

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Tazria M'tzora — What's inside a problem

Shabbat Tazria M'tzora | April 24 - 25, 2009

The Torah Portions of Tazria and M'tzora are undoubtedly the most unpleasant in the Torah. They describe Tz'ra'at — horrifying, disfiguring ailments that erupted on the skin, garments, and houses of the ancient Israelites. Tza'ra'at involved discolorations, scaling, balding, lesions, and other gruesome changes. Its treatment required, variously, quarantine, sacrificial offerings, shaving, burning, scraping, plastering, and ritual immersions.

The graphic descriptions of Tza'ra'at begin mostly passively: "if the Tza'ra'at erupts on the skin", "if there shall be a tza'ra'at on a garment", etc. In one case the tone is different: " G-d spoke to Moses and Aaron saying: "When you enter the land of Canaan that I give you as a possession, and I give a Tza'ra'at plague upon a house in the land you possess..." (Leviticus 14: 34-35). The same verb "NTN", to gift, is used to describe entering the Promised Land, and contracting a terrible plague! How is Tza'ra'at of houses a gift?

In the Midrash (Leviticus Rabbah 17:6), Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai taught that as the Israelites entered Canaan, the Canaanites hid their valuables in walls of their homes, so that they would not be found. G-d later causes Tza'ra'at lesions in the walls, which required their demolition. As they broke down the Tza'ra'at walls, the Israelites found the hidden treasures.

One can imagine few afflictions as disruptive-- physically and morally — as Tza'ra'at. One is publicly marked, quarantined, and compelled to undergo lonely periods of isolation. In our time, we know those who suffer from modern-day Tza'ra'at — addictions, incurable cancer, discord or violence. Both bodies and homes suffer from these sometimes chronic and isolating problems.

Even so, there can be riches within these infected walls; what is at first experienced as a curse, one often finds a blessing. Living in a broken home, we can better understand others whose households suffer from distrust or estrangement; people who have been ill or traumatized may love more deeply because they have insisted on love despite searing unfairness. They learn to live with fear, and to keep a sense of purpose even in dark times.

This not to minimize or glorify suffering. Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote When Bad Things Happen to Good People as a response to losing a teenage child, has said that this loss made him a better Rabbi and a more insightful man, but he would forgo all insight in an instant to get his son back.

Learning from frustration is one benefit of a life of faith. A persistent and unfair stereotype about faith is that it takes us out of the world, out of our senses. In fact, it helps us re-discover ourselves. Just as there were valuables in the walls with Tza'ra'at, so there is understanding and vision inside of us, even when we feel cynical, withdrawn or neglected. Sometimes we have to break down walls, but most of us have ideas and potentialities just waiting to be found.