

Parshas Tazria 5771

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO TZARA'AS TODAY – PART I

These *parshiyos* (Tazria and Metzora) deal extensively with the procedures and laws associated with the onset of *tzara'as*. While it is somewhat difficult to accurately identify this ailment (despite conventional wisdom, it does not appear to be the microbe *Mycobacterium leprae*), an attempt will be made here to touch on the general nature of this phenomenon – and the timeless lessons it imparts.

As delineated in the Torah, this condition (as we shall refer to it) can be manifest in people, clothing and even houses. A statement is made in the Mishnah in Nega'im concerning the latter form, which is very revealing of this overall condition.

THE RIGHT CANDIDATE

A close study of the particulars of this topic reveals a strong concern on the part of the Torah for the protection of the property of the afflicted individuals. Thus we find the Torah issuing specific instructions regarding the procedure when *tzara'as* is inflicted upon a home, which are intended to prevent the items of the house from contracting the ritual defilement normally associated with this condition. Concerning the Torah's care for people's possessions, the Mishnah (*Nega'im 12:5*) makes the following observation:

אם קָדַח עַל שָׁל רָשָׁע, קַל וְחָמֵר עַל שָׁל צְדִיק.

“If the Torah is so particular for the welfare of a *rasha* (sinful individual), how much more so will it seek the welfare of

the righteous!”

The key in this statement is the term used by the Mishnah to describe the *tzara'as*-sufferer: *rasha*. The Rambam (*Peirush Hamishnayos*) points out that this Mishnah serves as the source that *tzara'as* is visited on an individual as punishment for his behavior; hence, one who encounters it is referred to as a *rasha*. (The precise offense that occasions this form of retribution is identified by the Gemara [*Arachin 15b*] as *lashon hara* [evil gossip].)

Despite the negative connotations of this particular appellation (“*rasha*”), Rav Isaac Sher (*Leket Sichos Mussar, parshas Tazria-Metzora*) notes that *tzara'as* is not contracted by just “anyone”; it actually will inflict only individuals of high standing. (Presumably, the *rasha* title in this instance is not an assessment of one's overall character. The term is used on occasion in reference to the violation of a specific prohibition; in a general sense, he may be a worthy individual who nevertheless bears guilt regarding this specific act.)

This idea can be understood in light of the *Kuzari's* explanation of the *tzara'as* phenomenon. The *Kuzari* (2:62) compares the situation of the *Shechinah* (Hashem's Presence) dwelling among the Jewish people to the *neshamah* (soul) that resides within a body. It is the *neshamah's* presence that grants the body its life and its luster; should the *neshamah* retreat, the body is cut off from its life source. Similarly, a person who stumbles in the area of slander drives the *Shechinah* from his midst. As a body deprived of sustenance will soon display signs of decay, so, too, the individual from whom the *Shechinah* has departed will show similar effects, manifested in the form of *tzara'as*. Since *tzara'as* is the outgrowth of a loss of the *Shechinah*, it follows that it will only affect those individuals who had previously been on

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the proper level to accommodate the *Shechinah* in the first place.

ON THE HOUSE

R' Isaac elaborates on this point by drawing on a Talmudic maxim that emerges from the following story recorded in the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Ta'anis* 3:8): When his city was threatened by a marauding army, the great sage R' Levi ben Sisi sought to take action. Clutching a *Sefer Torah* (Torah Scroll), he ascended to the rooftops and beseeched his Maker. "Master of the Universe!" he cried. "If I have neglected any detail in this scroll, then allow the marauders to enter. If not, then let them disperse." In response to his plea, the threatening army seemingly disappeared; even a thorough search could uncover no trace of the enemy. A similar event transpired at a later date. This time, it was R' Levi's disciple who took the *Sefer Torah* and delivered the entreaty. The response was similar, and the enemy dispersed. There was one major difference, though: the disciple did not emerge entirely unscathed. He was left with a shriveled hand, which was perceived as a Divine sign that this disciple – while sufficiently meritorious to effect a salvation – was nevertheless somewhat spiritually lacking in comparison to his mentor's perfect righteousness.


The story resumes with the next generation, when the city was once again faced with invasion. Now, the disciple's disciple took up the mantle and ascended the rooftops with the *Sefer Torah* to seek deliverance. As a reflection of the diminishing status of progressive generations, this time the effect was – absolutely nothing. The marauders were not repelled. But nothing occurred to the supplicant, either; his hand remained entirely intact. Apparently, in the ranking of this line of scholars, this student came in third; why, then, was his superior predecessor stricken with an ailment of the hand, while he himself avoided any retribution? The Yerushalmi concludes with the explanation that "an insane individual is unaware of his travails." R' Isaac explains that immediate and miraculous events – even of retributive quality – are only worthwhile for worthy individuals. For those on a much lower level, these phenomena are effectively

useless. Just as a fool doesn't realize when he is beset with misfortune, so, too, this type of punishment won't register on someone who is spiritually deficient.

According to R' Isaac, it is this quality of *tzara'as* that precludes its applicability to modern times. As previously stated, only a lofty spirit can come down with *tzara'as*. Many of us are too removed from the *Shechinah*, and the appearance of *tzara'as* would not register starkly enough on our radar screens to effect a significant change in our behavior. Since we are immune to its effects, we are likewise – in a sense – immune to this disease.

This does not mean, however, that *tzara'as* has been totally eradicated from our midst. Next week, we will further examine and clarify the question of *what has happened to tzara'as today*.

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