

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

This parasha series is dedicated
in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.

PARASHAT TAZRIA

The Person, the Garment, and the House

By Rav Amnon Bazak

a. Introduction

The structure of the section in the Torah devoted to leprous sores, which begins in our parasha and concludes in Parashat Metzora, gives rise to an obvious question concerning the order of the topics addressed. The following is a summary of the structure of the discussion as a whole:

- i. 13:1-46 – sores on human flesh (this section is further divided according to the different types of sores; we shall not discuss this breakdown)
- ii. 13:47-59 – leprosy on clothing
- iii. 14:1-32 – the procedure for ritual purification of a leper from his sores
- iv. 14:33-53 – leprosy on a house
- v. 14:54-57 – summary

The obvious question concerns the placement of the subject of leprosy on clothing, which creates a break in the middle of the discussion of bodily leprosy. Why does this section not appear after the end of that discussion, as does the matter of leprosy on a house? Abarbanel, commenting on the beginning of our parasha, formulates the question (the eleventh in his list) as follows:

“Why does the Torah command [us] concerning leprosy of clothing in this place, after mentioning the various types of human leprosy, but before stipulating the way in which this leper, discussed as the first subject, is to be purified? It would seem more appropriate for the Torah to complete the laws pertaining to human leprosy and purification, and only then to discuss leprosy on clothing, and then leprosy on houses; why is the order jumbled?”

The question is further reinforced in light of a review of the progression of the verses. At the end of the section dealing with human leprosy, the Torah describes the behavior required of a person who has been pronounced ritually impure:

" (45)The LEPER in whom the plague exists – his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head left long, and he shall place a covering over his upper lip, and shall cry, 'Impure, impure'.

(46)All the days that the plague is within him, he shall be impure; he is impure, he shall dwell alone; OUTSIDE THE CAMP shall be his habitation".

The direct continuation of these verses is to be found at the beginning of chapter 14, where we read:

" (2)This shall be the teaching concerning the leper on the day of his purification, when he is brought to the kohen: (3) The kohen shall go OUTSIDE OF THE CAMP, and the kohen shall look, and behold – if the plague of leprosy is healed from the LEPER...".

Only in the concluding verses of the section regarding bodily leprosy do we find the expressions "tzarua" ("leprous") and "machaneh" ("camp"); this serves to highlight the linguistic connection between these verses and the introductory verses to chapter 14, dealing with leper's purification.

Moreover, the section addressing leprosy on clothing concludes with the words, "This is the teaching concerning the plague of leprosy in a garment of wool or of linen; either in the warp or in the woof, or in any [garment] made of skins, to declare it pure or to declare it impure" (13:59). This, in fact, concludes the subject altogether. But when it comes to leprosy on human flesh, a parallel verse appears only at the end of the entire discussion of the human disease, in chapter 14, verse 32: "This is the teaching concerning one in whom the disease of leprosy exists...".

In light of these linguistic aspects of the text, our question becomes even more insistent: why are the verses that deal with leprosy on clothing – seemingly an independent unit – inserted in the middle of this discussion?

b. The Leper and his Garments

In Abarbanel's view, it appears that this juxtaposition emphasizes the connection between a person and his clothing. The laws of leprosy emphasize two aspects that relate not only to the person who contracts ritual impurity, but also to his clothing:

i. Firstly, the verses tell us twice that if, by the end of the second week, the plague has not spread, the person is regarded ritually pure, but he must wash his clothing:

" (6)The kohen shall look at him again on the seventh day, and behold, if the plague is dimmer, and the plague has not spread in the skin, then the kohen shall declare him pure – it is [merely] a scab – AND HE SHALL WASH HIS CLOTHES and be pure".

" (34)The kohen shall look at the patch on the seventh day, and behold, if the patch has not spread in the skin, and it does not appear to be deeper than the skin, then the kohen shall declare him pure, AND HE SHALL WASH HIS CLOTHES and be pure".

ii. When the leper is declared impure, this has implications for his clothes, as well:

" (45)The leper, in whom the plague exists – HIS CLOTHES SHALL BE TORN, and his hair left long, and he shall cover his upper lip, and shall call out, 'Impure, impure'"'

Hence, a clear connection exists between the state of a person's ritual purity, and the state of his clothing. Partial impurity of a person requires washing his clothes, while complete impurity requires that they be torn. Needless to say, no such connection exists between a person and his house. We may therefore now answer our question: the laws of leprosy in clothing are discussed in the middle of the laws of bodily leprosy to express this connection between a person and his clothing.

It should be noted that the connection between a person and his clothing finds expression not only in the procedures associated with ritual purity and impurity, but also in procedures associated with consecration. There are clear parallels between the purification of a leper from his impurity and the consecration of Aharon and his sons as kohanim, as described in Parashat Tetzaveh and Parashat Tzav. Inter alia, we may point to the following parallel:

"You shall slaughter the ram and take of its blood and paint it on the tip of the right ear of Aharon and of his sons, and upon the thumb of their right hands, and upon the big toe of their right foot..) "Shemot 29:20.(

"The kohen shall take of the blood of the guilt offering and the kohen shall paint it on the right ear of the person to be purified, and upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the big toe of his right foot..) "Vayikra 14:14(

In the procedure for the kohanim's consecration, the sanctification of their clothing assumes a prominent role:

"You shall take of the blood that is upon the altar, and of the anointing oil, and you shall sprinkle it upon Aharon and upon his clothes, and upon his sons and upon his sons' clothes, with him, AND HE SHALL BE SANCTIFIED, AND HIS CLOTHES, AND HIS SONS AND HIS SONS' CLOTHES, WITH HIM." (Shemot 29:21(

The priestly garments, too, require special sanctification – but this sanctification is performed alongside, and as part of, the sanctification of the kohanim. When the kohanim are sanctified, their clothes become sanctified along with them – just as when a person becomes impure, his clothes require washing.

c. The Leper and His House

Thus far we have adopted one approach to answering our question, following Abarbanel, based on a perspective viewing clothing as an extension of the individual. However, beyond this approach, there is another factor which would appear to emphasize the comparison between leprosy of the HOUSE and leprosy of the person.

In chapter 13 of our parasha, the Torah describes the laws of 'tzara'at,' and in this respect the chapter includes bodily leprosy and leprosy of clothing. However, chapter 14 – in Parashat Metzora – does not discuss the laws of impurity, but rather addresses the process of purification. This process exists only where a leper is purified from his bodily leprosy,

or when a house is purified from its plague; it does not exist in the context of leprosy of clothing.

The purification processes for a person and for a house bear considerable resemblance to one another:

Purification of person:

" (4)The kohen shall command to be taken for the person to be purified two live, clean birds, and cedar wood, and scarlet, and hyssop. (5) The kohen shall [then] command that one of the birds be slaughtered in an earthen vessel, over running water. (6) Then he shall take the living bird, and the cedar wood, and the scarlet, and the hyssop, and he shall immerse them – as well as the live bird – in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the running water. (7) Then he shall sprinkle over the person to be purified of leprosy, seven times, AND DECLARE HIM PURIFIED, and then send off the live bird into the open field".

Purification of the house:

" (49)He shall take to cleanse the house two birds, and cedar wood, and scarlet, and hyssop. (50) He shall slaughter one of the birds in an earthen vessel, over running water. (51) Then he shall take the cedar wood and the hyssop and the scarlet, and the live bird, and immerse them in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered, and in the running water, and he shall sprinkle the house seven times. (52) And he shall cleanse the house with the blood of the bird and with the running water, and with the live bird, and with the cedar wood, and with the hyssop, and with the scarlet. (53) Then he shall send off the live bird out of the city, to the fields, AND MAKE ATONEMENT for the house AND IT SHALL BE PURIFIED".

Without embarking on a discussion of the significance of this process of purification, it is clear that the two procedures parallel one another. However, one important difference stands out: while the house is purified and ATONED FOR by means of the birds, the cedar, the hyssop and the scarlet, for the leper himself these means are only part of the PURIFICATION; they are not part of the ATONEMENT. The process of atonement is concluded only by means of the sacrifices and the placing of the blood and the oil upon the leper:

" (18)The remnant of the oil that is in the kohen's hand shall he place upon the head of the person to be purified, and the kohen SHALL MAKE ATONEMENT FOR HIM before God. (19) And the kohen shall offer the sin offering AND ATONE for the person to be atoned from his impurity, and thereafter he shall slaughter the burnt offering. (20) And the kohen shall offer the burnt offering and the meal offering upon the altar, and the kohen shall MAKE ATONEMENT for him, and HE SHALL BE PURIFIED".

This difference seemingly stems from the fact that the atonement for the leper is performed after he has been proclaimed impure, as explained in chapter 13, thus demanding a more complex process. As regards the house, by contrast, the process is necessary only in the case where, after the second week, the "plague is healed," and has not spread. In any event, what is common to the person and the house is that both require atonement – a process that does not exist at all, in any form, with regard to clothing. Thus, the division of the textual sections (and the chapters) evolves naturally from the difference

between the laws of impurity and the process of atonement; for this reason, the leprosy of clothing belongs only to the Parasha of Tazria, not to Parashat Metzora.

This division appears to accord a unique status to the house, in that it, too, like a person, requires atonement when it becomes defiled. Wherein lies the significance of this requirement?

d. "And he shall atone for himself and for his household"

This is not the only instance where we encounter the concept of "atonement" in connection with a house ("bayit" – house, or household). Two chapters later, in the Torah's description of the Kohen Gadol's service on Yom Kippur, this phenomenon appears once again:

"Thus shall Aharon come to the Kodesh: with a young bull as a sin offering, and a ram as a burnt offering... and Aharon shall offer up the bull of the sin offering, which is for himself, and MAKE ATONEMENT for himself and for HIS HOUSEHOLD... and Aharon shall offer the bull of the sin offering which is for himself, and he shall MAKE ATONEMENT for himself and for HIS HOUSEHOLD, and shall slaughter the bull of the sin offering which is for himself." (Vayikra 16:3-11)

As we know, the Sages interpret the repeated mention of the atonement for the household in two senses: the first refers to the family of the Kohen Gadol; the second refers to the tribe of Levi:

"He would approach the bull, while the bull stood between the vestibule and the altar, its head facing south and its face westwards; the kohen would stand on the eastern side, facing westwards. He would rest both his hands upon it and recite his confession, and this is what he would say: Please, O God, I have sinned and trespassed and done wrong before you, I AND MY HOUSEHOLD..) " Mishna, Yoma 3:8(

"Then he would approach the second bull, and rest both his hands upon it, and recite his confession, and this is what he would say: Please, O God, I have sinned and trespassed and done wrong before you, I and MY HOUSEHOLD AND THE CHILDREN OF AHARON, YOUR HOLY PEOPLE..) " ibid. 4:2(

But the very fact that the Torah refers to the kohen's relatives as his "house" ("bayit") proves the connection between the concept of "house" and those who live within it.

It emerges, then, that when a person's house is struck with plague, this is an expression of impurity towards that which represents its inhabitants as a collective whole. This is not the impurity of a specific individual, and therefore no individual is required to bring a sacrifice for it. However, there is impurity attached to a person's home, to the place where his family resides; this requires a process of purification and atonement. [1]

e. And I Shall Bring the Plague of Leprosy

We may now move onto an additional difference between leprosy of clothing and leprosy of the house. The parasha concerning leprosy of clothing opens with the words,

"The garment IN WHICH THE PLAGUE OF LEPROSY EXISTS, in a garment of wool or in a garment of linen...".

The parasha concerning the leprosy of a house, on the other hand, opens in an entirely different style:

"When you come into the land of Canaan which I give you as a possession, AND I BRING THE PLAGUE OF LEPROSY to a house in the land of your possession..(14:34) "

From the difference between these two formulations it appears that leprosy of clothing is a natural process, while leprosy of a house is a deliberate Divine act, apparently a form of punishment:

"Flee from an evil neighbor, for when plagues come upon the evil man's house, they [also] strike the righteous man's walls. Who causes the righteous man's wall to be struck? It is the sins of the evil man that caused it." (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, 52:16)

When it comes to leprosy of human flesh, the Torah does not hint at a determined Divine act, but rather speaks in natural terms ("If a person should have, in the skin of his flesh, a swelling, a scab, or a bright spot..." ;"If a person shall have the plague of leprosy..." ;etc.). Nevertheless, human leprosy also appears to be a punishment, for two principal reasons: firstly, the process is a particularly harsh one, involving the leper's isolation from human company. In the world of biblical concepts of reward and punishment, such a process cannot occur without reason. Secondly, in most cases where we encounter in Tanakh a person stricken with leprosy, the disease followed a sin [2]. This idea also seems to underlie God's message to David via Natan's vision: "I shall be a Father to him, and he shall be a son to Me – that when he sins I shall reproach him with a human staff and with mortal plagues" (Shmuel II 7:14). The Sages offer various opinions as to which sorts of sins bring plagues upon a person [3.]

It would seem, therefore, that leprosy on clothing – concerning which there is no mention of any process of atonement – is indeed fundamentally different from leprosy sores on human flesh or on houses. Leprosy in a person expresses a problem in that person; leprosy on a house indicates a general problem concerning the nature of the house and its inhabitants. Therefore, both these types of leprosy require a process of atonement. Leprosy on clothing, on the other hand, is part of nature. These sores have their own laws – like other types of impurity – but they have no element of atonement, since they do not come about as a punishment.

Notes:

[1]The spiritual connection between a person and his house finds expression also in other sections in the Torah, such as the exemption from military duty granted to certain groups of soldiers: "The officers shall speak to the people, saying: Which man has built a new house and has not yet inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in battle and another man inaugurate it" (Devarim 20:8). Especially striking is the law pertaining to a daughter who has prostituted herself while still living in her father's house; she is taken to be stoned specifically at the entrance to that house: "If this matter was true, and the girl was found not to be a virgin, then the girl shall be taken out to the entrance of her father's house, and the people of her city shall stone her with stones that she may die,

for she has performed an abomination in Israel - to prostitute her father's house – and the evil shall be removed from amongst you" (ibid. 22:20-21). Here there is an obvious connection between the geographical place – the first mention of the expression "her father's house" – and the family to which it refers, in the second mention ("to prostitute her father's house" = to prostitute herself while she was single and living in her father's house.)

[2]There can be no doubt that leprosy is a punishment in the case of Miriam ("The cloud moved from above the Tent, and behold – Miriam was LEPROUS as snow. Aharon turned to Miriam, and behold – she was leprous. So Aharon said to Moshe, "Please, my master, do not lay upon us THE SIN WHICH WE HAVE COMMITTED IN ACTING FOOLISHLY, AND IN SINNING" – Bamidbar 12:10-11), in the case of Gechazi ("The leprosy of Na'aman will adhere to you and to your seed forever.' And he went out from before him, leprous as snow" – Melakhim II 5:27), and in the case of Uziyahu ("Uziyahu was angry, and he had in his hand a censer for burning incense. While he was angry at the kohanim, leprosy broke out on his forehead in front of the kohanim, in God's house, above the incense altar. Azaryahu, the chief kohen, and all the kohanim, turned towards him – and behold, he was leprous upon his forehead; so they hurried him away from there, and he himself also hastened to leave, for God had smitten him" - Divrei ha-Yamim II 26:19-20). What is common to all three instances is that they present a person who aspired to a higher spiritual level than the one he/she had attained: Miriam was jealous of Moshe, Gechazi presented himself as Elisha's equal, and Uziyahu wanted to serve as a kohen. Each was punished, measure for measure, by ending up on a lower level than the one where he/she began.

[3]See, for example, Vayikra Rabba 17:3: "For TEN things plagues come [upon a person]: for idolatry, for forbidden sexual relationships, for bloodshed, for the desecration of God's Name and for cursing God, for stealing from the public and stealing that which is not his, and for vulgarity of spirit, for speaking badly of others, and for an evil eye." For further on this subject, see Nechama Leibowitz, "Studies in Sefer Vayikra," on our parasha.

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