

A PLAGUE ON YOUR HOUSE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The parsha discusses a type of plague that settles itself in the walls of one's home. If the plague spreads along the walls of the house in a certain halachically defined pattern, the house eventually may have to be destroyed. There is opinion in the Talmud that this plague in the walls of a house remains a purely hypothetical case, since the halachic requirements for the plague's pattern of spreading in those walls are so technically exacting as to make this a case impossible of actual fulfillment. Nevertheless, the Talmud admonishes us to study this matter in order to be rewarded for so doing. Apparently the Torah wishes us to understand the consequences of plagues in the walls of one's home. I have always connected the appearance of a plague in the walls of a house to the biblical verse that states that a stolen stone in a wall and an ill-gotten beam in the ceiling continually shout that they are stolen. Strictly speaking, Jewish law would require the demolition of the wall or the ceiling so that the stone or beam can be returned to its rightful owner. However, the rabbis lightened the burden of the thief by saying that monetary compensation would suffice, doing so in the hope that this would lead the thief to repent of his deed more easily. Yet, a house that has a plague in its walls, in the sense of stones that constantly proclaim that they are stolen, is doomed to destruction. Technically, the plague may not be able to bring the house down. But morally speaking, the house is doomed at some point of its existence.

The entire concept of tzoraat - the plagues discussed in last week's parsha of Tazria and this week's parsha - are related to the issues of speaking poorly and slanderously against others. A house filled with bad language, poor speech and slander of others is truly a wrecked and wretched home. There are plagues that descend on one's clothing - one's outside appearance, one's public standing in the community, if you will - as well. Again, the person who is known as a slanderer and tale-monger is eventually reviled by his or her own community. The plague of personality that slander inflicts on its perpetrators becomes visible and obvious to all. But the worst of all forms of this plague of tzoraat is the one that infects the person, the slanderer, directly. For it corrodes one's soul and renders one a cynic, a mocker, a person to stay away from.

Just as the plague of tzoraat was deemed to be a contagious one by most of the biblical commentators, so too is the weakness of slander a contagious condition. The Talmud teaches us that the slanderer is a triple murderer. He kills himself by speaking bad speech, he kills the person he is speaking to who will now accept the slander, and he kills the victim of his slander about whom he is speaking. These twin causes of tzoraat in one's home - thievery and slanderous speech - must be combated at all levels of our lives and beings. Only by so doing can we aspire to have a plague-

free home and general environment.

Shabat shalom.

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