



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Tazria-Metzora: Individual and Collective

The central focus of *Tazria-Metzora* is *tzaraat*, an ailment that can afflict the skin, clothing and the walls of our homes. Rabbinic tradition has always perceived *tzaraat* as a divine affliction for sins of a social nature:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, Plagues come for seven things: slander, bloodshed, perjury, incest, pride, robbery, and selfishness. (*Arakhin* 16a)

Why does this phenomenon relate in particular to social violation? If you think about it, our skin, our clothing, and our homes are the membranes, the coverings that surround us, protect us. They protect us from the outside, but they also show us to the wider environment. If they are sealed too tight, they suffocate us, too loose, we are vulnerable. They need to be calibrated for a perfect balance of exposure and insulation.

In our world, skin, clothes and homes are frequently used to make an impression on others. From tans to tattoos to Botox, people even try to adjust and adorn their skin; similarly, our clothing and homes are ways to make a social impact. The ailment of *tzaraat*, then, is a symptom indicating that those personal boundaries have become corrupted, out of balance.

Let us illustrate this with an example from the *parsha*. When a home is afflicted by *tzaraat*, it is examined by a priest who is the diagnostic expert. If a polluted area is identified, stones and wood in that area alone are removed. If after replacing the wall structure, the contagion recurs, the house is dismantled. Interestingly, however, prior to the priest's examination:

The priest shall order the house emptied before the priest enters to examine the plague, so that nothing in the house may become unclean; after that the priest shall enter to examine the house. (*Vayikra* 14:36)

In other words, the home contents are removed, now sitting on the sidewalk or the front lawn. The Rabbis imagined this situation and suggested that this was a come-uppance for the residents of the home. Read this *Midrash*:

Rabbi Yitshak said, "Sometimes a man asks his fellow, 'Lend me your axe to chop this wood.' And he responds, 'I don't have one,' in his selfishness, or 'lend me your sieve'; and though

he has one he says, 'I don't have [one],' in a spirit of stinginess. Immediately a plague comes to his house...And what would they do to him? They would clear out everything that he had inside his house...his pickaxes and his sieves, and the neighbors would say, 'Did you see his selfishness, since he had them in his home and he didn't want to lend.'" (*Devarim Rabba* 6:8)

In other words, at times we are too selfish. Our home becomes our castle. We build our walls high and do not share even when we have what to share.

So here begins our discussion

- Read the *Midrash* above from *Devarim Rabba*.
- Have you ever acted in this way or felt this reluctance to share?
- Why do we act this way?
- Is it selfishness or something else?
- What if the person asking were your sister, child or parent?

We live in a super-individualistic age. We value our space. In the home in which I grew up, each child had his own bedroom; same for my kids. More often than not we don't even know our neighbors. What happens when we seclude ourselves too much? One is not being asked to abandon all privacy or private ownership, but frequently we are fortunate, comfortable. Do we know how to share?

Tzaraat says that when our boundary becomes too thick, God afflicts it, and we need to be expelled from our home into the street, the community. *Tzaraat* asks whether we experience empathy, whether we are fulfilling our responsibilities beyond our inner circle. This is a topic to raise at the Shabbat table. And it is hard – because many of us are not well attuned to selflessness and altruism.

ERETZ YISRAEL – YOM HAATZMAUT

The truth is that *tzaraat* doesn't exist in our world today; and even in the Bible, *tzaraat* of homes applies in only one unique locale – the Land of Israel. Why? Because it is specifically in the Land of Israel that we have aspirations to create a public space that is Jewish, a caring and cohesive society that aspires to reflect the values of Torah.

Next week is *Yom Haatzmaut*. We celebrate the establishment of a Jewish national home in our historic land. As someone who made Aliya 27 years ago, I revel in the cohesiveness that Israeli society fosters, in the sense of nationhood. We come from many lands, from diverse backgrounds, and despite our frequent wrangling; we are engaged in precisely this task of forging a collective space, learning how to calibrate the balance among the individual, the collective and the national. Our children who serve in the army and national service are trained at a young age to understand that they must reach beyond themselves to contribute to the national effort. I admire and salute them. This formative national service deeply affects the values of Israeli society.

As I say *hallel* this week to thank God for the gift which is Israel, I will think about the tasks that lie ahead in ensuring that Israeli society continues to develop and grow so that we fulfill the vision of our prophets, the historic prayers of Israel and the founders of *Medinat Yisrael*.

Shabbat Shalom!