

In the spirit of Pesach, here is another question: Why is the Shabbat immediately preceding Pesach called Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Shabbat? True to Jewish form, there are many answers. Here is a small sampling. According to tradition, the 10<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, the day on which the Israelites were commanded to take a lamb for each household in preparation for the 10<sup>th</sup> Plague, was Shabbat. The lamb was an Egyptian deity, but through a GREAT miracle, the Egyptians were rendered unable to punish the Israelites for this desecration. The commandment about the lamb (Exodus 12:3) was the first commandment fulfilled by the Israelites, a sort of Bar Mitzvah, the beginning of their transition from childhood to adulthood, i.e., the Shabbat on which the Israelites became *gadol* (mature adults). The name also derives from the special Haftarah reading, which includes “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the GREAT and awesome day of the Lord.” Finally, the humorous answer: This is the first of only two Shabbatot on which the rabbi is required to give a sermon, which s/he usually does with lengthy abandon, making the service especially long, i.e., GREAT.

Equally varied are the explanations for a curious wording in our parashah: “When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as a possession, and I **place** a lesion of *tzara’at* upon a house in the land of your possession,” (14:34) Why would HaShem deliberately infect a house? Even considering the fact that *tzara’at* is divine punishment for the grave sin of *lashon ha-ra* (evil gossip), as suggested in the creative reading of the word *metzora* (someone with *tzara’at*) as an acronym for *motzi shem ra* – one who brings forth an evil name, such as Miriam’s racist comment about Moses’ “Cushite” wife, this is rather shocking. But trust our sages to come up with similarly creative explanations. Rashi, citing Midrash Leviticus Rabbah, teaches that this was because the Amorites, knowing that they would eventually be conquered, had taken precautions to conceal gold in the walls of their houses during the entire 40 years that the Israelites were in the desert. The removal of the infected stones and, in case of further contamination, the demolition of the entire house, will reveal the hidden treasure. Thus, HaShem’s action was not a curse, it was a blessing in fulfillment of a promise: “And it will be that when the Lord, your God, brings you to the land ... to give you great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill ...” (Deuteronomy 6:10-11). However, a different explanation both in Leviticus Rabbah and in Tractate Yoma 11b sees the infection as punishment for dishonesty caused by stinginess. “The house belonging to one who dedicates his house to himself alone, who refuses to lend his vessels to others and says he does not have them, will be punished. The Holy One of Blessing publicizes his possessions for all to see when he is forced to empty them from his house ...” Building on this explanation, let’s examine another quirky wording: “**Something like** a lesion has appeared to me in the house.” (14:35) Why this tentative statement from the owner of the house? Rashi, citing Nega’im 12:5 teaches that it is out of respect for the kohen, who alone is authorized to make the diagnosis. “Even if he is a learned sage and knows ..., he may not speak with certainty ...” Of course, this is proper behavior, especially in a stratified society. Remembering how Aaron’s two eldest sons were punished for their unwise independent action, it is easy to understand an owner’s forbearance. But a close reading also reveals a deeper and timeless truth. Today we know that certain types of mold that appear in buildings are highly toxic, and we also know that unscrupulous landlords often try to conceal this from their tenants. The underlying theme here is another instance of *lashon ha-ra*, which includes all forms of gossip, slander, and malicious speech, and was always punished by an eruption of *tzara’at*. Commentators have speculated that this entire episode represents moral, rather than medical conditions. That is plausible considering the highly symbolic purification ritual, which is also part of the purification rites for people with *tzara’at*. It involves living (spring) water and blood, along with a cedar stick, hyssop, a string made of crimson wool, and two doves. Living water cleanses and purifies. Cedar symbolizes positive strength, but also arrogance. Hyssop, in which the Israelites dipped the blood to mark their houses before the 10<sup>th</sup> plague, is a versatile medicinal herb. Red dye (*tola’at*) derives from the root verb *תלע* (to wiggle/worm) and symbolizes both humility and blood. Of course, blood, the life-force that belongs solely to HaShem, was an integral part of rituals in Temple times. Finally, the birds: Rashi likens *lashon ha-ra* to the twittering of birds. But why is one bird killed and the other set free? That too, is highly symbolic. The dead bird represents the sort of speech that caused the infection, and its blood into which the live bird was dipped symbolizes the lasting damage caused by *lashon ha-ra*. The upwards flight of the live bird models the high moral standards to which we should direct our speech. Both birds teach us a valuable lesson. We all say things we later regret, and it is easy to either deny having said them, or to withdraw rather than face humiliation. But it is a sign of true greatness, to repent and chart a new and better course for the future.

Shabbat shalom!