



The 5776 (2015-2016) cycle of Dvar Tzedek is a special one. To commemorate AJWS's 30th anniversary, we are sharing a selection of some of our favorite commentaries from past years. Each legacy commentary will be introduced with a related reflection on AJWS's work and contemporary issues.

Introductory Reflection

In his 2010 Dvar Tzedek, author Daniel Bloom writes of *tzara'at* as an affliction that affects not only people, as often thought, but also clothing and houses. While *tzara'at* as a physical affliction is associated with speaking ill of others, according to the sages, *tzara'at* of the home occurs when "the owners of the house refuse to lend a tool... claiming that they do not own such an instrument." The house is then publicly emptied to shame the owners for being unwilling to share resources with their communities.

While we no longer encounter *tzara'at* in modern-day society, we must continue to challenge the human tendency to keep our resources all to ourselves, instead of sharing with our global community. In his book, *The Most Good You Can Do*, author Peter Singer finds that using our income to buy more material goods for ourselves does not make us happier; but using it to help others does. In a Gallup survey that Singer references, 122 out of 136 countries polled indicated "a positive correlation between having donated to a charity in the past month and being at a higher level of happiness." In other words, having the newest iPhone or the fanciest car will likely not make us feel as fulfilled as sharing our wealth with people who need it more than we do.

As Daniel writes, "...we must take more responsibility to monitor our own behavior...for how we interact with and share our resources with other people." Let us heed the warning against greed demonstrated by this week's *parashah* and the wisdom offered by Daniel and Peter Singer, and prioritize generosity toward others over spending on material items for ourselves.

Read Daniel's piece below, and consider joining AJWS's [Books Beyond Borders book club](#), which explores books like *The Most Good You Can Do* and other inspirational reads related to social justice!

Parashat Tazria 5776

By Daniel Bloom

April 9, 2016

(Reprinted from April 17, 2010, as a double parashah that year)

Much of the double portion of *Tazria-Metzora* deals with the laws governing *tzara'at*, an enigmatic affliction which takes the form of a skin disease in people, but which can also afflict clothing and houses. Due to its symptoms of skin discoloration and the requirement that the victim be quarantined, *tzara'at* has often been mistakenly identified as leprosy. However, it is not caused by infection or a biological imbalance; rather, it is the physical but supernatural manifestation of an individual's spiritual malaise.

Tzara'at of the body is traditionally understood to be a consequence of *lashon hara*, evil speech.¹ One who is diagnosed with *tzara'at* is shamed and sequestered from the camp until after the affliction has subsided. This period allows the *metzora*—someone afflicted with *tzara'at*, to shed the ritual impurity associated with the condition, and to experience the some of the pain and isolation that his slander brought about in others.

The phenomenon of *nigai batim*—the *tzara'at* affliction of houses, is less well known and does not appear anywhere else in the Bible. Some claim that it is just theoretical; at least one sage states that it “never was and never will be,” and that it was written in the Torah only that we may “expound upon it and receive a reward.”² Elsewhere, the Talmud treats it as a real-world halachic case, expounding on the procedure, described in *Parashat Metzora*, wherein a house that is suspected of showing *tzara'at* must be emptied of its contents before it is examined by a priest.

The technical reason given for evacuating one's possessions is that once a priest declares the house to have *tzara'at*, the contents of the house become *tamei*, ritually impure. Yet the sages also suggest a more homiletic explanation: publicly emptying a home with *nigai batim* fits the crime that caused the affliction. They posit that *nigai batim* is caused when the owners of the house refuse to lend a tool, instead, claiming that they do not own such an instrument.³ The *tzara'at* then forces the unwilling lenders to publicly display their possessions, exposing their deceit and shaming them for their refusal to share resources with the community.

Unlike the Talmudic archetype, most of us would not deny owning a shovel if our neighbor asked to borrow one. There may, however, be occasions when we decline the opportunity to share what is ours—our time and money—with others. Of course, there are a multitude of reasons why someone would refuse to share his resources with the community, from plain spite to not wanting to assist others whom one views as competition.

Perhaps the most prevalent reason for withholding resources, however, does not arise out of nefarious motives, but of an internalization of the claim of the unwilling lender. When asked to share one of his possessions with someone else, our Talmudic protagonist replies “*ein li*—I don't have it.”⁴ How often are we asked to contribute something for the benefit of others and our response is *ein li*? Perhaps we find ourselves thinking, “I would volunteer but I don't feel I have the time. I would make a substantive gift to a cause I believe in but I don't feel I have the money right now.” When we perceive that our ability to help is limited, it is unlikely that we will ever act on our admittedly good intentions.

Many of us come up with all kinds of reasons why we don't share more of our monetary resources as *tzedakah* or spend more of our time volunteering. To be sure, there are those individuals who are stretched to the limit and lack the capacity to give. Many of us, however, are fortunate enough to be able to allocate significant portions of our time and money to discretionary activities. In fact, often the reason we can't give more *tzedakah* has to do with an attachment to possessions that we think we need, but are actually unnecessary expressions of status.

¹ Bamidbar 12:1-15.

² Sanhedrin 71a.

³ Yoma 11b.

⁴ Ibid.

©2016 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org •

www.ajws.org

In the Talmudic text, the affliction of *nigai batim* comes to remind people to share their possessions with others. It even goes further in that it exposes the very resources which were alleged to be unavailable. In today's world we don't have a feedback mechanism like *tzara'at* to either reveal or punish us for our hesitancy to give. We can nevertheless choose to take stock of our resources and how we allocate them, a process which should be continual rather than limited to allocating tax-deductible donations at the end of the financial year.

Ramban posits that *tzara'at* only occurred when the Israelites dwelled in their own land and conducted themselves according to God's wishes.⁵ Although the affliction indicated a spiritual flaw in particular individuals, the occurrence of such a direct mechanism of feedback indicated an intimacy between the Divine presence and the community. It may seem strange to view occurrences of skin disease or decaying houses as representing a kind of holiness. Nonetheless, the absence of *tzara'at* today means that we must take more responsibility to monitor our own behavior and enforce the high standards for how we interact with and share our resources with other people.



Daniel Bloom is an Australian-born technologist who currently works for a healthcare company. He has a degree in Jewish Studies from Monash University in Melbourne and also studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Daniel enjoys travel and has spent time in over thirty countries across six continents. After moving to Israel, he studied for a year at Yeshivat Hamivtar before serving for six months in the Israeli Defense Forces. He currently lives with his wife and two children in Chicago. Daniel can be reached at danielibloom@gmail.com.

⁵ Ramban on Vayikra 13:47.

©2016 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org •

www.ajws.org