

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Tazria - Metzora

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of

Faigel *bas* Shmuel *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Bringing Down the House

An exhibition on the underpinnings of the topic of tzara'as habayis (type of surface disease, here affecting a house)

The commentators reveal the wealth of profundity contained within the details of the *tzara'as* chapter, the main subject of this double *parshah*. Here, we attempt to at least scratch the surface regarding one of these aspects, the phenomenon of *tzara'as habayis* (*Vayikra* 14:33-53). As we shall see, there are various facets to this occurrence – some well-known, others less so.

Tzara'as is Embarrassing

Chazal inform us (primarily in Arachin [16a]) that (general) *tzara'as* results from any number of specific flaws or misdeeds. However, it is quite a unique form of punishment. Perhaps more than any other type of retribution, *tzara'as* is characterized by *bushah* (embarrassment), as the afflicted sinner suffers great shame in the course of his ordeal. Among other practices, he must rend his clothes, sit by himself and publicly announce his state of defilement (*Vayikra* 13:45-46).

The Chofetz Chaim (*Shemiras Halashon, II, ch. 16*) highlights another practice through which the “embarrassment factor” is quite apparent. When someone would bring a sacrifice in Temple times, it was accompanied by a libation offering (which differed in such particulars as quantity, based on the type of sacrifice it was accompanying). The Mishnah (*Shekalim* 5:3) outlines the interesting procedure through which these libations were procured. The individual bringing the sacrifice would have to purchase whatever he needed for the libation offering from the Temple officers. He would first approach one officer, tell him what kind of sacrifice he was bringing and transfer the necessary funds to him. Having calculated the nature of the mandated libation offering, the officer would then hand this customer a ticket of sorts (a *chosem* – seal), upon which was inscribed a term signifying the designated libation. As the Mishnah states:

אַרְבָּעָה חֹתָמוֹת הָיוּ בַּמִּקְדָּשׁ, וְכָתוּב עָלֵיהֶן, עֵגֶל, זָכָר, גִּדִּי, חֹטֵא ... חֹטֵא מְשַׁמֵּשׁ עִם ... מְצוֹרְעִין.

“There were four (types of) seals utilized in the Temple. Upon them were written (one of the following terms): ‘Calf,’ ‘ram,’ ‘kid,’ or ‘sinner’... The one (upon which was written) ‘sinner’ was used in connection with ... the (purification procedure of) those afflicted with *tzara'as*.”

Thus branded in so explicit a manner, the afflicted man would have to present his ticket to the libation officer to receive his libation materials. The humiliation he had to endure was intended to make him contrite and effect an atonement for the sins that had brought him to this state.

Shame plays a significant role, as well, in the procedure for dealing with *tzara's habayis*. Chazal attribute such *tzara'as* as being caused by the flaw of *tzarus ayin* (stinginess and selfishness). Based on the Medrash (*Vayikra Rabbah* 17:2), the *Tzror Hamor* (*parshas Metzora*) illustrates what transpires: Neighbors would

come to borrow this or that household item. Unfortunately, this particular householder never learned to share. Whenever he was asked, “Could I use your shovel?” “Could I borrow your sifter?” he would say, “I’m sorry, but I don’t own one.”

As outlined in the Torah, a house afflicted with *tzara’as* needed to be seen by the *kohein*. Before he would conduct his examination and pronounce the house to be in a state of defilement, the owner was to remove all of his possessions from the house (so as to prevent them from contracting defilement as well). Clearing everything out from one’s house is no simple matter, and so, the owner would have to enlist his neighbors to assist in the job. Everyone was gathered round and handling his objects; lo and behold, they would suddenly come upon the shovel and sifter he supposedly didn’t own! In front of the whole neighborhood, his stinginess was laid bare.

Demonic Disease

Rashi (*Vayikra 14:34*), based on the Medrash, cites the benevolent feature of *tzara’as habayis*: namely, that it served as a tremendous financial windfall for the homeowner. This was due to the fact that the Emori, original inhabitants of Eretz Yisrael, had stored treasures within the walls of their houses in anticipation of B’nei Yisrael’s imminent invasion. With the onset of *tzara’as* and by following the procedure of examination and dismantling as outlined in the *parshah*, the owner would discover that the walls of his structure were laden with gold.

Elsewhere, Chazal reveal that the Emori had used quite unusual “building materials” in fashioning their houses. Apparently, there was a lot more in those walls than hidden treasure.

Based on the Zohar, the *Tzror Hamor* (*parshas Metzora*) imparts the remarkable fact that the Emori’s houses were actually established on a foundation that was spiritual in nature – and not necessarily from the good side. These people were notorious for being steeped in idolatrous practices and the use of magic, drawing on the impure spiritual forces. Thus, they would lay the cornerstone of their house in the name of this or that *sheid* (demon), thereby infusing their house with a force of impurity that would permeate their dwelling and their lives. When Klal Yisrael entered the Land, Hashem did not want His holy nation to reside in a Land and in dwellings which were essentially contaminated (in a dark, spiritual sense). He would thus cause these “house demons” (referred to in kabbalistic literature as “*ba’alei batim*”) to expand and emerge from the inner recesses – appearing and spreading in the form of *tzara’as habayis*. This would result in a visit by the *kohein*, a man of sanctified status, who would begin the process to ultimately eradicate and “exorcise” the impure forces from the lives of the Jewish inhabitants.

The *Tzror Hamor* explains some of the details of the procedure based on this idea. For example, when the *kohein* would confer official impure status on the house, it would then be closed off for a period of seven days. The *Tzror Hamor* reveals the basis for this specific time period: it was to ensure that a Shabbos will transpire in the interim. This was a crucial event, for Shabbos proves detrimental to the *sheidim*. The Mishnah in Avos (5:6) mentions that demons were created during the week of Creation, in the period of “*bein hashemashos*” on *erev* Shabbos, meaning that they were formed in the final moments before the onset of the first Shabbos. This indicates that they are inherently incomplete creatures – disembodied souls, for the most part – whereby Shabbos arrived, and in a sense, interrupted their creation before they were fully formed. This left them in a state of terror vis-à-vis Shabbos, always attempting to flee from its arrival. So, in trying to evict these unwanted residents from the houses of Eretz Yisrael, Shabbos was enlisted to chase them away, restoring each residence to a pristine state.