

Parshiot Tazria-Metzora 5781, 2021:

Rabbi David Etengoff

The Mussar of Tzar'at

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The primary focus of our *parshiot* is the illness known as *tzara'at*. The unique nature of this class of disease is emphasized by the Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 1080-1158) in his introduction to our topic:

All of the sections dealing with the *negayim* (afflictions) affecting people, garments, houses and the manner in which they appear, as well as the number of days requiring sequestering, and the white, black, and golden identifying hairs, may not in any way be understood by following the simple and direct meaning of the text. Neither may we rely upon standard human knowledge and expertise [that is, current medical information]. Instead, we must follow the analysis (*midrash*) of the Sages, their decrees, and the inherited body of knowledge that they received from the earliest Sages. This is the essence [of this matter]. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Vayikra* 13:2, translation and brackets my own)

In sum, according to the Rashbam, *tzara'at* can only be understood from the Torah's standpoint, rather than from a physiological or medical perspective. This is because its etiology does not follow the normative laws of biology. Instead, it is a spiritually based ailment that manifests in a physical fashion.

As the Rashbam notes, one of the forms of *tzara'at* directly affects a house:

When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as a possession, and I will place a lesion of *tzara'at* upon a house in the land of your possession, and the one to whom the house belongs comes and tells the *kohen*, saying, "Something like a lesion (*k'nega*) has appeared to me in the house." (*Sefer Vayikra* 14:34-35, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The *pasuk*, “When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as a possession, and I will place a lesion of *tzara ’at* upon a house in the land of your possession,” appears to be quite negative, especially in light of the Torah’s command to “demolish the house, its stones, its wood, and all the [mortar] dust of the house” (14:45) if the *tzara ’at* cannot be removed in any other way. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon the Talmud and two *midrashim*, however, notes that the destruction of the house actually results in a very fortunate outcome:

“I will place (*v’na ’tati*) a lesion of *tzara ’at* upon a house” — This was an announcement to them that these plagues would come upon them (*Midrash Sifra, Metzora*, 14:75, *Talmud Bavli, Horayot* 10a), because the Amorites concealed treasures of gold in the walls of their houses during the whole 40 years the Israelites were in the wilderness in order that these might not possess them when they conquered Palestine, and in consequence of the plague [*tzara ’at*] they would pull down the house and discover them. (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 17:6, translation, *Pentateuch with Rashi’s Translation*, M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silberman)

At first glance, it is difficult to understand why *Chazal* and Rashi interpret, “*V’na ’tati* a lesion of *tzara ’at* upon a house,” in this manner. Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1941) addresses this problem and suggests a cogent textually based solution:

The reason for this analysis stems from the word, “*v’na ’tati*,” since, in our instance the Torah does not state: “when a lesion of *tzara ’at* will be found in a house in the Land,” as is the case regarding lesions that affect people and clothing. Moreover, in general, [any form of] the expression, “*netina*,” [giving, such as the word *v’na ’tati*] that is from the Holy One blessed be He, leads to something good. [Thus, we find,] “*v’na ’tati* your rains in their time” (*Sefer Vayikra* 26:4), “*v’na ’tati* peace in the Land” (*Sefer Vayikra* 26:6) and “*v’na ’tati* salvation in Zion, to Israel, My glory” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 46:13). Therefore, they interpreted this use of our term, *v’na ’tati*, as having a positive valence. (*Torah Temimah*, Parashat Metzora, note 111, translation my own)

In sum, according to Rav Epstein, our Sages’ understanding of *v’na ’tati*” is congruent with Rabbi Akiva’s famous aphorism: “Everything that the Holy One blessed be He does is for the best.” (*Talmud Bavli, Berachot* 60b)

The next *pasuk* contains a fascinating nuance: “Something like a lesion (*k’nega*) has appeared to me in the house.” Why do homeowners need to speak in such an indeterminate fashion, especially if they are well-versed in the laws of *negayim* and know that their home is afflicted with *tzara’at*? Why can they not straightforwardly declare to the *kohen* who comes to inspect their premises: “A lesion (*nega*) has appeared to me in the house?”

Rashi (14:35) draws our attention to this issue when he cites the statement from *Mishnah Negayim* 12:5 which rules, like our *pasuk*, that *k’nega*, rather than *nega*, is the halachically mandated statement — even for *talmidei chachamim*. As we would expect, there are many different approaches as to why this is the case. One of the most fascinating is offered by Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi (1455-1525), one of Rashi’s best-known supercommentators:

But I have heard from my teachers, that this verse is not being precise in its nomenclature in regard to stating something is absolutely [*nega*] or doubtfully [*k’nega*] a ritually pure (*tahor*) or impure lesion (*tamei*), rather it is addressing a matter of *derech eretz* (ethical behavior). That is, a person [should never declare a lesion to be *tamei*,] even if the matter is crystal clear in their eyes (*vadai*), instead, they must always state that the lesion is only perhaps (*safek*) *tamei* [and leave the determination to the *kohen*]. This is in congruence with *Chazal*’s dictum: “One should always teach his tongue to say: ‘I don’t know.’” (*Talmid Bavli, Berachot 4a, Sefer Ha-Mizrachi, Sefer Vayikra 14:35, translations my own*)

The Mizrachi’s explanation is particularly beautiful. In a few short words, he has universalized the Mishnah’s ruling and placed it squarely in the category of *derech eretz*, an area of our spiritual lives whose import cannot be overestimated. As Rav Yishmael bar Rav Nachman famously said: “*Derech eretz* preceded the [giving of] the Torah by 26 generations.” (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 9:3*) The underlying meaning of this concept was given voice in Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah’s far earlier aphorism: “If there is no Torah, there is no *derech eretz*; if there is no *derech eretz*, there is no Torah.” (*Pirkei Avot 3:17*) In other words, even though we are blessed with the Torah, it is in addition to, and does not

supplant, the fundamental obligation to live lives based upon ethically-suffused actions, for the Torah, itself, depends upon *derech erez*.

May the Almighty ever guide us on the path of righteousness and justice, and may the *derech erez* reflected by our actions enable us to become His authentic servants. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.