

METZORA (LEVITICUS 14:1-15:33)**A Pox on NONE of Your Houses!**

2011 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

“Home ownership is a pain!”

That was the mantra of the fellow who became my landlord when he bought the two-family house I was living in. When things went wrong in the house, he had to drop everything and protect his investment by addressing them. Today, as a homeowner myself, I personally understand exactly where he’s coming from. Every leak, every crack, every funny noise as the house settles is another threat to my financial solvency. When I was a renter, it wasn’t my problem. As owner of the house, I also own the problem.

Yes, home ownership can be a pain. Consider the poor fellow who finds a stain on the walls of his house:

G-d told Moses and Aaron, “When you will come to the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to you as a possession, and I will put a plague of ‘Tzoraas’ in a house in the land of your possession...” (Leviticus, 14:34-34)

“Tzoraas”, often mistranslated as “Leprosy”, is more often discussed as an ailment that afflicts one’s body. It is actually a SPIRITUAL disease with physical symptoms. *Tzoraas* is commonly associated with the sin of *Lashon Hara* – gossip. (See “A Taste of His Own Medicine”.) This week’s Torah Portion tells us that this miraculous malady can also affect one’s clothes and one’s house.

The procedure for suspected *Tzoraas* is similar for houses, clothes, and bodies; the Kohain/Priest must be consulted. No, you don’t call the dermatologist and you don’t call the home repair guy. This is a spiritual problem, requiring the expertise of a spiritual guide.

The Kohain would advise the homeowner to empty the house before his inspection; this way, if he had to quarantine the house, the contents would not be declared unclean. (It is the verbal declaration of the spiritual leader that causes the house and its contents to be unclean. This alone proves that we are talking about something spiritual. It would be ludicrous to assume that as long as the expert hasn’t officially declared the house contaminated, it is safe to remove whatever is inside. We see from here that even when G-d punishes someone, it is with compassion. Even if the house ends up condemned, the owner’s other possessions are spared.)

If the Kohain decided that the stain was, in fact, *Tzoraas*, he would close up the house for a week. The following week, if he found that the stain had spread, he would order the affected part of the wall removed and repaired, and closed up for another week. If the stain returned, the house was condemned,

and demolished. If, however, the stain “healed”, an atonement offering would be brought in the Temple, and the homeowner would get on with his life.

Yes, home ownership can be a pain. But the pain can be avoided. Let’s look again at what G-d told Moses and Aaron as they traveled in the desert:

“WHEN YOU WILL COME TO THE LAND OF CANNAN, which I am giving to you as a possession, and I will put a plague of ‘Tzoraas’ in a house in the land of your possession...”

This divinely-caused malady can only occur in the Land of Canaan/Israel. It never happened in the desert. The Land of Israel is very sensitive to sin. When people engage in activities to which the Land is “allergic,” the Land “breaks out” with an “infection.”

So there appears to be a simple solution. Stay out of Israel! Who needs these threats to our financial well-being? Forget the house in Israel; buy a condo in Miami! It’s safer. No wall stains, no Kohain visits, no quarantines! Why would anyone want to subject themselves to this threat?

Such an approach would be ill-advised and pointless.

Actually, it’s not such a “problem” anymore. Evidently, the entire concept of the disease of *Tzoraas* no longer exists. Plenty of people, in and out of Israel, engage in gossip and many other sins. We don’t see their clothes, homes, or bodies changing colors. Did G-d change His mind?

I don’t think so. Spiritual affliction is a message to someone who is otherwise spiritually sensitive that he needs to “put his house in order.” Someone who is careful about what he does and says will be responsive to G-d’s message. We are so far removed from an understanding of what G-d expects of us that we are numb to the subtle message of the Kohain’s visit.

That would SEEM to be good news. Our homes, clothes, and skin are now “safe.”

But in reality, that is truly a shame. No one wants to see his house destroyed. No one wants to move out of town, living like a leper until his flesh heals. But look what we would gain.

Do you remember your first cigarette? Do you remember the uncontrollable coughing and teary eyes? Contrast that with the pleasure you now derive from every cigarette. Now that you enjoy smoking, does that mean that it is now healthy? Since your body doesn’t immediately try to expel that disgusting smoke from your lungs, does that mean it is now okay? Remember that first cigarette? Your body was trying to tell you something. Your body was trying to tell you not to kill yourself. Your body no longer cares!

Losing weight is simple. Just eat fewer calories than you burn. Simple? Yes. Easy? No. But if an alarm went off every time we opened our mouths to sample a "tiny" piece of cheesecake, we'd soon see the pounds melting away!

Remember Pinocchio? Every time he told a lie, his nose grew. Let me ask you a question. If your nose grew every time you told a lie, how long would it take you to stop lying? If your walls turned green every time you said something nasty about someone, how long would it take to start speaking properly?

The appearance of *Tzoraas* is a tap on the shoulder from G-d Who loves us and reminds us that we're stepping out of line. The fact that that reminder doesn't come is the equivalent of going to sleep with dead batteries in the smoke detector. One may sleep well, but he runs the risk of NEVER waking up.

It's time to recharge our batteries.

Have a great Shabbos.

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