

NASO (NUMBERS 4:28-7:89)

There Goes the Neighborhood

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

It was time to build the “Temple.”

Moses was about to assemble the Tabernacle, a temporary Temple that traveled with the Israelites through the desert. Whenever they travelled it was disassembled and carried by the Levites. As soon as they reached their destination, they reassembled the Tabernacle.

The Tabernacle sat in the middle of the camp. The enclosed area of the Tabernacle was called “The Camp of G-d’s Presence.” It was surrounded by a second encampment, “The Levitical Camp.” As the name implies, that is where the Levites camped. The third encampment was where the other tribes camped. It was called “The Camp of Israel.”

The Camp of Israel was a place of holiness; those who were defiled were required to stay out of the encampment until they could undergo a purification process:

G-d spoke to Moses, saying, “Command the Israelites to expel from the camp everyone with Tzora’as, every Zav, and everyone who has been contaminated by contact with the dead. (Numbers, 5:1-2)

Tzora’as is a spiritual disease that manifests itself by discolorations of the skin. (It has often been mistranslated as “leprosy.”) Someone who suspects that he has contracted *Tzora’as* must be examined by a Kohain– Priest, who advises the person if he is in fact defiled. If he is, or if MAYBE he is, he must stay away from other people. The person with *Tzora’as* was required to leave all three camps. He/she stayed on the outskirts of the outer camp. (See “A Taste of His Own Medicine”.)

A *Zav* (or *Zavah*) is a man (or woman) who has experienced an abnormal flow of bodily fluids that are related to the reproductive system. It is not simply seminal or menstrual flow; it is a medical condition that indicates that not all is functioning properly. The *Zav* was permitted to remain within the Camp of Israel, but he was banished from the other two camps.

The person who had had contact with a dead body was not permitted to enter the Camp of G-d’s Presence. He was, however, permitted to remain within the other two camps.

In the next “paragraph”, the Torah writes: *a man or woman who commits any of man’s sins, by committing treachery towards G-d, and that person shall become guilty...* (verse 6) The Kli Yakar understands this as a statement of cause and effect. These people have sinned, therefore they must be sent away.

The Kli Yakar quotes the Midrash (7:10) that points out a link between these three defilements and the types of activities that can lead to them.

Tzora’as, says our Sages, is a punishment for, among other things, idol worship. It is also a punishment for gossip. There is Zero Tolerance for those who deny G-d’s Presence or who prattle endlessly about His children. As a result, there is no room anywhere in the Camps of Israel for such a person.

A person who suffers from a dysfunction of the reproductive system suggests guilt of sins of promiscuity. The holiness of the Camp of G-d’s Presence and the Levitical Camp could not abide the company of someone who engages in forbidden sexual activities. Therefore, they had to leave.

The defilement of the dead is a reference to murderers. Man is created in G-d’s Image. One who commits murder is attacking G-d’s Presence. Therefore, he may not enter the Camp of G-d’s Presence.

[Obviously, there is no suggestion here that anyone suffering from one of these conditions can be automatically assumed to be guilty of the sins listed. For example, someone who does the Mitzvah of burying the dead is also ritually defiled. It certainly doesn’t make him a murderer. By the same token, a person can become a Zav without committing adultery, and one can develop Tzora’as without worshipping idols.

Rather, the Midrash is addressing the symbolism of these conditions. These conditions are fitting, and typical, punishments for these sins. Many people who have committed these sins have received these punishments. Many people have suffered from these conditions and been totally innocent of these crimes.]

The entire emphasis of our lives should be based on the fact that we are “Torah-centric.” G-d placed Himself in the midst of the camps of Israel. His House was the heart, the focal point of the dwellings and travels of Israel. On the huge sphere called Planet Earth, Jerusalem is considered the center. We Jews of the Western Hemisphere pray facing east. Jews of Africa face north, while Jews of Turkey face south.

The camps of Israel are meant to be holy. When one chooses to live a life that is devoid of that holiness, he causes G-d the shift His Presence away. That his why the suggestion of sin, manifested in spiritual defilement, was not permitted in those camps. When there was a portable Temple in the desert, those people had to stay away. When there was a “Permanent” Temple structure in Jerusalem, those people had to stay away. When idol worship, gossip, murder, and promiscuity became rampant among G-d’s People. He allowed our enemies to destroy His house, and He “left town.”

We all want G-d to dwell among us. Do we make sure that our actions make that goal a reality?

When American society continues to move in the direction of permitting "marriage" that is an abomination, is that an invitation to G-d to come in? When the public is so supportive of the slaughter of preborn children that a President speaks out against the murder of abortion doctors (a terrible, indefensible act, of course), yet he is silent when a Muslim jihadist shoots American soldiers, what does that say about the priorities of our society?

There is no Temple in Jerusalem today. To a certain extent, in ways that we cannot fully comprehend, G-d maintains His presence everywhere, especially in Jerusalem, especially on the Temple Mount. Yet, He has still refrained from fully returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding His Temple. Could it be that we have not made Him feel welcome?

Are our communities places where G-d wants to live? Are our homes shrines of spirituality where G-d feels comfortable?

Every Friday night we begin our Sabbath meal by welcoming G-d's angels. The Talmud (Shabbos, 119b) explains:

Rabbi Jose the son of Judah said, two ministering angels -- one good angel, and one "evil" (prosecuting) angel -- accompany a person home on Friday night from the synagogue.

When they arrive home, if they find a candle lit, the table set, and beds arranged nicely, the good angel says, "May it be G-d's will that next Shabbos be the same," and the evil angel is compelled to respond, "Amen!"

Otherwise, [if the home is not prepared in honor of Shabbos,] the evil angel says, "May it be G-d's will that next Shabbos be the same," and the good angel is compelled to respond, "Amen!"

What does your house look like on Friday night? Invite G-d into your life. He's a great house guest. He brings gifts of light, holiness, blessing, and success.

Just make sure He's comfortable in the neighborhood.

****Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz**