

Tazria Metzora

5777

Rabbi Boris Dolin

This week, we read a double Torah portion, Tazria Metzora, which includes in it a challenging description of Tzarat a “skin plague” which affects not only people, but clothing and even the walls of houses. While the cure--and the reason--for this affliction is not clearly given, the priest has a clear role in diagnosing and assisting those who are affected. The person is allowed to heal, and possibly separated from the rest of the community until this happens--and then the priest pronounces the person either *tamei*--impure or *tahor*--pure. When the *metzora* heals, he or she is purified by the *kohen* with a special ritual involving two birds, spring water in a special vessel, a piece of cedar wood, a red thread and a bundle of hyssop. An entirely mysterious process, and one which quite clearly leaves out any definite explanation for the reason for the affliction in the first place.

In most cultures and for much of human history, there was no concept of sickness and disease as primarily a “medical” issue, as a problem with our physical bodies. A person did not get sick from bacteria, an infection or a disease. Instead it was often believed that sickness was caused by some action of the individual, very often it was a “divine punishment” for something that a person did to themselves or someone else.

In this worldview, where everything comes from God, then sickness and disease must also come from God. If a person is healthy, then they must be living an ethical life, and it could be assumed then, that if a person becomes sick, then they must have somehow sinned or done wrong.

The tzaraat which we read about this week was understood to be not just a physical ailment, but an ethical, emotional and social problem. Later commentators listed specific deeds which caused tzara'at. Midrash VaYikra Rabba says that it was punishment for lying, murder, vain oaths, robbery, sexual crimes and even for not giving enough tzedakah! Do any of these things, and you will get a painful and contagious rash. This path of reasoning may seem strange to us now, but before the days of modern medicine this belief was simply the most logical.

Unfortunately in many contemporary faith traditions, including the more fundamental forms of all of the major religions, this is still a common view; that all that happens in our lives, the good, but also the bad, happens for a reason and that we are to blame. When someone gets sick, when we experience a tragedy, no matter what our role, we must somehow be at fault. When someone dies, there must have been a “reason”. We may not know why or be able to make a direct connection, but we should not try to question God’s plan.

Yet doesn't this also mean that a doctor or anyone who tries to help someone who is sick is then fighting against the will of God? If God punishes with sickness, then only God can heal, and to take control in this way is then violating God’s will. If this is our understanding, then we should not question God, and we simply have to accept our pain and suffering, and that of others as the will of heaven. This may be the most logical view from a purely religious perspective, but in some ways, it is also the most cruel.

Judaism thankfully believes in logic, and as we know, we are asked to question and challenge the texts of the Torah, each other, and even God. When we encounter something that does not fit, when we see something that does not make sense, we search for answers. Yet life is not that simple, and simply questioning everything, especially when we or someone else in pain, does not always bring us to a place of healing or comfort. Judaism asks us to do more. We can’t just blame God. But we also can’t simply blame ourselves.

Our tradition asks us instead to be partners with God in creation and in the healing of ourselves and the world. When we experience pain and suffering we need to understand that God is crying with us, and God, and therefore all those who are close to us, and even those who are not, have the potential to feel our pain and have the potential to help. Pain should bring us closer to each other, and create more compassion in our hearts. And of course when we feel joy, when experience the beauty of life, this should inspire us to bring more of this joy to others.

And thankfully as we head into the second portion of this week’s double portion, through the creative minds of the commentators this joy, this ability to find goodness even in pain becomes the focus.

In Metzra, we move from skin rashes to the even more mysterious house rashes: “When you enter the land of Canaan that I give you as a possession, and I

inflict an eruptive plague upon a house in the land you possess, the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, saying “Something like a plague has appeared upon my house” (Lev. 14:34). There are many explanations for this, most continuing on the drash that just as people will be made sick by speaking *lashon ha’ra*, gossip or slander, the same can happen with houses. Nachmanides says that because there is a special emotional power in the Holy Land, the presence of God, the Shechina, can’t dwell in a house where *lashon ha’ra* has been spoken. The “rashes” on the walls are the physical representation of this spiritual brokenness. Speak too much gossip, and you may have to do some remodeling.

Yet Rashi has one of the more unique explanations, and says that underneath the strange colors appearing on the walls was in fact a special gift: "It was a happy tidings for them when the plague *tzara’at* came upon their homes. This is because the Amorite Canaanites had hidden treasures of gold in the walls of their homes during the forty years when Israel was in the desert, and because of the leprous plagues the walls were taken apart and the treasures were found" (Rashi, Leviticus 14:34). We could take Rashi’s words literally, but we also hope that all of the Biblical Israelites did not tear down their walls at the first sight of discoloration. Instead Rashi’s words might be seen in more figurative light.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin asks if maybe these “treasures” are the life and traditions that have filled a house. As the walls surround the family, the stories, the joys and challenges within, they absorb some of their power. The smells of meals and the sounds of children playing bring purity and safety to the walls. Yet the walls can also be filled with pain, with arguing, with lies and with sadness. How we fill the walls of our homes, both physically and spiritually is up to us, and it is a reminder that what we do and how we behave does stay within only us and with those whom we meet. Walls do not lie, so we should make sure to fill them with blessings.

Next week, I am honored to officiate at my first wedding of this summer. I often begin the ceremony by describing the symbolism of the Huppah. The huppah is a sign of protection and connection, and of the home that a couple will build together. But we also know it is only closed on one side, and this new home is much more open to the world, to the community, than it is blocked off. A huppah does not have walls, a huppah is openness.

No matter where we are in life, and regardless of what kind of family makes up our physical and spiritual homes, this can be an important lesson for us all. When we stay open to deep and meaningful encounters with others, when we are open to new ways of seeing and to having our own opinions changed, when we open to learning and open to growth, then there is little room for tzarat, these problematic impurities to grow. When we speak the truth, and when we speak and act with compassion, then the walls of our homes, and the walls of our community will be strengthened. The idea of Tzaraat, in all of its mysterious forms, is a reminder to stay positive in a world of seemingly endless afflictions. Behind the walls, the physical and spiritual walls we put up in our lives, we can be blessed to find joy, openness and freedom.