

Iyar is one of those months that has two days of Rosh Chodesh, which this year fall within Shabbat. For that reason the *maftir* deals with Temple offerings for Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh and there is a different Haftarah reading, which ends with a repetition of its penultimate verse: “And it shall be from new moon to new moon and from Shabbat to Shabbat, that all flesh shall come to prostrate themselves before Me, says the Lord.” This final chapter of Isaiah summarizes the entire book, beginning with stern admonishments and dire pronouncements on the egregious behavior of the people, and ending with glowing promises for a future in which HaShem will punish the wicked and reward the righteous, who will be gathered from all the nations. People have disagreed for centuries on the meaning of these verses, from whether they are messianic to whether they foresee a new kind of Temple worship or the end of Temple worship altogether. Whatever they predict, they run the gamut from sadness to joy, just like the 49-day cycle of the Omer Count, during which the entire month of Iyar falls. The name *Iyar* comes from the Akkadian word *ayyāru*, which means flower. But it is also related to the Hebrew word *or*, which means light, lamp, and sunlight. Indeed, here in the northern hemisphere our days are rapidly lengthening. Before the Babylonian captivity this month was called *Ziv* (I Kings 6:1), the month of radiance, when the trees are in blossom. It is also when manna, the food imbued with divine radiance, begins to fall, shortly after HaShem hears the complaints of the Israelites and turns the bitter water sweet (Exodus 15:23-26). According to our sages, these events occurred at the beginning of the month of Iyar. Throughout our history, despair and elation have been the hallmark of this liminal time between Pesach and Shavuot, and the month of Iyar is full of tragic events as well as events bringing hope, joy, and new opportunities. Pesach Sheni, a second chance to observe Pesach on Iyar 14, was established for those who had been unable to bring their Pesach offering due to ritual impurity caused by contact with a dead body (Numbers 9:6-7). Israel Independence Day, which is celebrated on 5. Iyar is preceded by Yom HaZikaron, Israel’s day of remembrance for fallen soldiers and civilian victims of terrorism. Lag b’Omer marks the end of the plague that affected Rabbi Akiva’s students, and the days preceding it mark Nazi book burnings and the enactment of the Nürnberg Laws as well as the capture of Adolf Eichmann, the liberation of Dachau, and the suicide of Adolf Hitler. In short, Iyar is a time of trepidation followed by healing. Our Sages noticed that the words *ani Adonai rofeycha* (I am HaShem, your healer – Exodus 15:26) form an acronym for the Hebrew spelling of Iyar אֵיָר אֲנִי יְהוָה רֹפֵאֲךָ. From the bitter waters of Meriva to the present day, HaShem promises hope and healing, although the balance between bitterness and healing often seems terribly lopsided. We have plenty of examples today, but what about the puzzling story of infected houses in our parashah? “When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as a possession, and I place an affliction of *tzara’at* upon a house in the land of your possession” (14:34) Why would HaShem deliberately infect a house? On the negative side, Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 17:2 teaches that it is to expose the stinginess of the inhabitants. “When a person says to their neighbor, ‘Could you lend me a *kav* (about 1 ½ liters) of wheat?’ and they reply, ‘I don’t have any.’ ... ‘A *kav* of dates?’ ‘I don’t have any.’ Or a woman says to her neighbor, ‘Could you lend me a strainer?’ And she replies, ‘I don’t have one.’ ... What does the Holy One of Blessing do? The plague erupts within that house, and while the person is bringing out their possessions, the people see, and say, ‘Didn’t they say they didn’t have anything at all? Look how much wheat there is ... A cursed house with these curses!’” But then in 17:6, the midrash offers a positive interpretation: “This was an announcement to them that these plagues would come upon them because the Amorites concealed treasures of gold in the walls of their houses during the whole forty years the Israelites were in the wilderness ... and in consequence of the plague they would pull down the house and discover them.” Like the stories in our parashah, the month of Iyar has seen crisis as well as healing. After all, it is the month that lies between the Exodus and the Revelation at Sinai, a time of tremendous upheaval for the Israelites taking their first steps into an unknown world that continually presents new challenges. When we are in the throes of suffering and groping in the dark, it is difficult to visualize a positive outcome. And it is even more difficult to realize that although history has proven that healing eventually takes place, there is no guarantee that those whose lives have been so brutally disrupted will be privileged to experience it. Our parashiot discuss a vital section of the body of laws that help ensure an orderly, healthy society. As we learned during the Covid pandemic, rules governing public health are not viewed favorably by everyone. Based on their behavior during other challenges, we can surmise that these former slaves, who could scarcely begin to imagine HaShem’s plan for their future, were no different. With only two exceptions, *b’nai Yisrael*, these Children of Israel, lacked both the resilience and the vision, and consequently did not live to enter the Promised Land. But their progeny grew to become *am Yisrael*, the Jewish People, who continue to seek the light at the end of the tunnel.

Shabbat shalom and chodesh tov!