

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



M'ITZORA

There's No Place Like Home

This week's Torah reading is one of the most conceptually difficult of our entire annual cycle of weekly portions. In the second of our double sedra, we read about TZARA'AT. The difficulty begins with the fact that we have no idea what that is. The only thing I can state with some confidence is that it is NOT leprosy (or Hansen's Disease). That misidentification was the result of some faulty translation (first in Greek and then in Arabic). So what is this ailment?

Who knows? Definitely not me. All we can do is try to understand why this ailment or phenomenon occurred. There are three manifestations of this unusual apparition: on one's body, on one's clothes, and the one I'm most interested in, on the walls of one's home, but only in Eretz Yisrael. The most famous reason given for contracting TZARA'AT is spreading gossip (LASHON HARA). This is based on the incident with Miriam, when she seemed to gossip about her brother Moshe (Bamidbar 12:1-16) and was punished with TZARA'AT. However, the Midrash (Tanchuma Metzora 4:1) counts the causes of the affliction:

Thus have our masters taught: The affliction comes for eleven things: (1) For idolatry, (2) for blessing (i.e. for cursing) the Name, (3) for unchastity, (4) for theft, (5) for slander, (6) for false witness, (7) upon the judge who perverts justice, (8) for swearing falsely, (9) upon one who enters a domain which is not his, (10) upon one who thinks false thoughts, and (11) upon one who instigates quarrels among brothers. And some also say: for the evil eye (i.e. for being miserly).

So, if I don't really know much about this phenomenon of mildew or fungus on the walls of our homes, why do I presume to discuss it? Hubris? Maybe, but I think I have a more important reason connected to the special occasion commemorated this week. This affliction to Jewish homes can only possibly occur in Eretz Yisrael. The Ibn Ezra points this out: Scripture reads thus because this law applies only in the Land of Israel because of the great status of the Land; for the Temple was among them, and the Glory (SHECHINA) was in their midst.

This uncomfortable set of Mitzvot is directly related to the special status of Eretz Yisrael, and our unique relationship to it. Having the Land is wonderful, but it carries responsibilities. So, what is so special about Eretz Yisrael?

Well, Rabi Yehuda HaLevi wrote:

Priority... belongs to the Land, on account of the special Divine acts that are connected with it, which I would compare to the cultivation of the vineyard. No other location would share the distinction of the Divine Influence, just as no other mountain may be able to produce as good wine.

Rav Soloveitchik, on the other hand, followed his own definition of sanctity and concluded:

K'dusha is man-made; more accurately, it is a historical category. A soil is sanctified by historical deeds performed by a sacred people, never by any primordial superiority. The halachic term K'DUSHAT HA'ARETZ, the sanctity of the Land, denotes the consequence of a human act, either conquest (heroic deeds) or the mere presence of the people in that land (intimacy of man and nature). K'dusha is identical with man's association with Mother Earth.

This idea is very beautiful, and inspiring. It adds to the symbiosis between the Land and the People. We love the Land, and the Land reciprocates. Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel, who was appointed Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv in 1935 (the other candidate was Rav Soloveitchik), wrote about Rav Abba of Akko who travelled back and forth from Eretz Yisrael to Bavel. Rav Abba would kiss the rocks when he would come back from Bavel. Concerning MITZVOT

HAT'LUYOT BAARETZ (Mitvot only performed in Eretz Yisrael, like T'RUMA and SHMITA) Akko is outside of the Land, but for our love of the Land, it remains dear. Rav Amiel concluded that it was only the K'DUSHA which was lost. However, the CHIBA (affection, devotion and love) will never be nullified and depart!

Indeed, neither our love nor our connection to Eretz Yisrael ever waned throughout our millennia of exile. I would also submit that the Land's love for us also stayed strong. It's a fascinating phenomenon that Eretz Yisrael was always considered a wasteland whenever the Jews were few and far between. Mark Twain visited in 1867, and described his progress from Yafo to Yerushalayim: The further we went the hotter the sun got, and the more rocky and bare, repulsive and dreary the landscape became... There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country.

No one would ever describe the trip from Tel Aviv to Yerushalayim that way nowadays. It is eminently clear that the very soil itself reciprocates our love. Eretz Yisrael only blooms for us.

Our mysterious plague on houses is a clear manifestation of the symbiosis

between Jews and the Land, for both good and bad. We are so blessed to be able to see the majority of the Jewish people dwelling in Eretz Yisrael for the first time since 722BCE. Yes, there are difficulties, but the Land itself blossoms and prospers in our presence.

And we must be appreciative of being granted this opportunity to once again control this Land, our patrimony. Look, I don't know what the best method for thanking God for these blessings really is. But I do know that we must emphatically thank God for this boon. For not showing gratitude to God is described by Rav Soloveitchik:

Miraculous grace places upon man an absolute responsibility to fulfill the larger imperative that calls out from the miracle. A transcendental imperative always accompanies miraculous activity... Woe unto the beneficiary of a miracle who does not recognize it for what it is, and whose ear is deaf to the echo of the imperative that arises out of this meta-historical event. Pity the one who benefits from the miracles of the Master of the Universe but the spark of faith is not kindled in him, and his conscience is not stirred by the sight of this singular event. When a miracle does not find its appropriate echo in actual deeds, a lofty vision dissipates and is squandered, whereupon Divine Jus-

tice indicts the ungrateful recipient of the miracle.

As for me, I'll say Hallel on Yom HaAtzma'ut. But that doesn't mean that there can't be other methods for displaying gratitude, but, please, make known to God, the world, the Jewish people and yourself that we appreciate this Divine gift. For ingratitude is a grievous sin, and could bring TZARA'AT to your home.

Happy Yom HaAtzma'ut! 🇮🇱