

With the laws of *kashrut* now in place, our parashiot now introduce the next body of laws designed to help the Israelites create and maintain an orderly, healthy society. Among them are the somewhat puzzling laws in Chapter 14, which deal with infected houses. “When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as a possession, and I place a *tzara’at*-lesion (צָרַעַת) upon a house ...” (14:34) Both Hebrew words denote a variety of lesions that were commonly called leprosy, but were actually a wide range of skin conditions and molds on clothing and buildings. The word צָרַעַת (*tzara’at*) is related to words meaning to humiliate, fell, or strike, as well as hornet / wasp. And the root נָגַע means to touch, taste, concern, afflict, or damage. But why would HaShem deliberately inflict/infect a house? Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 17:2 offers two contrasting answers: On the negative side, it exposes the stinginess of the inhabitants. “When one man says to another ‘Could you lend me a *kav* (about 1.2 liters) of wheat?’ and the man responds, ‘I do not have.’ ... ‘A *kav* of barley ... of dates?’ And the man responds, ‘I do not have.’ If a woman says to another, ‘Lend me a sifter,’ and she replies, ‘I do not have.’ ‘Lend me a sieve,’ and she replies, ‘I do not have.’ What does the Holy One of Blessing do? He brings a *tzara’at*-lesion upon the house. When he takes all his utensils out, the people see, and say, ‘Didn’t they say they had nothing? See how much wheat there is, how much barley, how many dates. The house has been deservedly cursed with these curses.’” Then, in 17:6, the midrash offers a positive interpretation: “When the Canaanites heard that Israel was coming, they arose and concealed their money in the houses and in the fields. The Holy One of Blessing said, ‘I promised their ancestors to take their descendants into a land full of everything good.’ What does he do? He brings leprosy in a house, and the owner demolishes it and finds the concealed cache.” In their discussions about these mysterious afflictions our sages also suggested that they could be symbolic rather than actual, for instance, the connection between leprosy and *lashon ha-ra* (evil gossip). They understood intrinsically that negative behavior leads to spiritual damage, which manifests in physical symptoms. Now we know through scientific research that the psyche profoundly impacts physical health. After all they have been through, the Israelites need to understand that the laws and precepts they are receiving are designed to help them maintain good spiritual, mental, and physical health as they go forward from Egypt to the Promised Land. But keeping them – and us – convinced and focused will continue to be a daunting task. When we are suffering and frightened, everything seems hopeless and it is hard to believe in a better future. No wonder these former slaves so often succumbed to nostalgia for Egypt. Life in slavery may have been miserable, but at least it was predictable. 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 developed into *am Yisrael*, the Jewish People, who against all odds, still continue to seek the light at the end of the tunnel. We have just welcomed the month of Iyar, which falls entirely within the time of Omer counting. 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. Throughout our history the liminal time between Pesach and Shavuot, especially the month of Iyar, has been full of great despair as well as great joy. It was at the beginning of Iyar, when the Israelites were hungry and thirsty, that HaShem caused manna to fall and turned the bitter water sweet. Pesach Sheni (Second Pesach) on Iyar 14, was established to give people who were unable to offer a Pesach sacrifice because they had been traveling, or had become ritually unclean after having touched a corpse, an opportunity to do so (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 saw Nazi book burnings and the enactment of the Nürnberg Laws as well as the capture of Adolf Eichmann, the liberation of Dachau and Bergen Belsen, and the suicide of Adolf Hitler. 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 אִיָר אֲנִי יְהוָה רֹפֵאֲךָ. In short, Iyar, the month that lies between the Exodus and the Revelation at Sinai, has often taken us on an emotional roller coaster – just like it did for the Israelites. The monthly waxing and waning of the moon is a powerful symbol of our cyclical history and our tremendous resilience as we rise from the ashes of each era of prosperity to regroup and rebuild. We are in the third week of Omer counting. The compassionate lovingkindness of Week One’s *chesed* and the strong discernment power of last week’s *gevurah* unite in the beautiful balance of this week’s *tiferet*. These three *sephirot* also represent our cycles of joy, pain, and healing. Research has proven that adversity does make us stronger, since without resistance we may grow weak and complacent. Although the balance between our times of adversity and prosperity often seems lopsided, the little sliver of moon that grows round, diminishes, and grows again shows us that *davka!* – we’re here to stay!

Shabbat shalom!