

THE LESSON OF HOUSE TZARAAS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand On Parshas Metzarah

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 457, Getting an Aliyah After Childbirth. Good Shabbos!

The Lesson of House Tzaraas

One of the forms of Tzaraas ("leprosy") that is discussed in Parshas Metzarah is the House Tzaraas [Vayikra 14:33-53]. A person can incur Tzaraas on his body, on his clothing, and even on the walls of his house. Rashi quotes a famous Medrash that House Tzaraas is "good news."

Why is House Tzaraas "good news?" After all, it entails at least destroying the wall of the house in which the Tzaraas blemish is found. In some cases it even entails demolishing the entire house. So how can this be considered a positive occurrence? Rashi explains that the Emorite inhabitants of the land had hidden their precious jewels and wealth in the walls of their homes during the forty years that the Jews were in the Wilderness on their way to Canaan. By means of this blemish, the Jews would break down the wall and find those hidden treasures.

It is a very curious phenomenon that a person inflicted with House Tzaraas should merit the great windfall of finding hidden treasure in the walls of his house. Let us, after all, not lose sight of the fact that Tzaraas is a punishment. What kind of punishment is it to receive a windfall?

There are various opinions in Chazal as to what sin causes Tzaraas. The most commonly known opinion is that Tzaraas comes to those who speak lashon haRah [gossip]. Another opinion is that Tzaraas comes to those who are stingy (tzarei ayin) -- people who do not give willingly of their money, time, and effort [Bamidbar Rabbah 7]. So what type of punishment is it for this cheapskate to need to knock down the walls of his home, if he is going to find great wealth behind the walls?

Rav Zev Leff offers an explanation as to why the stingy ungenerous person is rewarded by finding treasures in his house. Before the Kohen would proclaim the house impure due to House Tzaraas, he

would instruct the owner of the home to remove all his property from the house and place it on the street. This was to avoid contaminating the property, since anything within the walls of a house proclaimed to have House Tzaraas became impure (tameh).

The Medrash explains that this "property evacuation" procedure was a key component of the punishment. In general, stingy people do not want others to see what they have. If word gets out that a person has certain utensils and tools and vessels, people might ask to borrow from him. The stingy person does not want people to come ask to borrow, so he carefully hides his property inventory from public knowledge. Heaven forces him to show his hand, so to speak, by removing all his possession from his house, for public viewing.

The Mishneh in Negaim [12:5] gives another explanation for this "property evacuation." The Mishneh explains that the Torah had mercy on the property of Israel. The Torah was concerned that earthenware vessels that cannot be purified in a mikveh would be irreversibly contaminated and rendered worthless. In order to save these earthenware vessels (klei cheres), we tell the person to remove them from the house. Once we already tell him to remove the earthenware vessels, we tell him to take out all the vessels (including even those that could theoretically be purified in a mikveh).

In those times, the earthenware vessels were the cheapest and most inferior of all the vessels. We are not talking about fine bone china. We are speaking about very unappealing pottery that was used a few times and then discarded. In order to avoid the loss of these earthenware vessels, he is advised to remove them from the house.

This too is strange. Is the Torah not just reinforcing the "cheapness" of this "cheapskate"? He is worried about penny-pinching matters and even the Torah seems to be concerned about penny-pinching matters, sparing the klei cheres. The cheapskate is getting the wrong message here!

Rav Zev Leff explains that this is not strange at all. The klei cheres represent a tremendous lesson for the person. The laws of impurity (tumah) for klei cheres differ from those of other vessels. Any other vessel only becomes impure if and only if it is touched by a source of tumah, on either its outside or its inside. A klei cheres, however, does not become tameh at all when touched on its outside by a source of tumah. The only way it becomes tameh is if the source of tumah is placed inside of it. In that case, it becomes tameh even if the source of tumah is only suspended within its inner walls, without actually touching them.

Why is that? The Rabbis explain that in the case of a metal cup, such as a silver goblet, the value of the cup is not based on its functionality, it is based on the value of the item. The metal itself has value. The klei cheres, however, has no intrinsic value. It is really worthless. Its whole value is due to its function -- what can be done with it. The way to contaminate it is to affect its function -- and that can only be done by placing the source of tumah inside the klei cheres.

This is the message we want to send to the cheapskate. A person who is "tzar ayin", who doesn't share and who doesn't give of his possessions, is missing the whole point of material goods in this

world. The whole point of all material wealth is what can be done with that wealth. If a person merits having money, he should know that from a Torah philosophical viewpoint, money has value because of what he can do with it.

The person, who hoards property, misses the lesson of the klei cheres. House Tzaraas is teaching the following: This house was originally owned by Emorites or Canaanites. Their problem was that they were cheap. They hid their property only because they didn't want the Jews to get it. They knew that they themselves would not benefit from their vessels because they knew the Jews were going to expel them from the land. Their whole intent was just to insure that the Jews didn't get benefit from the possessions. It was the mentality that "If I can't have it, nobody can have it."

The Jew who is stingy enters the same house with the same attitude. He has the same tunnel vision and the same cheap ungenerous mentality. He wants to hoard all his possessions for himself. He is missing the point of what material possessions are all about. They are to share. They are to give. They are to use, not only for oneself but for other people as well.

So, we teach him a lesson. Lesson number one is to move all his possessions onto the street, to show everybody what he has. Lesson number two is that of klei cheres -- that the function of all possessions is to be used, not to hoard. Finally, after he has this education and has learned the lesson of "tzarus haAyin", he is actually given the opportunity to apply what he has learned.

"Here" the Torah says, "is new found wealth. Let us see if you learned your lesson well. If you did, you will use your money and share your money. Everyone will enjoy it. If you don't learn the lesson of House Tzaraas, then the affliction will eventually spread to your clothing, and ultimately your body itself."

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