

Get Your House In Order- Tazria Metzora 5783
Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

Sometime in the early 1990s, the photojournalist Peter Menzel undertook a remarkable project. We are all enthralled by the luxurious residences and extensive catalog of possessions of the rich and famous. But what would an inventory look like of the possessions of an *average* person, living in an average home? He conceived of a project in which he would photograph families with all their worldly possessions in front of their homes. Experts at the United Nations and World Bank helped determine who would be considered average in different countries, based on type of dwelling, family size, annual income and religion. Amazingly, armed with this data, he was able to induce average families to remove all their worldly possessions from their homes, just to be photographed. The ensuing book, titled *Material World*, is a masterpiece. I've been thinking about this book in light of a section of this week's double parsha, where the inhabitants of a home are *required* to remove their possessions from their house, and there is no photo project at the end.

We know that *tzara'as* is a unique illness, one that does not fit easily with any known clinical patterns. There are several ways in which this is manifest. For example, someone who has the flu is sick whether or not she is diagnosed by a physician, but one is not considered a *metzora* unless the Kohen renders a

definitive diagnosis. Another profound difference is that *tzara'as* can appear on a person's house- something that doesn't happen with, say, psoriasis. The Torah describes a scenario in which a person discovers a lesion on their home, and is concerned that it may, indeed, be *tzara'as*.

כִּי תבֹאוּ אֶל־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם לְאֻחְזָה וְנִתְחִלִי גַּעַץ צֹרֵעַת בְּבַיִת אֶרֶץ אֲחֻזַּתְכֶם:

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,

וּבֹא אִשְׁרֵ־לוֹ הַבַּיִת וְהִגִּיד לַכֹּהֵן לֵאמֹר כָּנָגַע נִרְאָה לִי בְּבַיִת:

the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, "Something like a plague has appeared upon my house."

The Kohen comes to the person's house, and before declaring it afflicted, the Kohen orders everything out of the house, like in *Material World*:

וְצִוָּה הַכֹּהֵן וּפָנּוּ אֶת־הַבַּיִת בְּטָרִם יָבֹא הַכֹּהֵן לְרִאוֹת אֶת־הַגָּעַץ וְלֹא יִטְמָא כָּל־אֲשֶׁר בְּבַיִת וְאַחַר כֵּן יָבֹא הַכֹּהֵן לְרִאוֹת

אֶת־הַבַּיִת:

The priest shall order the house cleared before the priest enters to examine the plague, so that nothing in the house may become impure; after that the priest shall enter to examine the house.

Why is it necessary for the person to declare that they think they have seen tzara'as? Why does everything have to be removed from the house first? And, if tzara'as is a spiritual malady with physical manifestations, what is it supposed to teach the sufferer?

In the final halacha of the laws of Tzara'at, the Rambam offers a philosophical overview of this condition:

וְשֵׁנוּי עֵינַי הַבְּגָדִים אוֹ הַבְּתִימִים קְרוּי צָרַעַת. וְזֶה הַשְּׁנוּי הָאֵמֹר בְּבִגְדִים וּבְבֵתִים שֶׁקָּרָאָתוּ תוֹרָה צָרַעַת בְּשֵׁתָפוֹת הַשֵּׁם אֵינוֹ מִמְנַהֵגוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם אֲלָא אוֹת וּפְלֵא הָיָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּדִי לְהַזְהִירוֹ מִלְּשׁוֹן הָרַע. שֶׁהַמְסַפֵּר בְּלִשׁוֹן הָרַע מְשַׁמְנֹת קִירוֹת בֵּיתוֹ. אִם חֹזֵר בּוֹ יִטְהַר הַבַּיִת. אִם עָמַד בְּרִשְׁעוֹ עַד שֶׁהִתְנַחַץ הַבַּיִת מִשְׁתַּנֵּן כְּלֵי הָעוֹר שֶׁבְּבֵיתוֹ שֶׁהוּא יוֹשֵׁב וְשׁוֹכֵב עָלֶיהֶן. אִם חֹזֵר בּוֹ יִטְהָרוּ. וְאִם עָמַד בְּרִשְׁעוֹ עַד שֶׁיִּשְׂרְפוּ מִשְׁתַּנֵּן הַבְּגָדִים שֶׁעָלָיו. אִם חֹזֵר בּוֹ יִטְהָרוּ וְאִם עָמַד בְּרִשְׁעוֹ עַד שֶׁיִּשְׂרְפוּ מִשְׁתַּנֵּה עוֹרוֹ וַיִּצְטָרַע וַיִּהְיֶה מְבַדֵּל וּמְפָרֵס לְבַדּוֹ עַד שֶׁלֹּא יִתְעַסֵּק בְּשִׂיחַת הָרִשְׁעִים שֶׁהוּא הַלִּיצְנוּת וְלִשׁוֹן הָרַע.

This change that affects clothes and houses which the Torah described with the general term of tzara'at is not a natural occurrence. Instead it is a sign and a wonder prevalent among the Jewish people to warn them against lashon hora, "undesirable speech." When a person speaks lashon hora, the walls of his house change color. If he repents, the house will be purified. If, however, he persists in his wickedness until the house is destroyed, the leather implements in his house upon which he sits and lies change color. If he repents, they will be purified. If he persists in his wickedness until they are burnt, the clothes he wears change color. If he repents, they will be purified. If he

persists in his wickedness until they are burnt, his skin undergoes changes and he develops tzara'at. This causes him to be isolated and for it to be made known that he must remain alone so that he will not be involved in the talk of the wicked which is folly and lashon hora.

As the Rambam explains it, *tzara'as* is manifest in a series of escalating warnings. First it appears on the walls of your house. It's not too late, though- you can repent and stop the progression of the illness in its tracks. If you persist, however, in the antisocial behavior that causes *tzara'at*, it will become more severe and invasive as it appears on your clothes, and eventually on your body. The Rambam's explanation is logical, but raises a few questions. First, the Torah's account of *tzara'as* doesn't follow the Rambam's order. In fact, the Torah lists it *after* all the others. Second, if *tzara'as* is designed to warn an *individual* about his or her behavior, why does everyone and everything have to leave the house?

Permit me to share an explanation with you that I heard this week from Rabbi Dr. Dovid Katz, Rabbi of Congregation Beth Abraham Hertzberg's in Baltimore, history professor at Johns Hopkins and host of a popular Jewish studies podcast. Rabbi Katz explained that *tzara'as* on a house is the most serious, because it shows that whatever antisocial behavior that caused it is tolerated or welcomed in that house.

We know of homes where you go on Shabbos afternoon if you want the latest gossip, and which friends can be counted upon to steer conversations away from ideas and toward people. When this kind of behavior is tolerated, it infects everyone in the household; the only way to uproot it is to recognize that it is endemic and to name the problem- כנגע נראה לא בבית. This is why the house has to be cleared out, too, and, if it is infected, must be totally dismantled. It creates a drama whereby everyone passes by and knows that the family is going through the *tzara'as* purification process. No longer can the inhabitants hide behind the veneer of virtue, and pretend everything is in order. The process of familial growth and change requires that everyone in the family understands the issues that need to be repaired, and demonstrates willingness and participation in doing so.

This message is obviously important when we consider the kind of families we want to raise, the kind of social circle we want to be associated with and the kind of community we wish to build. There is another lesson, though, that I think is relevant for the Shabbos before Yom Haatzmaut. You see, the Torah tells us that the house with *tzara'at* only happens in the land of Israel, and our sages tell us two remarkable things about a house with *tzara'at*. First, that the process of dismantling the afflicted house leads to the discovery of treasure¹, and second, that the entire scenario never actually happened². It was included in the Torah to provide reward to those who study it. We are all aware of the existential threats Israel faces from

¹ Vayikra Rabba 17:6

² Tosefta Negaim 6

Iran, which continues to fund terrorist groups like Hamas and has recently cemented a worrisome rapprochement with Saudi Arabia. We cry whenever there is a terror attack, especially the kind that have been so common lately, which have robbed families of multiple loved ones at once. When the threat to the Jewish state, and therefore the Jewish people, is *external*, we feel a sense of unity, of kinship, like an extended family. We understand that we all live in the same house; a threat to a Jew in Israel is a threat to a Jew anywhere- and Israelis feel the same way.

When the threats facing Israel are *internal*, however, our attitude changes somewhat. In its vision for the future of its democracy (and even whether it should be one), Israel is more polarized than perhaps it has ever been. The vehement protests and counterprotests about the current proposed version of judicial reform are arguably the most vivid example of this polarization, though there is plenty of other fractiousness between the right and the left. Besides the political divide, Israel polarized on ethnic, religious and cultural grounds. Israelis are divided against Palestinians and some Arab citizens of Israel, due to the complex situation regarding security, sovereignty and citizenship. Chareidim are divided against the vehemently secular, the legacy of Ben Gurion's draft exemption at the founding of the state for Torah scholars when it looked like there would never be any in meaningful numbers, and the inequality of service resulting from this exemption. Sephardim are divided against Ashkenazim, on the background of decades of discrimination by the secular Ashkenazi elite and the religious Ashkenazi

establishment. Even within religious communities there is discord and angry factionalization; the more liberal wing of the religious Zionist community are divided against the very conservative wing. The Lithuanian Chareidi world has splintered into various political parties and movements. On top of that (and related to that), the start-up nation also has to deal with serious income inequality, a considerable number of its citizens living below the poverty line. When we consider these issues, we stay silent, because we dare not air dirty laundry- like the *metzora* family before they move their things to the curb. Alternatively, we view them at a distance, like the passerby who sees the *metzora* house being emptied of its contents. We feel terrible, we empathize- but we don't look too carefully, and we move on with our lives because we are at a distance. Based on the conversations I've had with many of you, with colleagues and with other Jewish communal professionals but for many, what is happening in Israel is of great concern.

However, many people are not well-versed in the actual issues at stake, or have one-sided sources for their information. And even if we are familiar with all the nuanced and complicated social issues Israel faces, it's understandable if we are quiet about them. After all, we do not live there, and we should be circumspect about espousing positions on conflicts whose results don't impact our day to day lives until we move there and have skin in the game. The truth is, though, there are plenty of issues, especially religious issues, that could impact us directly in more ways than you can imagine. But even if not, reticence should not be an excuse for

ignorance or apathy. You can't really say you love someone until you know, care about and are willing to help them conquer their internal struggles. The project of understanding, of betterment, involves educating ourselves about the issues and understanding how critical they are. Even if there will never be a house with *tzara'as*, we still need to learn about it; when it comes to Israel, we all need to feel like we live in the same house, and aren't just passing it by.

Maybe this Yom Haatzmaut, under a cloud of terror and fractiousness, is not the most joyous we will ever have experienced. But it is especially important to celebrate it this year, and to actualize our caring about Israel's internal challenges. We all live in the same house, and if we realize that, we will reap the treasures, and the rewards, the Torah promises.