

A Plague in the House?

In the Hebrew Scriptures the term *tzara'at* can refer to a variety of skin ailments (translated in various ways, e.g., 'scaly skin', 'leprosy'). To the biblical authors it is not just a disease; it is associated with divine displeasure. It smites like a plague (Hebrew: *nega*) and causes ritual defilement that calls for a process of purification. See, for example, Leviticus 14:33-35. Here we pay close attention to verse 35.

When you come into the land of Canaan, which I give you for a possession, and I put a leprous disease in a house in the land of your possession, the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, "There seems to me to be some sort of disease in my house." (Lev. 14:34-35)

This passage gives rise to an example of the detailed creativity of traditional Jewish approaches to the Bible, and how the sages are able to draw moral lessons from a single letter of the sacred text.

In our text above, one might expect the householder to simply announce "there is a disease." Yet one added Hebrew letter tells us that rather than *nega* ('plague'), he says *kanega* (it seems to be a plague). Says Rashi,¹

"Even if he is learned and has no doubt as to the nature of the plague, he must not utter a definitive judgment, but merely declare: 'it seems...'"

Of what significance is this apparent hesitation? Ponder this before reading on.

The Maharal of Prague² reminds us that in the Torah *tzara'at* is approached as a matter relating to ritual purity laws, not a biological phenomenon. Thus definitive pronouncement is the task of the priest, not of a physician or any other kind of expert.

R. Eliyahu Mizrahi³ finds there a moral lesson about what we might describe as 'loose talk.' Much damage is done by presenting hearsay as established fact. As it says in the Mishnah:

"Teach your tongue to say, 'I do not know'" (Berakhot 4a).

The midrashic preachers often played with the similarity of the Hebrew words *m'tzora* ('leper') and *motzi ra* ('slanderer'), so this section of the Torah became an opportunity to preach against the evils of gossip.

Another explanation is offered by R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller:⁴

"The Torah does not want the owner of the house to declare 'a plague' so as not to invite misfortune... Indeed, the tzara'at might recede before the priest's arrival."

In other words, we should not jump to pessimistic conclusions but rather exhibit patient hope and trust in God.

And all this from the pondering of a single Hebrew letter... Here we have a fascinating glimpse into Scripture as the divinely inspired Word in the hands of a living, faithful, interpreting community. •

Over to you...

With a friend or in a small group, join in the work of the interpreting community of faith. From your own prayerful, creative reflections, how would you explain "it seems to be a plague" in verse 35?

Who's who

Our sages this week are:

1. **Rashi** (1040-1105). French scholar, regarded as the 'prince' of Jewish Bible commentators.
2. **Maharal of Prague** (1525-1609). His works on Jewish ethics, philosophy, and rabbinic law are regarded as classics.
3. **R. Eliyahu Mizrahi** (1440-1525). Renowned Talmud scholar. Chief Rabbi of Turkey at the time of the expulsion of Jews from Spain.
4. **R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller** (1579-1654). Served as a Rabbi in Vienna, Prague and Cracow. Best known for his commentary on the Mishna, *Tosefos Yom Tov*.

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, (Jerusalem, 1993); Plaut, *The Torah. A Modern Commentary* (New York, 2006). Scripture: NRSV.

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