

Parashat Metzora מצרע

Torah: Leviticus 14:1–15:33

Haftarah: 2 Kings 7:3–20

Hindrances to Worship

General Overview

Parashat Metzora is a continuation of the previous Torah portion. They share a common theme — ritual impurity. For this reason, in most calendar years, *parashiyot* Tazria and Metzora are usually combined. However, sometimes they are separated. Consequently, we are offering a separate commentary on Parashat Metzora.

The contents of this *sidra* are fairly straightforward. It is critical that the reader refers to our comments on the nature of *tahor* and *tam'ei* in the commentary on the previous portion. The remarks made there also apply to this present parasha. The comments focus on what happens to people in the Holy Community who become *tam'ei* because of either certain skin eruptions or bodily emissions and houses which become *tam'ei* when they exhibit certain discoloration on the walls.

Exposition

Accordingly, our commentary will utilize this outline:

- I. An Afflicted Skin
- II. An Afflicted House
- III. An Afflicted Discharge

In this excerpt from Parashat Metzora, we will focus on section II, An Afflicted House.

II. An Afflicted House

We will look now to the next body of content in this parasha, the procedure for cleansing an afflicted house, found in 14:33–53.

It is important to note that there are many similarities between this and the *metzora*, (person with the skin affliction). In both cases, wood, crimson, and hyssop, and the slaughtered bird are identical. Furthermore, the shaving of hair was also depicted by the scraping of the plaster from an afflicted house. In addition, in both cases, the person and the house were subject to scrutiny by the kohenim. The only observable difference between the two cases was that the house was not sprinkled with blood and oil. Instead, the afflicted house was sprinkled by blood and mayim hayyim.

What is important for us is to try to ascertain, if we can, the reason(s) why someone's house would become *tam'ei*. To be sure, all houses, especially here in the Middle East, are quite vulnerable to molds and mildew, especially in the winter, because there is a lot of moisture and no insulation. A *tam'ei* house, according to the Torah, was only such when the growth in it was determined by

the kohen to be greenish or reddish. So, not all molds and growths indicated a *tam'ei* condition.

One hint about the cause of a *tam'ei* condition is found in 14:34, where God says, "When I put a spreading mildew in a house...". Firstly, this tells us that God is the one who brings the affliction to a person's house. Secondly, we are told that there may be certain times when the Holy One will, in fact, choose that option — to inflict someone's house in order to render it *tam'ei*. Since such an infliction is always a problem and never a blessing, and since this condition requires the presence and involvement of a spiritual leader, we may safely conclude that when a person's house was in a *tam'ei* condition, there must have been some kind of a spiritual problem with the person who lived there.

The Torah indicates that when a house is determined to be so afflicted, time is given for the condition to be "healed." If, after a specified time, and following certain specified tests, the house is not void of the reddish or greenish infliction, the case may eventually be such that the only solution is simply to tear the house down. Thus, theoretically, there could have been cases in Israel where a *metzora* may not have been healed, resulting in expulsion from the camp while his house would have to be torn down. That, indeed, would have placed the *metzora* in a most desperate and deplorable condition. What could have happened to have caused such a scenario?

A. Use The Proper Procedure

It seems that the Torah hints at a strong connection between these afflictions and unconfessed and unrepented sin. However, all commentators are not necessarily in agreement with this statement. Wenham, for example, fluctuates in his viewpoint when he says,

"It is not stated anywhere in these laws that these skin diseases were caused by particular sins. Indeed, the fact that inanimate objects like garments and houses could be so afflicted evidently rules out such a strict connection between sin and the "skin diseases." Nevertheless in several cases skin disease is definitely viewed as the consequence of specific sins: Num. 12:9ff; 2 K. 5:26–27; 2 K. 15:5; 2 Cr. 26:19ff."¹

As I see it, there are two possibilities why the Holy One would so afflict someone or his belongings. The first is when the person has entered into a state of *tam'ei* and has failed to take the proper steps to be relieved of it. This does not necessarily involve sin on his part, but it would involve negligence. For example, one such case is where a man has accidentally touched a dead animal's carcass while out in the field. This is not personal sin, but it does render him *tam'ei*. He is in a situation where he is ineligible to participate in the Mishkan. The Torah prescribes the process through which he could become declared to be *tahor* instead of *tam'ei*.

However, what if he simply chooses not to follow that teaching? This could turn an unfortunate but sinless act into a matter of rebellion! It is incumbent upon the Israelite to worship God in the Mishkan. But what if he refuses to take the proper steps necessary to facilitate that? Here, in my opinion, is when God would inflict such a person or his belongings with a *tazria* - *in order to discipline him*. It is also conceivable that the infliction may run according to what the sages say in the midrash:

It is also so when [leprous] plagues come upon man. First they come upon [the fabric of] his house. If he repents, it requires the pulling out [of afflicted stones]; if not, it requires pulling down. Then they [i.e. the plagues] come upon one's clothes. If he repents, they require washing; if not, they require burning. Then they [i.e. the plagues] come upon his body. If he repents, he undergoes purification; if not, "He shall dwell alone" (Leviticus 13:46).²

All of this was done to the person *in order to discipline him*, which, in turn, was designed to help bring him closer to the Lord.

B. Repent of Sin

A second possible reason for these horrible afflictions might be sin. Contrary to Wenham's above ambivalence, I think there is sufficient evidence to suggest that this might be a major cause for the Lord's afflicting the person or his belongings.

The first line of evidence is the use of the Guilt and Sin offerings in the restoration process. These sacrifices were not given just for ceremonial purposes. If a *metzora* was required to bring such offerings it was because truly sin and guilt had occurred. The affliction was sent by God *as a discipline* for not repenting of this sin.

The second line of evidence is the severity of the discipline if the *metzora* continued in his state. It was not a pleasant thing to have one of the many possible skin diseases. Nor was it a happy moment to have your house demolished or to be excluded from fellowship. It could only have been unrepentant sin which would have brought such conditions upon the redeemed. Along these lines, Rabbi Munk notes that

If the bird returns the same day, it is a sign that the sick person has not fully repented and that he will be struck again by the affliction.³

The last strand of evidence that sin was the main culprit is the parallel of such consequences found in the Renewed Covenant Scriptures. Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5 and 1 Corinthians 11 all indicate that sin is the ultimate reason why a person is either expelled from the Holy Community or may be afflicted with a disease.

There is one important element to note here. All throughout this discussion I have been using the words "*as a discipline*" when discussing these afflictions. I am doing this to distinguish the consequences from the word "punishment." God's people are *disciplined* by their Heavenly Father; they are not punished. The most severe form of discipline is death itself but this is not done to show that the person is eternally separated from God because of his sin. The death penalty, when it is levied against a believer, is done so in order to protect the community against the person acting out of his flesh. In those cases the believer yielded his members to his flesh, did not confess it, nor repent from it and had to be removed from the community — but not from the grace of God!

C. Lets Get Specific!

What sort of sins could have caused such afflictions? To be sure, the Torah does not say specifically. However, the sages of old have had a lot of ideas. It says in the midrash,

R. Johanan said: All these are punished by leprosy — “haughty eyes”...“a lying tongue”...“hands that shed blood”...“a heart that devises wicked thoughts”...“feet that are swift in running to evil”...“he that sows discord among brothers.”⁴

In another passage we read

For ten things [i.e. sins] does leprosy come upon the world: (1) idol-worship, (2) gross unchastity, (3) bloodshed, (4) the profanation of the Divine Name, (5) blasphemy of the Divine Name, (6) robbing the public, (7) usurping [a dignity] to which one has no right, (8) overweening pride, (9) evil speech, and (10) an evil eye.⁵

These statements cover a lot of territory. Some sages, however, get more specific. Many of the ancient and more modern rabbis stress that *tazria* was sent by God as a primary discipline for not controlling our tongue. For example, the midrash says,

It is for this reason that Moses addressed a warning to Israel, saying to them, “This shall be the law of the *metzora* (leper), i.e. the law relating to one that gives currency to an evil report.”⁶

The Rambam also agrees that the sinful use of our tongue is one of the major reasons for experiencing a *tazria* affliction. Nechama Leibowitz, former Professor of Bible at Tel Aviv University, expresses her agreement, too, when she quotes him at length — as we shall do:

Tzara'at is a homonym covering several dissimilar manifestations: a white spot on the human skin, the loss of hair on the head, the discoloration of garments or house walls are all called *tzara'at*. The last two — *Tzara'at* of garments and houses — are not natural phenomena, but wondrous signs for the people of Israel, to warn them against the sin of evil talk. Thus, the house walls of those who indulge in evil talk will undergo a change. If he repents, the house becomes pure again; if he persists in his evil ways, so much so that his house is demolished, his leather couches and accessories suffer discoloration, but regain their purity if he repents...Therefore, those who seek a righteous path must shun the company of these and thus avoid being caught in the web of evil and folly. For their gathering opens with idle talk, as it is stated: “And a fool’s voice is known by a multitude of words” (Kohelet 5:2)⁷

¹ G.J. Wenham, *Leviticus: NICOT*, 212–213.

² Vayikra Rabbah 17.4

³ Rabbi Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vayikra*, 146–147.

⁴ Vayikra Rabbah 16.1

⁵ Vayikra Rabbah 17.3

⁶ Vayikra Rabbah 16.4

⁷ Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, 218–219.