

Parshiot Tazria-M'tzora – Rosh Chodeh Iyar

April 25, 2020 – 1 Iyar 5780

Annual (Leviticus 12:1 – 15:33): Hertz p. 460

Haftarah (II Kings 7:3-20): Hertz p. 477

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Torah Portion Summary

When a woman gives birth, she enters a state of ritual impurity. When the child is a boy, she is in a state of *niddah* (separation) for seven days, and she remains ritually impure for 33 days. After the birth of a girl the corresponding periods are two weeks and 66 days. At the end of this time the mother is to bring a burnt offering and a purification offering and she is restored to a state of ritual purity.

God teaches Moshe and Aaron about *tzara'at*, a scaly skin disease traditionally translated as leprosy but recognized now not to be the condition known today as Hansen's disease. When a person developed a rash or other signs of skin disease, the priest was to examine it and determine if it was in fact *tzara'at*. If it was, the person was ritually impure. If the diagnosis was uncertain, the priest was to quarantine the person for seven days and then examine him again. If the diagnosis still was uncertain the person was isolated for another seven days; if the rash had not spread he was declared ritually pure. Once a person was determined to have *tzara'at*, he was declared ritually impure and sent to dwell outside the camp.

Tzara'at could affect fabrics as well as people. Once a priest had determined that an article of cloth or leather was affected it was to be burned.

God gives Moshe instructions for the rites of purification and the sacrifices that the *m'tzora* (person afflicted with *tzara'at*) must bring in order to complete the process of ritual purification. Provisions are made so that a poor person can bring less costly sacrifices.

God also tells Moshe that once the people have settled in the land of Canaan a person may discover some sort of plague on the walls of his home. A priest must examine it; if he declares that the house is afflicted with *tzara'at*, the affected stones must be removed and replaced. If the *tzara'at* returns, the house must be demolished. If it does not return, the priest performs the specified ritual of purification.

Finally, God instructs Moshe about the impurity resulting from discharges from the genital organs - both those that are the result of disease and the normal discharges of semen and menstruation - and the process of purification for each.

I. 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. (*Leviticus 14:34*)

1. Rabbi Samuel ben Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Because of seven things the plague of *tzara'at* is incurred: slander, the shedding of blood, vain oath, incest, arrogance, robbery and avarice... Because of robbery, as it is written, "The priest shall order the house cleared", in connection with which a tanna taught: Because he had gathered money that was not his own, the priest comes and scatters it. And because of avarice, as it is said: "The owner of the house shall come", referring to which the school of Rabbi Ishmael taught: He who would reserve his house for himself [by refusing to lend his belongings]. (*Talmud Arakhin 16a*)
2. Our sages in Yoma explain that the house in question is under the exclusive control of one person who does not wish to lend furniture or utensils or invite guests to his house. If the house was struck with *tzara'at* this was in response to the tight-fisted nature of its owner. (*Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher, 1263-1340, Spain*)
3. A man says to a friend, "Lend me a *kav* [a dry measure, about a liter] of wheat", and the friend replies, "I have none"; or one man asks for the loan of a *kav* of barley, and the other says, "I have none"; or he asks for a *kav* of dates, and the other says, "I have none"; or a woman says to her friend, "Lend me a sieve, and her friend replies, "I have none"; or she says, "lend me a sifter", and the friend replies, "I have none". What does the Holy One do? He causes *tzara'at* to affect the friend's house, and as the household effects are taken out, people seeing them say, "Did not that person say, 'I have none'? See how much wheat is here, how much barley, how many dates! The house is justly cursed with the curses of want that the owner professed". (*Vayikra Rabbah 17:2*)

4. There are four character traits among people: Some say: "Mine is mine and yours is yours" - this is the average trait, but there are those who say this trait is characteristic of Sodom. "Mine is yours and yours is mine" - this is the trait of an ignoramus. "Mine is yours and yours is yours" - this is the trait of the saintly. "Yours is mine and mine is mine" - this is the trait of the wicked. (*Pirkei Avot 5:12*)

Sparks for Discussion

Whatever *tzara'at* actually is, our rabbis understood that it was a spiritual affliction, punishment for a sin. Our commentators associate *tzara'at* of a house with selfishness, greed, even theft. Vayikra Rabbah brings the example of a homeowner who refuses to lend foodstuffs or utensils, claiming he does not have the requested item. Do you think the sin being punished is his refusal to lend or his lie? Are we always required to lend our possessions when asked? Here, the neighbor asks for a measure of grain or a kitchen utensil. What if the neighbor wanted to borrow your car or your grandmother's china? Is it appropriate to refuse? How might you explain your refusal? The text from Avot tells us that some regard "what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours" as characteristic of the wicked residents of Sodom. Do you agree? Why?

II. 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. (*Leviticus 14:36*)

1. For as long as the priest does not attend to it, the law of uncleanness does not apply there. For if he will not empty it, and the priest will come and see the plague, [the house] must be shut up and all that is in it becomes unclean. Now, for what objects does the Torah have consideration? If for vessels [which require only] immersing, let him immerse them and they will become clean; and if for food and drink, let him eat during the days of his uncleanness. Hence the Torah has consideration only for earthenware vessels which cannot be purified by ritual immersion. (*Rashi--Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, France*)
2. Rabbi Meir said: And what things of his can become unclean? If you say his articles of wood or his garments or his metal objects, they can be immersed and they become clean. For what does the Torah have consideration? For his earthenware utensils [which cannot be purified and must be broken], and for his flask and for his pitcher. If the Torah is so considerate for a man's property of small worth, how much more so for his property that he values most! And if so much [consideration] for his property, how much more so for the life of his sons and daughters! [And] if so much [consideration] for what appertains to a wicked man, how much more so for what belongs to the righteous man! (*Mishnah Nega'im 12:5*)
3. A silver cup was stolen from the owner of the inn where Mar Zutra was staying. Mar Zutra noticed that one guest washed his hands and wiped them on a cloak that belonged to someone else. He concluded that this person was the guilty one since he was careless with the possessions of others. He confronted the suspect and obtained a confession. (*Talmud Bava Metzia 24a*)
4. Rav Huna said: When a person has committed a sin once and a second time, it appears to him as if it were permitted. (*Talmud Yoma 86b*)

Sparks for Discussion

Any objects inside a house at the moment when a priest declares it impure also become impure. However, most of them can be returned to a state of purity. Only earthenware dishes and utensils cannot be purified and must be broken and discarded. Rashi says that everything must be removed from the affected house before the priest inspects it so that the homeowner will not have to bear the cost of replacing his relatively inexpensive earthenware items. Rabbi Meir adds that if the Torah (that is, God) is concerned about common, inexpensive dishes, it should teach us to value not only our possessions, but also human beings. Do you agree?

Mar Zutra believed it was a small step from disregard for another's possessions to outright theft. Do you agree? Some people don't think twice about taking home pens and paper from the office or eating a handful of grapes from the package before bringing it to the checkout counter to be weighed. Would you call this theft? Does the acceptance of this behavior make it easier for people to take things of greater value? Where do you draw the line?