

Earthquakes

Category: Metzora, Tazria, Vayikra

The leprosy of the Torah is well-known to have been a punishment. But what was the House-Tzara'at about?

Every now and then, earthquakes become major news somewhere in the world. It seems that earthquakes are among Earth's permanent guests—every few months, there is another one.

Usually, when you say “earthquake,” people think “California” or some other place prone to earthquakes. But earthquakes can strike even the most unexpected places. Even the Holy Land has had earthquakes, since it lies upon a junction of two tectonic plates known as the Syrian-African Fault.

Earthquakes in the Holy Land were known even in the Biblical era. One such earthquake is even mentioned in the Book of Amos (1:1): “The words of Amos... who prophesied concerning Israel ... two years before the earthquake.”

Indeed, in the last two centuries, two major earthquakes struck Israel. One of them centered on Jerusalem in 1927, killing 300 and injuring 700. It also caused injuries as far away as Hebron and Jericho and collapsed the famous Allenby Bridge.

And 90 years before that, in 1837, a serious earthquake struck Safed and Tiberias, resulting in a series of huge waves from the Kinneret Sea that only added to the destruction. Apparently, there was more water in the Kinneret then... and close to 2,000 people perished in that tragedy, with the cities of Safed and Tiberias destroyed.

As a result, many Jews abandoned Safed, believing that the earthquake was a punishment from heaven for daring to compete with the greatness and holiness of Jerusalem.

On the other hand, there were Jews at the time who specifically moved to Safed after the earthquake—they interpreted it as a sign of the coming of Moshiach. To justify this claim, they pointed to the following passage in the Talmud, Tractate Sotah: “In the [approaching] footsteps of Moshiach, brazenness will strengthen,”

meaning that there will be greater disrespect in the world, “and value will be supplanted,” meaning that prices will rise and everything will become more expensive. And then, the passage states, “the Galil [region] will be destroyed.”

From that one snippet, some Jews deduced that the destruction of the Galil, which contains Safed and Tiberias, is a sign of the coming of Moshiach.

Now, it’s interesting how this particular event was interpreted by some as a heavenly punishment and as a sign of Moshiach by others. To each his own.

Coming back to modern times, it’s also interesting how in recent years, the authorities in Israel have been very concerned about earthquakes, G-d forbid, checking public buildings to make sure that they are built to Israeli safety and legal codes.

What Was Tzara’as

This brings us to this week’s Torah portion, in which we read about Tzara’as, an unusual spiritual disease that actually caused physical symptoms.

Many translations of the Torah translate Tzara’as as “leprosy,” which in modern medicine is known as Hansen’s disease. But Tzara’as as it is described in the Torah and in the commentators like Maimonides is clearly not Hansen’s disease. So what was Tzara’as? It was a punishment for speaking lashon hara, “the evil tongue,” meaning negative speech about others.

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 17:3) takes it a step further, saying that Tzara’as was also a punishment for many other things too. For example, we’ve all heard the story of Kayin and Hevel, commonly known as Cain and Abel. Kayin murdered Hevel, and after that, the Torah tells us that “G-d gave Kayin a sign”—and the Midrash says, “According to Rabbi Nechemyah, Kayin developed Tzara’as.” Thus, Tzara’as is also a punishment for bloodshed.

In the Book of Kings, we read about Naaman, the general of Aram who fell ill with Tzara’as. The Midrash tells us, “Why was he afflicted? Because he took a young girl captive from the Land of Israel.” This story shows us that kidnapping is also punished by Tzara’as.

As the story goes, Naaman goes to the Prophet Elisha, and Elisha heals him. As a

token of thanks for being healed, Naaman wanted to give Elisha gifts, but the Prophet refused to take anything from him—and it was a great Kiddush Hashem, a boosting of G-d's reputation, that the Prophet didn't want to take anything in exchange for the miracle that he had worked.

But after Naaman left, Elisha's devious assistant Geichazi ran after him and lied to him, telling him that Elisha had changed his mind and that he did indeed want to be paid.

When Geichazi got back, Elisha asked him where he had been. Geichazi tried to deny what he had done, but the Prophet knew what he had done—so he said to Geichazi, “Let Naaman's Tzara'as stick to you.” We thus see that Tzara'as is also a punishment for desecrating G-d's reputation too.

Finally, also in the era of the Prophets, the story is told about King Uziyahu, who decided one day that it wasn't enough that he was king—he wanted to be the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, in the Beis Hamikdash too. He wanted to offer up the Ketores, the holy Incense.

The Kohanim, the priests, tried to stop him from carrying out the act, saying, “It is not for you, Uziyahu, to bring incense unto G-d, but for the Kohanim, the sons of Aharon. Leave the Temple!”

But King Uziyahu grabbed the handle of a Ketores pan to bring the Ketores. He was angry at the Kohein who had spoken to him like that and wanted to hit the Kohein for stopping him from bringing Ketores. But then, suddenly “the Tzara'as shone forth on his forehead,” as the verse in Chronicles (II:2:26) says, and the king left the Temple. So we thus see that trying to be the Kohein Gadol also gives one Tzara'as.

Bottom line? All these stories tell us that Tzara'as is a punishment given by G-d for many sins.

So now, back to our Parshah again.

House Tzara'as

In the Torah portion of Metzora, we learn about yet another type of Tzara'as: “House Tzara'as.” This was diagnosed when a person would suddenly find signs of

Tzara'as on the walls of his home. And we can ask an obvious question: Why would a house get Tzara'as? People, I can understand: Tzara'as is a punishment for bad behavior. But since when do houses misbehave? Why Tzara'as on walls?

The Talmud (Tractate Yuma 11b) tells us that "House Tzara'as" occurred "with someone... who didn't want to loan his tools, saying he didn't have; G-d would publicize them when he would clear out his house."

What this means is that sometimes a Jew would not want to loan tools or household items or money, saying that he didn't have the item in question when he really did. For example, somebody would ask him, "Can I borrow your lawnmower?" and he would say, "I don't have one." The next day, someone would ask him for a camcorder so he could record his daughter's birthday party at preschool, and he would say, "I would very much like to help you, but I don't have one."

In those situations, the Tzara'as would appear on the wall, and the Torah tells us that before the Kohein would come to the house to inspect it and declare it a "Tzara'as Zone," every item in the house would have to be removed and taken outside, down to the bare walls.

This was because the very moment that the Kohein would declare the house "impure," everything in it would automatically become instantly impure—so to keep your stuff from becoming impure, you would take it out and put it in the yard. (Who knows? Maybe that's where the whole concept of garage sales started!)

And then, when the homeowner would start clearing out the house, then all the treasures would be discovered. The whole town would see that he did have a lawnmower after all—and not only that, a new one—and the latest camcorder, and so on.

The Deeper Good

But when we look deeper into the verses that describe "House Tzara'as," we understand that with "House Tzara'as," it's different. It's written differently. The terminology used by the Torah when it comes to "House Tzara'as" is not standard terminology—specifically, the verse begins in a positive manner, as if we're about

to read good news here: “When you come to the Land of Canaan which I give you as an inheritance, and I put forth the plague of Tzara’as...”

Rashi explains, “It is a message to you that the plagues are coming upon you because the Amorites hid stashes of gold in the walls of their houses all through the 40 years in which the Israelites were in the desert—and because of the plague, the walls would be smashed, and they would find them.”

What we had there was a Jew sitting on a treasure and not even knowing it—so G-d would send him the plague of “House Tzara’as” and he would then have to demolish the walls of his house and discover the treasure—which is a very positive thing.

Rabbi Levi Ben-Gabbai, one of the early Medieval Jewish leaders in Spain over 800 years ago, wrote a commentary on the Torah in which he says something very interesting about the reason for “House Tzara’as”: Since the Jews were entering homes that they had not built themselves, with many of them built on crumbling foundations, therefore, to keep the Jews from getting hurt in collapses or earthquakes, the plague would appear in such houses—which would force the residents to clear the houses out and rebuilt them from scratch. Thus, they would be saved—and this was the good news about “House Tzara’as.”

Now, in our personal lives, we endure “earthquakes” of our own.

Sometimes it seems like our entire lives are falling apart before our very eyes, or something very serious happens in the family, whether a medical issue, financial issue, or something else.

And just like with a real earthquake, the house will survive the earthquake if it is built on a solid foundation, so too spiritually, if a Jew’s spiritual foundations are solid, he or she will stand strong when spiritual earthquakes strike.

In Judaism, there is something called “Kabolas Ol,” or “Acceptance of the Yoke.” This refers to the spiritual step of simply accepting G-d’s Will, and of living with that acceptance on a daily basis.

In Judaism, a Jew’s relationship with G-d can’t only be based on intellect and reason. After all, there are times in a person’s life when a person can’t find any reason in whatever happened to him, or they lose that interest in Judaism that

they had when first starting the journey into Judaism.

So the foundation must ultimately be *Kabolas Ol*, acceptance—in which one keeps the mitzvos because that's what G-d wants, not what he or she wants and not for any other reason. Indeed, with acceptance, one doesn't need any reasons. One merely takes the actions—and then, this foundation of acceptance gives us the strength to stand firm in any situation, to survive it all and to remain a person of faith.