

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
(office@etzion.org.il)

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

\*\*\*\*\*

PARASHAT METZORA

\*\*\*\*\*

**Tzara'at of the House**  
**by Rabbanit Sharon Rimon**

(*Vayikra* 14:34) When you come to the land of Canaan, which I give to you as a possession, and I put the plague of *tzara'at* upon a house in the land of your possession,

(35) Then he that owns the house shall come and tell the *kohen*, saying: It seems to me that there is something like a plague on the house...

(40) Then the *kohen* shall instruct, and they shall remove the stones in which the plague is found, and cast them outside of the city, to an unclean place...

(43) And if the plague returns and breaks out in the house after he has removed the stones, and after he has scraped the house, and after it is plastered,

(44) Then the *kohen* shall come and see, and behold: if the plague has spread in the house, it is a malignant *tzara'at* in the house; it is unclean.

(45) So he shall break down the house, its stones, its wood, and all the mortar of the house, and remove it outside of the city to an unclean place...

**Characteristics of *Tza'arat* of the House**

*Tzara'at* of the house is one of three types of plagues mentioned in the *parashiyot* of *Tazria-Metzora*. There are plagues of the body (various types of which are listed in *Parashat Tazria*), plagues on clothing, and plagues of the house.

Despite the similarities, the plagues of the house are unique:

a. The plagues that affect the person or his clothing are covered in *Parashat Tazria*, and then *Parashat Metzora* begins with a discussion of the process of ritual purification for a person who is *ametzora* (i.e., someone struck with *tzara'at*). Only afterwards does the Torah introduce the plagues that affect houses. In other words, plagues of houses are separated, in the text, from the other sorts of plagues.

b. Concerning all other plagues, we read: "IF THERE BE in the skin of a person's flesh..."; "If THERE BE the plague of *tzara'at* in a person..."; "IF THERE BE A PLAGUE in a man or woman..."; "IF THERE BE upon the garment..." When it comes to *tzara'at* of the house, the Torah introduces the law in a unique fashion: "...AND I PLACE the plague of *tzara'at*..."

c. It is only in relation to *tzara'at* of the house that mention is made of coming to the land: "When you come to the land of Canaan... and I place the plague of *tzara'at* upon a house in the land of your possession." In the process of purification of the *metzora*, the Torah addresses the situation in the desert. We are told, "Outside of the CAMP"; "He shall dwell outside of his TENT"; "Before God at the entrance to the OHEL MO'ED." In the process of purification of the house, we read about a "house" rather than a "tent,"

and "outside of the city" instead of "outside of the camp."

The portion describing plagues upon houses is introduced with the words, "When you come to the land of Canaan..."; this teaches us that *tzara'at* affecting houses – in contrast to other types of plagues – occurs only in *Eretz Yisrael*. (Some commentaries deduce from the Ramban's words that all of the plagues occur only in *Eretz Yisrael*, but this is a minority view.) It may be for this reason that *tzara'at* of houses is treated separately and differently from that of the body and of garments. The Torah begins with a discussion of *tzara'at* of the body and of garments, both of which were relevant already in the desert, and then goes on to describe the process of purification of the *metzora*. Only afterwards is mention made of *tzara'at* that affects the house, since it is not yet relevant, but may appear only in the future, when the nation enters the land.

Why does *tzara'at* of houses occur only in *Eretz Yisrael*?

By studying the continuation of the *parasha*, with its description of the purification process involved in *tzara'at* of the house, the Sages deduced that the house must be one that is built from stones, wood and earth, not a tent:

*Sifra, Beraita de-Rabbi Yishmael, parasha 1, chapter 1:*

"...And I place the plague of *tzara'at* upon a house in the land of your possession" – this refers to a house that is made of stones, wood and earth, which are able to contract ritual impurity. Is it possible that a type of house that is not made of stones, wood and earth could contract impurity? (It is not;) for this reason it is written, "He shall break apart the house, with its stones, its wood, and all the earth of the house." Thus, we learn from the description of its ultimate fate that a house cannot be struck with this ritual impurity unless it is built of stones, wood and earth.

If the plague appears only in a house of stone, then it is clear that it was not relevant in the reality of the tents in which *Bnei Yisrael* dwelled in the desert. In other words, *tzara'at* of the house appears only after the entry into the land because there were no permanent houses in the desert. According to this view, there is no fundamental connection between the plague upon houses and *Eretz Yisrael* specifically.

This answer does admittedly solve some of the questions that we posed above, but it gives rise to two new difficulties. Firstly, why does *tzara'at* affect specifically a house of stone, and not a tent? Secondly, the Torah could have said, "If there be a plague of *tzara'at* upon a house" – and it would have been clear that there were no houses in the desert, and hence that the plague would not appear there. But the *parasha* bears a unique introduction. It makes explicit note of the entry into the land, and the fact that God gave the land to Israel. The first verse sounds like the herald of some auspicious declaration or promise. After the words, "When you come to the land of Canaan which I give to you as a possession," we expect some stately continuation, and are disappointed at the "promise" that follows: "... And I place the plague of *tzara'at* upon a house of your possession." In the context of this structure and style, the expression "and I place" (*ve-natati*) has the effect of conveying the sense of something positive that is going to happen.

In all the other types of *tzara'at*, as noted, the introduction is formulated in conditional terms: "IF THERE BE a plague of *tzara'at* upon a person...." Thus we are faced with two questions. Firstly, WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN TZARA'AT OF THE HOUSE AND THE ENTRY INTO THE LAND? Secondly, WHY DOES THE INTRODUCTION TO THE DISCUSSION OF TZARA'AT OF THE HOUSE APPEAR TO CONVEY THE SENSE OF GOOD NEWS, I.E., THAT IT IS A POSITIVE PHENOMENON?

### "Good News for Them"

The Midrash raises the same question, and provides a rather surprising answer:

"And I place the plague of *tzara'at*" – Rabbi Chiya taught: Is it then good news for them that they will be stricken with plagues?! Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai taught: When the Canaanites heard that Israel were coming to their country, they arose and hid their wealth inside their walls and in their fields. The Holy One said: I did not promise their forefathers that I would bring their descendants into a land laid waste, but rather to a land full of all kinds of goodness, as it is written: "And houses full of all kinds of goodness" (*Devarim* 6:11). What, then, did the Holy One do? He caused sores to appear on a person's house, and when he took it apart [as would be necessary if the plague was confirmed to be *tzara'at* and then proceeded to spread], he would find the treasure; likewise he would have to burn his field and, as he turned it over, he would find the buried treasure. (*Vayikra Rabba*, 17,6)

Taking his cue from this Midrash, Rashi explains: "'And I shall place a plague of *tzara'at* – THIS IS GOOD NEWS FOR THEM, THAT THE PLAGUES WOULD COME UPON THEM, for the Emorites had hidden gold coins in the walls of their houses throughout the forty years that Israel were in the desert. By means of the plague, the house would be dismantled, and they would be found."

The Midrash and Rashi understand from the introduction to this *parasha* that the plague upon the house carries a special, positive message related to the entry into the land; they explain the law of the plague upon the houses as a positive promise. The plague leads to the house being demolished, and this in turn provides the opportunity to discover the hidden treasure.

But this interpretation raises a difficulty: a plague is not a positive phenomenon. It involves ritual impurity; it causes the house to be taken apart. This is not what we would regard as a positive process, and were it not for the festive introduction, we would never dream of suggesting that "this is good news for them"; in fact – quite the opposite.

*Chazal*, (*Arakhin* 16a) too, explain that all of the plagues come as a result of sin, of a certain corruption:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: plagues come [as punishment] for seven things: *lashon ha-ra'* (slander), bloodshed, a false vow, sexual immorality, vulgarity of spirit, theft, and stinginess.

(In *Vayikra Rabba* 17:3 there is a list of TEN transgressions, while *Yalkut Shimoni Zekharya* 247, 572 lists eleven.)

All plagues come as punishment for sin, or as warning concerning a situation that needs correcting. Plagues upon houses are no exception to this rule.

### Stinginess

For which sin is a plague upon the house sent as a punishment? The Midrash provides a graphic description of the character trait that requires correction:

It is written, "The produce of his house will disappear, they shall flow away in the day of His anger" (*Iyov* 20), they will flow away and be found. When? On the day that the Holy One arouses His anger against that person. How does this come about?  
A person says to his neighbor, "Lend me a *kav* of wheat."  
The neighbor replies: "I have none."  
"Then a *kav* of barley?"  
"I have none."  
A woman says to her neighbor: "Lend me a sifter."  
She replies, "I have none."  
"Lend me a sieve?"  
She replies, "I have none."  
What does the Holy One do? He brings a plague on the house, and when the man is forced to take out all of his belongings, everyone sees and they say, "Didn't he say that he had nothing? Look how much wheat he has! How much barley! How many dates there are here!" (*Vayikra Rabba* 17)

According to this Midrash, *tzara'at* comes upon a house because of miserliness. (Other sources suggesting the same idea include *Arakhin* 16a, *Yoma* 11, *Tanchuma* 4, *Bamidbar Rabba* 7: 5, *Devarim Rabba* 6:4.)

MISERLINESS IS NOT A SIN. A person has the right to do as he pleases with his own property. There is no obligation to lend to others. But miserliness is a NEGATIVE TRAIT that must be corrected. From this point of view, *tzara'at* of the house is not really a punishment, but rather a catalyst for change, causing the person to mend his ways. Through the experience of *tzara'at* upon his house, he comes to understand that it is not proper that he hoard his property to himself; he must also share with others.

Thus, *tzara'at* of the house comes as a SIGN TO THE PERSON THAT HE MUST CHANGE HIS WAYS.

### "God Gives as a Possession" or "Your Possession"?

If *tzara'at* of the house is not meant to be "good news," but rather a signal to the person to mend his ways, how are we to explain the special introduction to this subject?

In his discussion of this *parasha*, the Keli Yakar raises a number of questions (quoting):

- "When you come to the land of Canaan, which I give to you as a possession" – we must clarify why, when it comes to plagues upon houses, the Torah specifies "When you come to the land of Canaan," which is omitted from the description of all other sorts of plagues.
- Likewise, the expression "Which I GIVE to you as a possession" is entirely redundant, for it is known;
- Furthermore, the verse "... and I give a plague of *tzara'at* upon a house IN THE LAND OF YOUR POSSESSION" should read, "upon your houses."

d. ... The language is somewhat contradictory: when it says, "which I GIVE to you as a possession," the possession is attributed to God [it is His to give], but when it says ["in the land of] YOUR POSSESSION," the possession is attributed to Israel, as though it is they who take the inheritance by their own hand....

What, then, is the purpose of the special introduction? The Keli Yakar describes how the introduction addresses the mistake of the miserly person, who is struck with *tzara'at* upon his house:

It seems to me in this regard THAT THE MAIN REASON IS BECAUSE OF MISERLINESS, as our Sages deduced (*Arakhin* 16a) from the verse, "And he to whom the house belongs shall come" to mean "He who made his house belong only to himself, and did not share of it with others," for IT IS FOR THIS REASON THAT GOD GAVE HIM FOR A POSSESSION A HOUSE FULL OF ALL KINDS OF GOODNESS – IN ORDER TO TEST HIM AND SEE WHETHER HE WOULD ALSO SHARE OF HIS HOUSE WITH OTHERS, "For the silver and gold is Mine, says God" (*Chagga*2:8), AND ALL THAT A PERSON GIVES TO OTHERS IS NOT FROM HIS OWN PROPERTY, BUT RATHER FROM GOD'S TABLE HE MERITS IT." Therefore it is written, "When you come to the land of Canaan which I give to you as a possession" – for it is not by their sword that they inherit the land, nor did their arm deliver them (*Tehillim* 44:4), but rather the right hand of God that is uplifted, to give them the portion of the nations. There is no room for the miserly to say, "My strength and the power of my hand have achieved all this valor for me," for it is God Who gives you strength and possession; therefore some of what is His should rightfully be given to the poor of His nation. And if you do not listen to His voice, and you are among the miserly who attribute the possession to themselves, then "I shall place a plague of *tzara'at* upon a house in the land of your possession...."

The Keli Yakar regards the introduction to the *parasha* not as good news, but rather as a description of the state and feelings of a person which cause him to be struck with the plague. The opening verse describes the good land which God has given. A person who understands that God has given him the land as a possession – "which I give to you as a possession" – is conscious of the fact that the land really belongs to God, he himself has merely received a gift from God, and therefore he does not treat his property as belonging only to himself. He knows that he must share with others the good that God has granted him.

In contrast, a person who treats his house as "A HOUSE OF YOUR POSSESSION" feels that his house belongs solely to himself, and therefore it not interested in giving of his own possession to others.

This is the person's mistake: the property and the house are not his; they are a gift from God. If his sense of ownership of his property expands to the point where he is not prepared to give any of it to others, then "I SHALL PLACE the plague of *tzara'at* upon the house of YOUR POSSESSION. The plague will come, reminding him that the house is not really his own possession, but rather something granted to him by God.

According to the Midrash in *Vayikra Rabba*, *tzara'at* that appears on a house leads to a correction of the trait of miserliness through the procedure of the house-owner being forced to reveal his property publicly; then he is ASHAMED at not having shared with others, and this leads him to mend his ways. The Keli Yakar adds a further dimension to our

understanding of the correction that is effected by means of *tzara'at* on the house: the plague on his house leads the person not only to feel shame before his friends and neighbors, but also causes him to feel that HIS OWNERSHIP OF THOSE POSSESSIONS IS UNDERMINED. This person has forgotten that God is the true owner of the property, that He has given him everything. His hold on his property has been so tight that he was not prepared to share anything of it with anyone else.

The plague that appears on his house is not regular mold, and it cannot be treated in natural ways. It is a special plague sent by God. This plague is meant to remind the person Who the true Owner of the house is. Only if the person mends his ways will his house be healed. The healing process may be relatively short: the objects are removed from it, it is sealed up for seven days, the specific stones that are affected are removed, and new stones are put in their place. But if the person has not repented, and the plague once again erupts on his house, the entire house must be taken apart.

The removal of the objects from the house teaches the person that his property is not entirely in his own possession. If this step does not have the effect of causing him to repent, and the plague attacks his house once again, then it is dismantled. Taking the house apart is a more drastic step; it teaches him that this type of house is not worthy of being inhabited. Only when a person recognizes the true House owner, is his house worthy of being lived in.

Now we understand why *tzara'at* appears specifically on a house of stone. The reason would appear to be that in this type of house there is a greater chance of a person having a sense of absolute ownership and forgetting that that the house was given to him as a possession by God, as the Torah describes:

Guard yourself lest you forget the Lord your God... lest you eat and be satisfied, AND BUILD GOOD HOUSES, AND DWELL IN THEM. And your cattle and sheep multiply, and you have much silver and gold, and all that you have is abundant. And your heart becomes haughty, and you forget the Lord your God.... (*Devarim* 8:11-14)

Rashi's explanation (following the Midrash), according to which the Torah is giving good news about finding treasure, is surprising because a plague is not something positive; why would God choose to reveal the place of the treasure by means of a plague? Perhaps we may connect Rashi's interpretation with that of the Keli Yakar: finding the treasure is the end of the process. The person has erred in having forgotten that his house actually belongs to God. By means of the *tzara'at* and the process of purification of the house, the person undergoes a significant process of inner change. The dismantling of one's house is a significant psychological experience; everything that the person has is broken up. The thing that was so secure in his eyes, and over which he felt such secure ownership, is taken apart. When he is left with nothing of his own, he understands that the true Owner of the house is God.

When he lives with the sense that everything belongs to God, then he may receive additional gifts from God: the treasure buried and hidden under his house.

### **Casting His Fury Upon Wood and Stones**

Another idea is to be found in *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Tazria siman* 10): "If there be in the skin of a person's flesh' (*Vayikra* 13) – the Holy One does not wish to harm this person. What does He do? First He gives him warning, and only afterwards does He strike him, as it is written

(Ibid. *Vayikra* 14), 'AND I PLACE A PLAGUE OF TZARA'AT UPON A HOUSE IN THE LAND OF YOUR POSSESSION.' FIRST HE STRIKES THE HOUSE. If the person repents – fine; if not – He strikes his clothes, as it is written (13), 'If there be the plague of *tzara'at* upon a garment.' If he repents – fine; if not, it comes upon his body, as it is written, 'If there be in the skin of a person's flesh....'"

*Midrash Tanchuma* (Warsaw) *Parashat Metzora*, *siman* 4:

Why are the wood and stones and walls struck (with *tzara'at*)? So that their owners will see, and will engage in *teshuva*....

According to this Midrash, the plague upon the house is the initial warning, with the aim of avoiding the need to strike the person himself with a plague. According to this understanding, the good news here is that GOD DOES NOT IMMEDIATELY STRIKE THE PERSON HIMSELF, but first WARNS him by placing a plague upon his house.

*Midrash Tadsheh* 17 (quoted in *Torah Sheleima*):

Why does the Torah not begin with the *parasha* concerning [*tzara'at* of] the house? Because God told them the *parasha* about *tzara'at* in the desert, where they did not yet have houses. The Holy One said: BECAUSE YOU DO NOT HAVE HOUSES, I AM STARTING [THE DISCUSSION] WITH YOUR BODIES, BUT AFTER YOU ENTER THE LAND, I WILL START WITH YOUR HOUSES.

This good news is unique to *Eretz Yisrael*: only in *Eretz Yisrael* does the plague appear upon the house before it strikes the person himself, and therefore this is good news that is connected to the entry into the land.

According to this interpretation, we are still left with the question: why is it specifically in *Eretz Yisrael* that God first strikes the houses, rather than sending a punishment directly to the person's body? Why is there no warning to a person in the desert, in the form of a plague upon his tent, before his body is struck with *tzara'at*?

### "A Land that God Keeps His Eye Upon"

What is the special connection between *tzara'at* of the house and *Eretz Yisrael*?

In the Mishna *Nega'im*, chapter 12:4 we learn:

...Outside of the land, they are not struck with plagues.

According to this Mishna, we understand that the connection between the plagues and *Eretz Yisrael* is a fundamental, inherent one. The Ibn Ezra explains as follows (commenting on *Vayikra* 14:34):

The reason why the Torah says, "When you come to the land of Canaan" is because this [discussion] applies exclusively in the land, BECAUSE OF THE UNIQUE GREATNESS OF THE LAND, for the Sanctuary is in their midst, with God's glory within the Sanctuary.

In other words, because of the unique character of *Eretz Yisrael*, plagues may occur on the houses in the land. *Eretz Yisrael* possesses a unique degree of holiness, and therefore IT DOES NOT TOLERATE SIN. It is for this reason that the land "expels" from its midst the nations that have been sinful:

Do not defile yourselves with all of these, for with all of these the nations which I drive out from before you, were defiled. And the land became defiled, so I visit its iniquity upon it, AND THE LAND EXPELS ITS INHABITANTS. But you yourselves shall observe My statutes and My judgments, and you shall not do any of these abominations – neither the native born among you nor the stranger who dwells in your midst... THAT THE LAND NOT EXPEL YOU WHEN YOU DEFILE IT AS IT EXPELLED THE NATION THAT WAS BEFORE YOU. (*Vayikra* 24-28)

This special land does not tolerate spiritual and moral corruption; it expels such phenomena from its midst. If there are houses that suffer some spiritual defect, the land will not tolerate it, and therefore the plague will appear upon them.

But we may add a further stage, on the basis of the principles that we have discussed thus far. Plagues appear upon a house when a person is miserly and is not prepared to share what he has with others. Such a person lives with a misguided consciousness concerning his home. The house is given to him by God; he fails to understand this and believes that the house is his own possession. THE LAND – GOD'S LAND – IS UNABLE TO BEAR SUCH A HOUSE, WHICH DENIES ITS OWNERSHIP BY GOD, AS IT WERE. Therefore it is specifically in *Eretz Yisrael* that plagues appear upon such a house.

"I SHALL PLACE a plague of *tzara'at*..." – this expresses God's SPECIAL PROVIDENCE that exists only in *Eretz Yisrael*: "A land that the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year" (*Devarim* 11:12).

This being so, A PLAGUE UPON A HOUSE IS A PHENOMENON THAT APPEARS ONLY IN *ERETZ YISRAEL*, BECAUSE OF THE ELEVATED SPIRITUAL LEVEL OF THE LAND.

What is the good news about these plagues?

The good news is that THE LAND IS OF SUCH UNIQUE SANCTITY that even its houses are affected by plagues as a result of a defective spiritual state.

And there is more: a person whose character traits are flawed and corrupted – even if has not transgressed any explicit prohibition – receives Divine signals to change his ways. Thus, the plague leads to THE MAINTENANCE OF THE HIGH SPIRITUAL LEVEL that is needed specifically in *Eretz Yisrael*.

In summary, in the Torah's discussion of *tzara'at* upon houses, the emphasis is on the fact that this plague happens specifically in *Eretz Yisrael*. *Tzara'at* affects only a house or permanent structure, not a tent. The *parasha* discussing *tzara'at* of a house is presented in a positive style, we may perhaps even say in the language of good news - "I shall place the plague of *tzara'at*" –as opposed to the parallel formulation where it comes to *tzara'at* of the body or clothing. We examined several approaches to this *parasha* and attempted to elaborate on them:

a. "When you come to the land..." – *Tzara'at* affects only a house made of stone and wood, not a tent. Therefore there was no *tzara'at* affecting houses in the desert; the phenomenon would begin only after they entered the land.

The good news here: unclear.

b. (Rashi) "When you come to the land" – the Canaanites hid treasure in their houses; the good news: you will find the treasure.

c. (*Vayikra Rabba*) "When you come into the land: this is a punishment for miserliness. Taking apart the house signals to the person that he must "leave his house," figuratively, and share his property with others. Good news: ?

d. (*Keli Yakar*) "When you come to the land..." – God brought us into the land and gave us all of the houses ready and built; from this we must learn that all property is a gift from God. Accordingly, we explained above that it is specifically a stone (permanent) house that is struck by *tzara'at*, for it is there that the danger of a person having a sense of absolute ownership is greatest.

Good news: no good news here. We did, however, propose the possibility of combining this view with that of Rashi, such that the process of *tzara'at* upon the house represents a correction and repair through which the person comes to understand that his property comes from God, hence ultimately, at the end of the process, the person may become worthy of indeed possessing property and finding the treasure.

e. (*Tanchuma*) "When you come to the land..." – it is only in *Eretz Yisrael* that God strikes the house before striking the person bodily. But why is this the case specifically in *Eretz Yisrael*? The good news: there is warning in the form of a plague upon the house, before the plague appears upon the person's flesh.

f. (Based on a principle arising from the Ibn Ezra) "When you come into the land" – this plague happens specifically in *Eretz Yisrael* for two reasons. Firstly, because of the lofty spiritual level of the land, a plague appears as a result of a spiritual decline. Secondly, since the land belongs to God, there is a special plague that is sent upon a house when its owner denies (through his behavior) the fact that it belongs to God.

The good news: it is the lofty level of *Eretz Yisrael* that causes *tzara'at*; this brings about a correction of a person's traits, thereby leading us to a higher and more worthy spiritual level.

**Visit our website: <http://vbm-torah.org>**