

This week's parsha discusses the idea of tzara'at. Tzara'at is classified into three types, which themselves have subcategories. There is the affliction of the house, of the beggar, and of the person. The nature of these three categories is not the same. The Ramban writes that the nega on the beggar and house are above nature, completely beyond any natural phenomenon. While the significance attributed to the affliction on the body, as a consequence of sin which only repentance can fix, gives it a supernatural cause, the phenomenon, as a skin affliction, does have a natural cause. A garment however, and especially a house, do not naturally get disease. Here, both the cause and the effect are supernatural.

This is the type of law only the Torah can legislate. Hashem says he will make a miracle part of the legal system, making tzara'at an occurrence that while miraculous, is to be expected. The question is, why? Why does Hashem feel the need kaviyachol, to legislate a supernatural law? What does tzara'at accomplish to make it so important?

To my knowledge, there is only one other location in the Torah where a law is premised on the expectation of a miracle. When a man suspects his wife, the kohen gives him to drink from a mixture of ink and ashes. And the waters judge her. The only other instance of miraculous law, of supernatural legislation, occurs to maintain peace between a man and his wife. Chazal say: It is worthwhile for the divine name to be erased to keep peace between husband and wife. Yet this is different than the supernatural phenomenon of tzara'at.

The nega is a means of personal affliction, to arouse one to repent. It does not address the problem, but the source. The one who was harmed in the lashon hara is not given justice through the nega, but the one who is guilty reforms his ways. While of course a proper reformation of his ways will involve fixing what was wrong, that is not what tzara'at directly addresses. The affliction addresses him for his sins.

Mei Sotah have the opposite purpose. They are justice. They address the law, not the people. If the woman is guilty, she dies. Although the Gemara says that merits delay her death, the justice has been served. She will die. If she has nozechusim, the death will be immediate, giving her little time to repent. Tzara'at is a divine gift of teshuvah. Sotah is a divine gift of justice.

The implications of this are astounding. There are many times in the Torah where Beit Din require more knowledge to judge. In such cases we have rules: homotze mechavero alav haraya, safek tumah birshut harabim tahor, etc. Yet Hashem could just as easily have given the courts a miraculous means to arrive at the truth. Why not give the plaintiff a drink that acts as a truth serum? The implication is obvious yet profound. When there is money in doubt, while the heavenly court always administers justice, whether we see it or not, it is acceptable for the court of man to operate under principles that are just, but not absolute justice. The legal parties can now continue with their lives. Yet by shalom bayit, this is not acceptable. We can tell a man that this money is halachically his, but we can't tell him his wife is halachically innocent. A loving relationship doesn't exist on rules of rov and chazaka, it must be based on trust that is absolute. That is why mei Sotah are necessary.

This explains tzara'at as well. While tzara'at is often viewed as punishment for lashon hara in particular, that is not the universal opinion. The Gemara lists 7 sins that result in tzara'at, and the Ramban just says it is the result of sin. Although sins are generally categorized into 2 groups, Bein adam l'adam and Bein adam lechavero, these categorizations can be a bit of a misnomer. While sins between man and God don't have anything to do with other men, sins between man and man most definitely have to do with God. Tzara'at is addressing that aspect of the sin. As we said above, tzara'at does not fix what was done,

but it arouses man to repent. It fixes the relationship between man and Hashem. The relationship between Yisrael and Hashem is often likened to that of a husband and wife. Between us and Hashem, good enough is not good enough. Ideally, the relationship must be absolute. To uphold our relationship with God, he legislates miracles, just as he does to uphold peace between husband and wife.

But today there are no more open miracles. Me sotah is no longer administered. Tzarras has ceased. That doesn't mean that relationships with absolute trust are impossible. It means we must be more vigilant to preserve them. We must take an active role. One beautiful interpretation behind the concept of hester panim is that as miracles become fewer, man himself must work harder to accomplish what has been lost. One must carefully examine his actions and do teshuva, because if he doesn't make a cheshbon hanefesh, no one else will. Husbands and wives must make sure that they maintain a relationship so full of trust, openness, and communication, that suspicion does not exist.

There is another lesson here as well. It is important to understand that human beings are not Hashem. Tzarras leads to repentance. There is little that Hashem won't forgive if the repentance is sincere. Yet Sotah is justice. If a woman has adulterated, she has breached a hole in the relationship that is too much to overcome. There are times people say things out of anger that they later regret but cannot un-say. A healthy relationship is able to sustain damage and repair itself, but that doesn't mean it can sustain any damage, nor that the damage leaves no mark.