

Tzaraas of the House: Lessons from the Leprous Lodging

The Torah describes three types of *tzaraas*¹: affliction of the body², of the garment³, and of the house⁴. Although listed in a decreasing order of severity, the Midrash⁵ tells us that they were listed in reverse order chronologically. As an initial call to teshuva, one's house would be afflicted. If the person did not repent, the affliction moved to his garment. Finally, if he still hadn't done Teshuva, his body would be afflicted. The three forms of *tzaraas* thus form a sequence, giving the sinner ample time to repent and increasing in severity until he does so.

This midrash has several implications. If *tzaraas* followed the sequence of increasing severity, we would expect *tzaraas* of the house, as first in the sequence, to be the most common form of *tzaraas*. We would also expect that *tzaraas* of the house, as part of a sequence, to not have specific sins associated with it alone. We would also expect that *tzaraas* of the body, the culmination of the sequence, to be at least as miraculous as the other two.

Each of these assumptions, however, is disputable. According to one opinion in Tosefta Negaim 6:1⁶, not only was *tzaraas* of the house uncommon; no house EVER got *tzaraas*⁷. Additionally, Chazal connect *tzaraas* of the house with refusal to lend possessions⁸. Given that the owner was forced to remove all of their possessions, items which they previously claimed to not have, this constituted a form of *middah kneged middah*. Finally, while *tzaraas* of the body was undoubtedly a miraculous occurrence⁹, the affliction of the inanimate house and garment seem to constitute an even larger deviation from the natural order¹⁰.

Considering these issues, how can we understand this Midrash? The answer lies in one crucial detail. When the Torah introduces *tzaraas* of the house, it specifies that these phenomena only occurred once Israel had entered the land¹¹. Ramban¹² applies this condition to *tzaraas* of the garment as well, explaining that this is because these forms of *tzaraas* were exceedingly

¹ Tzaraas is most famously associated with Lashon Hara in connection with the story of Miriam in Bamidbar 12:1. Bavli Arachin 16a, however, lists 7 reasons, Vayikra Rabbah 17:3 lists 10, and Bamidbar Rabbah 7:5 lists 11.

² Vayikra 13:2

³ Vayikra 13:47

⁴ Vayikra 14:34

⁵ Varikrah Rabbah 17:4. See also Rambam Hilchos Tumas Tzoraas 16:10

⁶ See also Sanhedrin 71a

⁷ Similar opinions exist regarding the Ben Sorer Umoredh, and Ir Hanidachas. Even the dissenting opinions regarding *tzaraas* of the house never saw it themselves but merely bring evidence that it must have happened. Clearly, these were at most exceedingly rare occurrences.

⁸ See Vayikrah Rabbah 17:2, Arachin 16a, Bamidbar Rabbah 7:5, Devarim Rabbah 6:8, and others. Other opinions in Devarim Rabbah hold that the affliction of the house was caused by Lashon Hara, not stinginess

⁹ See, however, Moreh Nevuchim 3:47 where Rambam says that *tzaraas* is contagious. Rambam's commentary on Mishnah Negaim 12:5 seems to associate *tzaraas* of the body with a known disease. Rav Hirsch on the Torah lists several compelling reasons why even bodily *tzaraas* cannot be explained naturally.

¹⁰ See Ramban on Vayikra 13:47, and Rambam in Hilchos Tumas Tzoraas 16:10, Moreh Nevuchim 3:47, and his commentary on Mishnah Negaim 12:5. This also follows common sense; even if *tzaraas* is a supernatural disease, human beings are subject to disease. Clothing and houses are not.

¹¹ Vayikra 14:34. Many commentators explain why this is the case. The Riva, in his commentary to Vayikra 14:34, makes a particularly interesting suggestion that the tents in the *midbar* were not of the right material. See also Sifra, Braita of Rabbi Yishmael.

¹² On Vayikra 13:47. See also Ibn Ezra on 14:34 for a similar idea.

miraculous, only appearing when Israel dwelled in the land in an elevated state of holiness with the divine presence resting among them. This explanation harmonizes our apparent contradictions. *Tzaraas*, as a three-part sequence, was exceedingly rare and only occurred at specific times in Israel's history. At such times, they merited miraculous forms of *tzaraas* as a warning to do teshuva. The sequence thus proceeds from most to least miraculous. However, at times when Israel was not in such an elevated state, they only experienced *tzaraas* of the body.

This also explains why *tzarus ayin*, stinginess, was associated specifically with *tzaraas* of the house, which only occurred when Israel was at its spiritual peak. At such times, God promised them tremendous economic prosperity. Failure to lend one's possessions during such times could only be the result of callous indifference to the needs of one's neighbors¹³. Such insensitivity and heartlessness is the root of many sins and is appropriate as the first warning to do teshuva.

One takeaway from this analysis is that the more effort we put into our relationship with God the more we get in return. While this may play out on a national scale, it applies to our personal lives as well¹⁴. May we all merit to strengthen our relationships with Hashem and see much blessing in return!

¹³ While never a good trait, in times of financial hardship or political instability, even an otherwise compassionate person can be wary of sharing their possessions. Such behavior is inexcusable, however, in times of prosperity.

¹⁴ See Moreh Nevuchim 3:18