

THE HOLY LAND

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Metzora

The Holy Land

This week's parashah continues the laws of tzara'at that were begun last week. But, while last week's parashah presented the laws of tzara'at that appears on one's body or clothing, our parashah discusses tzara'at that appears on one's house. We read (14:34-35), "When you arrive in the land of Canaan that I give you as a possession, and I will place a tzara'at affliction upon a house in the land of your possession. The one to whom the house belongs shall come and declare to the kohen, saying, 'Something like an affliction has appeared to me in the house'."

Why does one say "Something like an affliction has appeared . . .," rather than, "An affliction has appeared . . ."? A person who suspects that there is tzara'at on his body or clothes doesn't say, "Something like an affliction has appeared"!

R' Chaim Palagi z"l (1788-1868; rabbi of Izmir, Turkey) explains: As the above verse indicates, the laws of tzara'at on a house apply only in Eretz Yisrael. Regarding Eretz Yisrael-the house is effectively part of the Holy Land--it is not proper to speak negatively; the most one may say is, "Perhaps there is something wrong with this house." There is no similar concern when speaking about one's self or one's clothing. This, continues R' Palagi, provides a basis for the teaching of our Sages that the kohen should plead with the homeowner to repent in order not to cause impurity to Eretz Yisrael. Again, the kohen does not do this when faced with tzara'at on one's body or clothing. (Artzot Ha'chaim p.32)

"Zot tihyeh torat ha'metzora / This shall be the law of the metzora on the day of his purification." (Vayikra 14:2)

R' Shimon Sofer z"l (1821-1883; rabbi of Krakow, Poland) asks: Why did the Torah not use a simpler phrase, "Zot torat ha'metzora / This is the law of the metzora . . ."?

He answers: If the Torah had stated, "This is the law of the metzora," it would have implied that there

definitely would be a metzora in the future. The Torah did not wish to express such a pessimistic thought and therefore stated, "This shall be the law of the metzora" should the circumstance ever arise. (Michtav Sofer)

"The kohen shall command; and for the person being purified there shall be taken two live, clean birds, cedarwood, crimson thread, and hyssop. The kohen shall command; and the one bird shall be slaughtered into an earthenware vessel over spring water. As for the live bird-he shall take it with the crimson thread and the hyssop, and he shall dip them and the live bird into the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the spring water." (14:4-6)

Midrash Rabbah states: Why was Tzipporah (the wife of Moshe Rabbeinu) called by that name? Because just as a bird ("tzippor") purifies a metzora, so she purified the house of her father (Yitro). [Until here from the midrash]

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) explains: An idolator is called "dead," as in the verse (Tehilim 106:28), "Then they attached themselves to [the idol] Ba'al Peor, and ate the sacrifices of the dead." Likewise, a metzora is called "dead," as in the verse (Bemidbar 12:12), "Let her [Miriam] not be like one who is dead." Tzipporah purified her father's house of idolatry, which is equivalent to "death," just as the bird offering purifies the metzora of tzara'at, which is equivalent to "death."

Maharal continues: Specifically the blood of the bird purifies the metzora of "death," because blood is the essence of life. And, specifically the blood of a bird because birds, which fly about so effortlessly, seem to have more "life" in them than do other living things. Thus, they purify the metzora, whose condition was equivalent to death.

Maharal concludes: Among all animals, birds appear to be the least connected to this material world. Similarly, Tzipporah was less connected to the gross, material world than were her compatriots. That is what made her a fitting wife for Moshe Rabbeinu. (Gevurot Hashem ch.19)

Pesach

As for the one who does not know what to ask, you must begin to speak to him, as it is stated (Shemot 13:8), "And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, 'It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt.'" (From the Haggadah)

Why is this the answer we give to the child who does not know what to ask? R' Yaakov Perlow shlita (Novominsker Rebbe in Brooklyn, N.Y.) explains:

Rashi z"l comments on the quoted verse: "'Because of this' - in order that I will fulfill His commandments." According to Rashi, writes R' Perlow, the purpose of the Exodus was so that we would receive the Torah and fulfill Hashem's mitzvot, for only in that way can Hashem's Honor be revealed in this world.

The Gemara (Pesachim 68b) teaches that a person first beginning to serve Hashem may legitimately do so for selfish motives--for example, for the sake of his own soul. Therefore we tell the young child or the beginner, "Hashem acted on my behalf," for my own good. How so? "'Because of this'--in order that I will fulfill His commandments," which will elevate me and make me great. (Adat Yaakov: Pesach p.137)

"They could not delay [leaving Egypt]." (From the Haggadah)

Our Sages say that, had Bnei Yisrael remained in Egypt a moment longer, they would have sunk to the "50th gate of impurity" from which there is no return. R' Zalman Sorotzkin z"l (rabbi in Lithuania and Israel) observes that Bnei Yisrael reached that stage after only 210 years in exile. In contrast, the Jewish People apparently have not fallen that low after the nearly 2,000 years in the current exile. Why?

He answers: The key difference between us and our ancestors who were in Egypt is that we have the Torah and they did not. True, our Sages say that they preserved their unique style of dress and they spoke the Hebrew language, but that wasn't enough to preserve their identity. Only the Torah can accomplish that. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Ha'shir Ve'hashevach p.105)

R' Gedalia Schorr z"l (1911-1979; Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn) asks: What does it mean that there is no escape from the "50th gate of impurity? Chazal's statement implies that even Hashem could not have removed them from there, but surely there is nothing that is impossible for Hashem to do!

R' Schorr explains: Hashem promised Avraham that his (Avraham's) descendants would be enslaved in a foreign land for 400 years and then redeemed. But not all of Avraham's descendants were enslaved in Egypt, only those who carried Avraham's physical DNA and were his spiritual heirs. Had Bnei Yisrael sunk down to the fiftieth level of ritual impurity, the spiritual link with the Patriarchs would have been severed. Of course Hashem still could have saved them, but He would not have been saving the spiritual descendants of Avraham. Rather, it would have been a new people that He was taking out of Egypt. That could not be permitted to happen. (Ohr Gedalyahu)

Perhaps one of the most perplexing parts of the Haggadah is the song known as "Dayenu," in which we say that if G-d had taken us out of Egypt but not judged the Egyptians, that would have been enough for us. Or, if He had judged the Egyptians, but not destroyed their idols, that, too, would have been enough for us. Or, if He had destroyed their idols, but not killed their firstborns, that, too, would have been enough. Or . . . What does this song mean?

Rav Eliyahu Hakohen Ha'itamari z"l (Izmir, Turkey; died 1729) explains: For each of the Divine gifts or miracles listed in this song, one could argue that G-d should have acted otherwise. We praise G-d that He considered all these arguments and acted in the way that was best for us and for the glory of His Name. For example, one could argue that if He had taken us out of Egypt but not judged the Egyptians so harshly as to practically destroy them, His name would have been magnified even more, for the Egyptians would live to remember, and to tell others, how He had humbled them. On the other hand, one could argue that they would not feel humbled in that event. Rather, they would say, "He won this battle, and we will win the next battle."

That is why G-d judged the Egyptians harshly. Still, one could argue that if He had judged the Egyptians harshly but not destroyed their idols, those idols would have served as constant reminders of G-d's power to anyone who saw them. On the other hand, some people would say that G-d wasn't strong enough to destroy the Egyptians' idols.

That is why G-d destroyed the Egyptians' idols. But, one could argue that if He had destroyed their idols, but not killed their firstborns, then those firstborns would have had a special reason to tell others of G-d's greatness. It was customary at that time to devote one's firstborn to the service of the idol; with all the idols destroyed, the Egyptian firstborn, who were no longer performing that service, would be a testament to G-d's power. On the other hand, Pharaoh was a firstborn; if the firstborns had not been smitten, people would say that it was Pharaoh's merit or power which saved him and those like him.

That's why G-d killed the firstborn . . . (Minchat Eliyahu ch.32)

"Memoirs" will resume after Pesach

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