב בְּקִירוֹת בְּתֵיחֶם כֹּל אַרְבַּעִים שָׁנָה שֶׁהָיָה יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִדְבָּר, וְעַל יְדֵי הַנֶּגַע נֹתֵץ הַבַּיִת וּמוֹצְאֵן: (רש"י, ויקרא יד:לד)

In contrast to the other forms of *tzaraat* that announce the presence of sin, *tzaraat ha-bayit* actually announces blessing. The homes that the Israelites would come to inhabit were treasure troves, filled with the riches of their previous inhabitants lodged deep in their walls. The hidden goods would only be revealed through the destruction that *tzaraat ha-bayit* demanded. Hence its presence was a "*besorah tova*," a great tiding, offered by God to the Jewish people.

To clarify, regarding this form of *tzaraat*, the journey from diagnosis of impurity to purification involved many steps. First, an individual who suspected that his or her home was afflicted would report to the *kohen* (priest): "כְּנֶגַע נִרְאָה לִי בְּבַיִת," "Something like a lesion has appeared to me in the house" (Lev. 14:35). Then, after clearing out the home to avoid contamination of its objects, the *kohen* would come to ascertain its status. If indeed it appeared to contain *tzaraat*, he would quarantine the house for 7 days. "וְהִסְגִּיר אֶת־הַבַּיִת שִׁבְעַת יָמִים" (Lev. 14:38). After this week, he would assess the spread of the affliction. If it had continued to spread, all stones affected would be removed and replaced. Then another 7 day waiting-period would be observed, after which the *kohen* would return. If he observed further spread of the *tzaraat*, then the entire house would be demolished. All of this would be followed by a sacrificial purification process.

The Piaseczner Rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of the Warsaw Ghetto, raised a compelling question about the relationship between this complex destructive process and the gifts it revealed.

"Let us understand. [If the plague is purely beneficial,] why does the Torah command that a house first be locked up for seven days, and only afterwards, if the leprous spot persists, are the stones of the wall removed and replaced? Surely, once the leprous spot becomes visible, it should be obvious that treasure is buried there...Why does the Torah tell us that the house is *tameh*, ritually unclean for seven days?" (*Esh Kodesh*, Metzora 1940)

ונבין נא א"כ למה הסגיר מתחילה את הבית שבעת ימים, ורק אח"כ חלצו את האבנים, הא כיון שראה הנגע ידע שכאן מטמון...למה צותה התורה לטמא מקודם שבעת ימים?" (אש קודש מצורע ת"ש)

If it's so clear, as per Rashi, that what appears to be an affliction is actually a blessing in disguise, why such an elaborate and elongated procedure to arrive at its revelation? Why not just tear down the walls immediately and expose the riches hidden within?

The Rebbe answers: Because even when something is "*I'tovah*" (for the best), even when it will reveal itself over time as an occasion for opening or healing, we must still pause to really honor the pain it inflicts. No matter how many explanations we might have to make the suffering "worth it"; no matter how many ways we have to retrospectively redeem or recontextualize misfortune, in the here-and-now it just hurts. Being displaced hurts. Having your home torn apart or torn down hurts. Being socially isolated hurts. So for seven days (or fourteen) we hold just that. We suspend speculation about the meaning of things and we sit *shiva* for the loss and the disorientation that comes from it. We mourn for the ways in which we've been uprooted. We breathe, cry, stay silent. And then, only then, might we be prepared to reveal the blessings that lay hidden deeply (sometimes very deeply) inside of such experiences.

The Piaseczner concludes:

"And so the law states: A person must say, "Something *like* a lesion has appeared to me in the house" (Lev. 14:35). Even if he is a scholar and knows the exact definition of a leprous mark, he must still use the phrase "*like* a lesion"--for, as we said above, a person is never able to tell whether what is happening to him is a [blessed] challenge or a [meaningless] injury. All he can say is that it looks like an affliction. The truth, however, as the Torah announces, is that what God is doing with us is for the good of Israel." (*Esh Kodesh*, Metzora 1940)

ולכן צריך האיש לומר רק "כנגע נראה לי בבית" (ויקרא יד:לה), ואפילו תלמיד חכם שיודע שנגע היא רק "כנגע" יאמר, לפי הנזכר לעיל, מפני שהאיש בעצמו אינו יכול לאמר אם היא באמת נגע או פגע רק שלו נראה כנגע היה יכול לאמר, אבל באמת טובה היא לישראל אשר יטיב ה' עמו.

A person locked in his or her own hardship can never really know what lays on the other side of it. The Torah does not ask us to leapfrog over that pain or to explain it away, but rather to sit with it and wait. The treasures behind the walls will come, says the Rebbe, but only with time and a little bit of breaking down.



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