

A PLAGUE TURNS INTO A BLESSING

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Metzora

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The pasuk says, "When you come to Land of Canaan which I give to you for a possession, and I will put a plague of Tzaraas in a house of the land of your possession" [Vayikra 14:34]. Rash"i quotes the Medrash Rabbah, which says that this was in fact good news for the Jewish people.

Tzaraas (or Nega'im) is a spiritual plague causing various types of discoloration of skin, clothing, or house walls; and associated with various sins of speech. Why would the appearance of Tzaraas on their houses be good news? If Tzaraas is found on the walls of the house, one is required to demolish the house! How many of us would consider that good news?

The answer is, as Rash"i says, that the inhabitants of the Land of Canaan hid great wealth and treasures in the walls of their houses. If a person would get a plague of Tzaraas on his house and follow the halacha of tearing it down, he would find a fortune inside. Therefore, this was good news.

Many of us have, no doubt, been bothered by the following question: If G-d wants me to receive a present, this is a very strange way for Him to go about giving it. We all know that Tzaraas comes as punishment for a sin. The Talmud [Eruchin 16a] lists a number of sins for which Negaim come. They come for slander, they come for being stingy, etc. So which way is it? Is Tzaraas coming for a sin or is it coming as a way to provide a treasure?

Would it not be more logical and sensible that there should be a halacha that when one puts up his Mezuzah in Eretz Yisroel, it is necessary to bore into the door post, so he could find his treasure that way? It is certainly a very strange teaching of our Sages that I should find my treasure specifically when I am in the midst of suffering a punishment which I deserve.

Additionally, the language of the section of 'Nigei Batim' [Plagues on houses] is different from the language used by the Torah in connection with other types of Tzaraas. There are three types of

Tzaraas. One type appears on the house, one type appears on clothes, and one type appears on the human body.

Concerning the negah of the house, the Torah says "And I will put a negah on the house of the land of your inheritance" [14:34]. By the other types of Tzaraas, it says, "And the garment will be brought..." or "And the person will be brought..." The Torah speaks in third person -- the Jew will find that he has a Tzaraas. Only by the house does G-d speak in first person -- "I will put..."

The Ramba"m says [Hilchos Tumas Tzaraas 16:10] that the three categories of Tzaraas (house, clothing, person) have an order to them. The purpose of Tzaraas was to remove a person from the sin of Lashon HaRa [evil tongue; slander]. If a person would speak Lashon HaRa, first he would get Tzaraas in his house. If he would persist in speaking Lashon HaRa, it would begin to affect his clothing. If he persisted in his evil ways, it would affect his body.

Rav Bergman, in his Share Orah, mentions a principle that we have mentioned a number of times in this shiur: At the end of the Tochacha in Bechukosai, the Torah concludes with words of consolation [Vayikra 26:42]. "And I will remember my covenant with Yaakov, and even my covenant with Yitzchak, and even my covenant with Avraham, and the Land I will remember." However, the Tochaha [chastisement] in Parshas Ki Savo does not end with any words of consolation.

The Zohar says that they asked in the Beis Medrash regarding the reason for this discrepancy. Rav Shimon Bar Yochai answered that in the Tochacha of Parshas Bechukosai, the thrust and theme of the chastisement was "Your dealings with Me is with 'keri,' so too, my dealings with you will be with a fury of 'keri.'" In other words, if you think things are just 'happening' (mikreh); if you don't take Me seriously; if you don't believe in Divine Providence, then the response will be that I too will deal with you such that you will be subject to all the evils that "nature" can offer. I will stand, so to speak, on the sidelines.

On the other hand, the Tochacha of Parshas Ki Savo constantly says, "I will do this to you; I will do that to you; etc." When it is G-d Himself that is handing out the punishment, the relationship between the Jewish People and their Creator has not been severed. G-d is punishing, but there still is a relationship. It is analogous to the case where the father knows the child is doing bad and spansks him. He punishes him, but the relationship is still there.

Sometimes, however, there is a situation where the father walks out of the room and says, "I am going to teach this child a lesson. Let whatever happens to him, happen. Let him play with matches and get burnt. I will show him, by leaving." This is the Tochacha of Parshas Bechukosai. This is a far worse curse; therefore it needs a consolation.

This is the difference between nigei batim and all other N egaim. With nigei batim, where one has just strayed and spoken Lashon HaRa, perhaps occasionally, G-d says "Our relationship is still there" -- I will personally punish. "I will place the nega..." But if one persists and goes further and further away; then eventually, it will no longer be "I will place..." It will be that the plague will come, but the

relationship will no longer be there.

Now we can begin to understand how there can be a treasure in a punishment. Chaza"l tell us that when Shimshon [Samson] was in the house of the Plishtim [Philistines] and his two eyes were taken out, Samson prayed to G-d: "With the merit of the loss of one of my eyes, let me bring down the house upon the Plishtim; and with the merit of the loss of my other eye, let me have the merit to enter Olam Haba."

This is amazing. The Talmud tells us [Sotah 9b] that "Shimshon went after his eyes..." He sinned with his eyes and as a result of that, he lost his eyes. How then, does he come and claim to have merit based on the loss of his eyes? Rav Bergman says, herein lies a great principle. If G-d gives a person a punishment and he responds to that punishment, then he turns the punishment into a merit. That is what suffering and punishment is all about. The purpose is to strengthen the relationship between G-d and man. If Shimshon responded and knew that he did Teshuva [repentance] for the sin that he did with his eyes, he could then come back to G-d and say "with the fact that I lost my eyes and I realized the lesson in that and am thereby turning it into a merit for myself, with that merit, grant me the ability to kill the Plishtim and get into Olam Haba."

With this we can now understand how the Nega Tzaraas can be hiding a treasure. We had asked, if it comes from a sin, how can it be the source of a treasure? The answer is that with the nega of Nigei Batim, which is the first level of Loshon HaRa that a person commits, there is still a personal involvement of G-d. ("And I will place...") If a person then responds, and as the Rambam says, rectifies his ways, he can in fact turn that punishment into a merit. Therefore, it is appropriate for this correct response to merit the treasures that the inhabitants of Canaan left behind.

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