



Around the Shabbat Table

**Shabbat Metzora 5765
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Shalom!

Introduction

This week's parasha continues the teachings relating to the person who is affected by an unknown affliction called "tzara'at." While many bible translations refer to tzara'at as "leprosy," the symptoms mentioned in the Torah do not conform to Hansen's Disease, as leprosy is called today.

Last week's parasha, Tazria, referred to the type of tzara'at that affects individuals. This week's parasha picks up with the description of the ceremonies that indicated that one was free from tzara'at, and the purification that he would go through.

The parasha continues with a description of tzara'at affecting houses. While this tzara'at phenomenon is a physical affliction, Jewish tradition has always maintained that it was brought as a punishment for wrongdoing. In particular, gossip was seen as the cause, largely because, in another Torah portion, Miriam the prophetess is stricken with tzara'at shortly after she gossips about her brother, Moshe (Moses).

The Torah portion then discusses other discharges that might render a person "tamei," ritually impure, and therefore unable to participate in certain Temple services. This parasha, as well as the chapters of Leviticus that deal with these types of ritual

impurities, conclude with a description of how an individual becomes ritually pure again after such emissions.



Questions for your Family's Discussion

The *metzora*, individual suffering from *tzara'at*, was not permitted to enter the Holy Temple or to participate in its rituals. He also had to spend a period of time living outside the encampment of the Israelites.

1. Are there situations in which a person should be prohibited from participating in the community as a consequence of wrongdoing?
2. If so, under what circumstances?
3. When should that person be permitted to once again participate fully in the community?

The rabbis saw *tzara'at* affecting individuals as a consequence of people spreading gossip.

1. How are we to understand, in that context, the idea that a house would be “punished” for some wrongdoing with *tzara'at*?
2. Under certain circumstances, a house so afflicted would have to be destroyed. Are there times in which a household, family or marriage can become so troubled that the only way to “purify” it is to break it up?



Texts to Wrestle With

The rabbis whose opinions were brought together in the Talmud questioned whether there ever was a house affected by *tzara'at* in the way the Torah describes it:

There never was a leprous house [to need destruction], and never will be. Then why was the law written? — So that you may study it and receive reward...

It was taught: R. Eliezer son of R. Zadok said: There was a place within a Sabbath's walk of Gaza, which was called the leprous ruins. R. Simeon of

Kefar Acco said: I once went to Galilee and saw a place marked off, and was told that leprous stones were thrown there!
-Sanhedrin 71a

The first opinion expressed clearly states that such an occurrence never actually happened, while Rabbis Eliezer and Simeon claimed to have observed dumping grounds for destroyed houses, implying that it actually had occurred.

1. What does the first opinion mean when it states that this mitzva was only taught in order for people to learn it, but that it never really occurred?
2. Why would we want to learn it? Can you suggest some lesson for use to glean from it?

In the same text from the Talmud, the rabbis mention two other punishments that they believe were never actually imposed:

1. The death penalty for a rebellious child

If a man has a wayward and rebellious child, who does not listen to the voice of his father and the voice of his mother, and they warn and flog him, but he still does not obey them; Then his parents may take him out to the judges of the city, telling them that “this our son is wayward and rebellious, he does not obey our voice, he is a glutton and a drunkard,” upon which all the people of the city pelt him with stones and he dies, so that you rout out the evil in your midst, and all of Israel will take heed and be frightened” – Deuteronomy 21:18 - 21

2. The complete destruction of a city that has followed idolatry

If you hear concerning one of your cities, which the Lord your God is giving you in which to live, that: 'Certain base fellows have gone out from the midst and have drawn away the inhabitants of their city, saying: Let us go and serve other gods, which you have not known'; Then you shall inquire, and make search, and ask diligently. If it is true, and the thing certain, that such abomination has occurred in your midst, you must smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, completely destroying it, along with all that is within it, even its cattle, with the edge of the sword. You shall then gather all the spoil of it into the midst of a broad place, and burn the city down, along with all its belongings, unto the Lord your God. It shall be a heap for ever; it shall not be built again. Deuteronomy 13: 13- - 17

- Why do you think the rabbis wanted people to understand that these punishments were only theoretical and had never been imposed?
- Does the mere threat of punishment keep us from violating rules and laws? Does it help as a deterrent?



Towards an Action Agenda

There is a great introduction to the ethical teachings about speaking, including the prohibition against *lashon ha-ra* (gossip) at:

Judaism 101 - Ethics of Speech

The avoidance of gossip is among the most difficult to observe. One congregation, B'nai Jeshurun in New York, was so committed to making sure that communications in its meetings followed *lashon tov* (positive speech) and not *lashon ha-ra* (gossip, evil speech) that it created a *b'rit*, covenant, to guide its activities and meetings. You can find it, and perhaps create something similar for your family, for organizations to which you belong, or just for yourself:

Brit Lashon Tov



Shabbat Shalom!

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply press the “reply” button on your e mail program and respond with your thoughts and ideas.

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