

**Maintaining Pure Homes**  
***Parashat Mitzorah***  
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Of all the topics discussed in today's Torah portion, surely the notion of a disease afflicting not your body, and not your clothing, but your *house* is one of the strangest.

In Leviticus chapter 14, verses 33-53, we're exposed (no pun intended) to a really strange notion: that the very stones from which your house is built may be contaminated.

What are you supposed to do if that happens? Well, according to the text, a priest comes in and takes a look, confirms the diagnosis, and orders the evacuation of the house. If, after some time, the disease goes away, then there's a ritual of purification and the family can move back in. But if the disease or plague doesn't go away—in other words, if the home remains contaminated—then you have break the house apart and discard the pieces, never to be used again.

What are we talking about here? And why is this strange passage in the Torah?

**One possibility is that we're talking about a real illness; a “house disease.”** That's possible. Not too long ago, there was a story in the paper about “sick houses.” (Lisa Belkin, New York Times Magazine, August 12, 2001; an older article appears here: <http://tinyurl.com/13wvox> .) This is a real phenomenon that real estate experts know all about. Homes can develop tenacious molds and mildew. Once they do, it can be very difficult, very expensive, ... and sometimes simply impossible to eradicate them. Houses sometimes have to be abandoned. All because of these microscopic organisms that thrive in damp conditions and that can make a home unlivable for humans.

**So that's one possibility.** It's possible that the Torah is teaching us that, like humans, homes can become sick, and that if they do, you should get an expert in to address the problem, and if he or she is successful, great; if not, you have to move out.



How mundane! Think of all the challenges with buying, selling or owning property that the Torah *doesn't* talk about. The Torah doesn't address many practical concerns. It seems rather unusual and almost *inappropriate* for the Torah to be taking the time to address mold and mildew. And, indeed, multiple Jewish commentators (e.g., Yehudah HaLevi, Ramban, Rambam) agree: we're not talking here of a natural illness.

**Another possibility is that the text is talking about some sort of mysterious paranormal affliction that needs to be exorcised.** Believe it or not, there are people who are not chemists or civil engineers or particularly knowledgeable in molds, who nonetheless specialize in what they call, "healing sick houses." They believe that some houses suffer from "geopathic stress." One technique they employ is "dowsing"-- a form of paranormal divination -- in order to help a house become habitable. (See, e.g., <http://www.procterdowsing.co.uk/service.htm>.)

Now, it's true that the Torah did originate thousands of years ago, at a time when supernatural beliefs were mainstream. Indeed, it *arose* out of such a world. But Jewish tradition has long rejected magic and superstition as an explanation for phenomena described in the Bible, and most Jewish Bible interpreters refused to countenance that sort of reading of our text.

**Instead, they took it in a third, radically different direction.** There's a passage in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 71a) that tells us, "There never was a house with the plague of *tsa-ra-at* and there never will be. It never existed and it is not destined to exist." (*Bayit ha-m'nugah lo hayah v'lo atid lih'yot.*)

OK, so if it never existed, and it will never exist, why then is this passage in the Torah? The Talmud goes on to say, "This passage appears for the purpose of edification." It's there for us to study and to gain merit. In other words, it's designed to teach us something. The question is, "What?"

According to this tradition of interpretation, the text is talking metaphorically. It isn't speaking literally about plagues growing on houses; it's speaking about a non-material way that a house can become "contaminated," a way that can't be fixed by drying out the house or with divining rods.

How, spiritually, can a house become contaminated?

It should be obvious to us: a house can become contaminated if the people in it don't treat one another properly. A house can become contaminated if the people in it gossip about one another; if they are disrespectful to one another; if they scheme and plot against one another. A house can become contaminated if there is an absence of love in it.

When I think about a sick home, I think about the movie, *American Beauty*. Starring Kevin Spacey, it came out about fifteen years ago. Next door to Kevin Spacey's character lives a repressed man, a repressed woman, and a very unhappy teenager. That house, it becomes clear, is ill – as are the people in it.

A house is—or should be—a family's private refuge. But it can only function that way if the family feels that it is a refuge, and that can only happen if proper values inhabit it. You can have a house with a magnificent kitchen and dining room—in which nobody eats together. You can have a house with lots of communication devices—but no communication. The image of a house “afflicted by plague” is that of a house in which those values that keep a family safe and united—the values of love, caring, honesty, and trust, and the behaviors that flow from those values—are absent.

For the rabbis—and for us, of course—it isn't enough for the members of a household to live with and treat *one another* properly. Sure, that's necessary. But if all that a house is, is a castle with a moat around it, that's hardly a healthy home. A house isn't a *home* if the walls represent an impermeable barrier to the problems and concerns of the outside world. If a house is cut off in that way from the rest of the world, it can become distressed. The walls can become clammy and discolored. Only if instead a house is a springboard for caring and concern, only if its windows and doors can and do open freely, can fresh air blow into it and keep it clean and healthy.

What then is the lesson? The lesson is clear: we should open up our doors and windows. We should look out of our homes and see what needs to be done, what ways we can be helpful. This is a beautiful way to prevent our homes from becoming stuffy (and self-centered). It's a beautiful way, spiritually, to air them out.

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At the conclusion of the ritual that certifies that a home is no longer suffering from plague, the Torah tells us that the priest is supposed to take a bird and let it go free in the open country outside the city.

That's a beautiful image: the notion is that the bird carries away any lingering impurity, and what remains is clean and pristine.

But in one of the early commentaries in our text (Targum Psuedo-Jonathan), there's an interesting addendum: it says, "But if it is destined for the house to be stricken again with *tsara'at*, the bird will return on that day." [Quoted in Jacob Milgram, *Leviticus 1-16* (3 Anchor Bible, 1991, p. 881)]

There's an important lesson there: There's always the potential for contamination. Good habits - - of speech, of conduct- - are essential, but we are only human. We can slip back, we can say the wrong thing. Our mean-spirited side can express itself. And if that happens, the *tsara'at* can come back.

So there's hope in this passage, but also a sober reminder: that each and every day we have to work at keeping our houses "clean": My hope is that we'll do that, and will therefore be blessed with houses that are fresh, and clean, and pure.

Amen.