



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Tazria-Metzora

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

April 25, 2015
Tazria-Metzora

**What Treasures Are Hidden
Within You?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Everyone – from young children to mature adults – loves to discover hidden treasure. We can all envision the sheer delight when we uncover secret riches in unexpected places.

Today we shall speak about how to discover the hidden treasures within ourselves.

There are many things in life that we treasure: we treasure our families and our communities; we treasure our health and our wellbeing; we treasure our successes and our accomplishments; and we treasure our gifts and our opportunities.

None of these are hidden treasures; they are revealed for us – and for all – to see.

Hidden treasure, the kind that comes with a map and a pirate ship, is another story. Hidden treasure is the preciousness buried deep within, the gems and jewels one finds when one least expects them and in the least likely of places.

More often than not, hidden treasure is more valuable than any overt treasure.

It is of this hidden treasure that this week’s Torah reading, *Parshat Tazria-Metzora*, speaks.

This sermon also contains a story of Rav Nachman of Breslov which promises to unearth the hidden treasure within us all.

WHAT TREASURES ARE HIDDEN WITHIN YOU?

The Concealed and the Revealed

1. Mrs. Klopman (Joke)

A businessman boarded a plane to find, sitting next to him, an elegant woman wearing the largest, most stunning diamond ring he had ever seen. He asked her about it.

“This is the Klopman diamond,” she said. “It is beautiful, but it’s like the Hope diamond; there is a terrible curse that goes with it.”

“What’s the curse?” the man asked.

“Mr. Klopman.”

A few months later, the doctor told Mrs. Klopman that, tragically, she had a fatal condition and would never outlive her husband.

Mrs. Klopman immediately commissioned a world-famous artist to paint her portrait, which was to be hung above the mantel in the living room. As she posed for the portrait, she asked the artist, “When you’re done ... I want you to add some things to the painting ... I want you to paint on my wrist a three-tiered diamond bracelet,” she said. “Also, paint on black pearl earrings the size of grapes.” She continued in this vein, asking him to paint several rings on her fingers and a ruby and diamond tiara for good measure. The artist did as he was told and turned out a dazzling portrait.

When the job was finished, before he left, the artist said, “May I ask you a question, Mrs. Klopman?”

“Sure, go ahead,” she replied.

“Well,” said the artist, “painting the Klopman diamond was easy, but I had a heck of a time dreaming up all the other jewelry you wanted me to add on. Tell me, why did you want it?”

A crafty gleam lit Mrs. Klopman’s eyes: “Because when I pass away and my husband brings the next Mrs. Klopman into this house, I want her to look at my portrait and go crazy trying to find all that stuff!”

2. Hidden Treasure

On this glorious Shabbat, as we sit here together in unison, one large extended family, I would like to talk to you about hidden treasure.

Everyone – from young children to mature adults – loves to discover hidden treasure. We can all envision the sheer delight when we uncover secret riches in unexpected places.

Today we shall speak about how to discover the hidden treasures within ourselves.

There are many things in life that we treasure: we treasure our families and our communities; we treasure our health and our wellbeing; we treasure our successes and our accomplishments; and we treasure our gifts and our opportunities.

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Hidden treasure, the kind that comes with a map and a pirate ship is another story. Hidden treasure is the preciousness buried deep within, the gems and jewels one finds when one least expects them and in the least likely of places.

More often than not, hidden treasure is more valuable than any overt treasure.

And it is of this hidden treasure that our Torah portion speaks.

Overtly, the Torah chapters we read this week seem to discuss anything but treasures – the impurities in our lives. Yet, as we shall discover, within them lay secret riches, which can enrich every one of us.

3. Afflictions

Our Torah reading this week is actually made up of two portions, *Tazria* and *Metzora*, both of which discuss the ritual impurities that are caused by certain events, and the purifying measures that must be taken to overcome them.

Tazria opens with childbirth, the most joyous of all occasions. And then, after spending a mere eight verses on this happy subject launches into afflictions that are caused by various impure behaviors. *Metzora* continues in this vein until its conclusion.

The afflictions which these portions describe are called in Hebrew *negaim* (from the word, *nega*, meaning “touched,” “stricken,” or “afflicted”), and the fact that they are present is indicated by a sign called *tzaraat*, a rash-like lesion or stain on a person’s skin, clothing, or home.

The *tzaraat* was a sign of unhealthy, unholy and impure behavior, resulting in a type of spiritual “infection.” It could show up on three kinds of surfaces: human skin; items of clothing; and walls of houses.

The latter, *tzaraat* of the home, is where we shall focus our inquisitive lens. And in the process discover the personal relevance of these seemingly “archaic” laws.

4. Home Invasion

This is how *Metzora* describes the *tzaraat* of a home:

And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying: “When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as a possession, and I shall place a lesion of tzaraat upon a house in the land of your possession.”¹

Remember, *tzaraat* is indicative of a highly negative affliction, the result of impure behavior. Yet, a simple, literal reading of this verse seems to indicate that the placement of *tzaraat* is inevitable and may be a positive thing. This is suggested by the Hebrew phrase *Ani noten*, meaning “I shall place,” which is the language of gift-giving.

¹ Leviticus 14:33-34.

But how could *tzaraat* possibly be a gift? And why is *tzaraat* treated (grammatically at least) as a blessing?

Moreover, twice the Torah uses the word *achuzah*, “possession,” in this verse, as if the blessing of *tzaraat* is contingent upon Israel’s possession of the homes in the land of Canaan. What is the connection between possessing these homes and the affliction of *tzaraat*?

And, finally, why is this language of gift-giving reserved for the *tzaraat* of the home, and not mentioned with regard to the *tzaraat* of skin or clothing?

5. The Oldest Book in the World

The answer to these questions come from an ancient source that predates the Torah. Yes, there is such a book, which some believe dates back to Abraham or even to Adam. (Perhaps it was written by Adam and redacted by Abraham.)²

This ancient tome is called *Sefer Yetzirah* or the “Book of Formation,” and it documents the building blocks of existence. It states that God created (and creates in perpetuity) the world with language – letters and words that form known reality.

After explaining that there are twenty-two (Hebrew) letters in the universal constellations, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, as it is wont to do, implements wordplay to teach us something highly fascinating:

There isn’t in goodness higher than pleasure (*oneg*); and there isn’t in badness lower than affliction (*nega*).³

Nega (*nun, gimmel, ayin*), meaning “stricken” or “afflicted,” is composed of the same three letters as *oneg* (*ayin, nun, gimmel*), meaning “pleasure.”

² See *Sefer Yetzirah* by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, specifically the chapter on its authorship.

³ *Sefer Yetzirah* 2:4.

There isn't any higher good than pleasure; and there isn't any lower bad than affliction. And these two diametric opposites, the epitome of good and the epitome of bad, pleasure and affliction, are composed of the same three letters!

What can this mean?⁴ How can the same letters be both a curse and a blessing?!

6. The Midrash and the Zohar

In good Jewish fashion, we can explain one quandary by introducing another.

As mentioned, the language of the Torah verse that discusses God's gift to Israel of the *tzaraat* affliction is rather perplexing. This mystifying verse is explained in two seemingly paradoxical ways:

The Midrash⁵ explains that it was actually good news for the Israelites to find the stains/lesions of *tzaraat* on the walls of their home, because the previous idolatrous occupants⁷ had often hidden away treasures of gold inside these walls. When the Israelites would demolish the dwellings⁸ because of the *tzaraat*, they would find the treasure – clearly a blessing.

The Zohar,⁹ the seminal Kabbalistic work attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, cites this explanation as well, and then goes on to add another explanation, seemingly different to the first.

⁴ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 27, pp. 107-115 at length.

⁵ Vayikra Rabba 17:6. C.f. Talmud, Horiyot 10a.

⁶ Torat Kohanim 14:75.

⁷ Caananites in the Midrash text. See Likkutei Sichot vol. 32, pp. 91-97 for an elegant reconciliation.

⁸ Leviticus 14:43-45.

⁹ On our chapter Tazria – Zohar III 50a.

As the occupants of the land of Canaan – the Canaanites and the Amorites – were idol worshippers, their homes were saturated with befouled spirits and polluted air. Thus, God gifted these homes with the lesions of *tzaraat*, so that the Israelites would be obligated to tear down these dwellings and build them back again with new and pure materials, as the Torah explicitly states:

*And they [the people] shall take other stones and bring them instead of those stones. And he [the owner] shall take other mortar dust and plaster the house.*¹⁰

Thus, between the Midrash and the Zohar, we have two seemingly opposing explanations as to what the gift of *tzaraat* in an Israelite home consisted of:

- 1) According to the Midrash the gift in the affliction (in the homes) was the treasure discovered after the homes were destroyed and the Israelites found the abundant good and riches therein concealed.
- 2) According to the Zohar, the gift in the affliction was in the destruction itself – demolishing the foul impurity in the previous idol-worshipping occupant, and rebuilding new and pure homes.

So which one was it: Were the afflicted homes good (containing hidden treasures) or bad (impurities that need to be destroyed)?

Is *tzaraat* a means to pleasure, riches, goodness, or an affliction caused by impurity and transgression against God?

7. A Possessed House

We may answer this seeming contradiction by examining another nuance in this verse.

As mentioned, the Torah uses the word *achuzah*, “possession,” not once but twice:

¹⁰ Leviticus 14:42.

When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as a possession, and I shall place a lesion of tzaraat upon a house in the land of your possession.

Why does the Torah make God's gift of *tzaraat* contingent on "possessing" the house and the land?

In the answer we shall come to understand the seemingly different explanations of the Midrash and Zohar, as well as the meaning behind the words of Sefer Yetzirah that the same letters spell *oneg*, "pleasure," and *nega*, "affliction"?

The Midrash, right after explaining the good news of God's *tzaraat* treasure gift, explains¹¹ that, on a cosmic level, the house the Torah means here is the Ultimate House, the Holy House, the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Holy Temple that is home to the Divine.

In times of exile, to the eye of flesh and blood, it may seem as if this Holy House is defiled,¹² covered in *tzaraat*.¹³ But God says: "Know this: Though to the naked and untrained eye it may seem as if My House is defiled by bankrupt spirituality, when you come into the Land of Israel, take possession of it and make it holy, then you shall see how it was all a gift, so that you may uncover the deepest treasure hidden within. By possessing your divine heritage and fulfilling your divine potential, you will reveal how even the negativity and impurity of exile is transformed into riches and treasures."

Thus, the two explanations of the Midrash and the Zohar, as well as the two combinations of the letters *ayin*, *nun* and *gimmel*, are not contradictory at all, but actually reveal our deepest and most essential potential:

¹¹ Vayikra Rabba 17:7.

¹² See Yechezkal 24:2 – Say to the house of Israel: So said the Lord God: Behold I am profaning My sanctuary...

¹³ See Likkutei Sichot *ibid.* p. 115.

Our job in this world is to turn the letters of life (which may be used for “affliction/*nega*” or for “pleasure/*oneg*”) into letters of pure and holy pleasure. We are charged with the mission to possess God’s Holy House, knocking down the impure edifices of idolatry and building them up with new and pure materials.

Then we shall see how, all along, even the *tzaraat* of life was merely there to help us find the deeper treasures hidden within.

8. The Lesson For Us Today

Sometimes the most difficult situations lead to the greatest discoveries. Sometimes the greatest destruction leads to the greatest treasure.

Natural pearls are formed by a secretion of shelled mollusks to cushion the irritation caused by dust or other objects clinging to their very tender inner tissue.

Some of the greatest innovations resulted from crisis and upheaval.

Hatzala – the largest volunteer ambulance service in the USA, which has saved thousands of lives -- was conceived by Rabbi Hershel Weber in the late 1960s, after his mother died due to the ambulance arriving too late.

There are two steps to tackling the impurities of life, two steps to overcoming the challenges in our lives: the first step is to knock down and destroy anything defiled, anything marked with an affliction, a lesion, a plague, a rash, a *tzaraat*. The first step is to break apart the letters *nun*, *gimmel*, *ayin* that spell *nega*, “affliction.”

The second step is to find the treasure and build the house back up again. To take the three letters that used to spell affliction and reorder them to now spell *oneg*, “pleasure.”

This is how we come to possess our individual divine homes, and this is how we shall globally possess the universal Divine Home in Jerusalem.

This is how we discover the deepest treasures – within us and within everyone around us, and within every experience.

9. Bridge to Treasure (Story)

Among the tales of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov is the following parable about a Jew on a treasure quest:

Once a Jewish inhabitant of Austria saw in his dream that under a bridge in the city of Vienna a valuable treasure lay buried. He journeyed there, stood on the bridge and wondered what to do, as it was impossible to search by day in case people saw him searching and realized that there was something going on.

By the by, a soldier crossed the bridge, saw the Jew standing there, and asked him: “What are you doing here? What are you looking for?”

The Jew decided to tell his secret to the soldier, asking him to help him search for the treasure so that they might share it 50/50 when they found it.

But the soldier replied: “I feel sorry for you, you crazy dreamer! I also dreamed that a valuable treasure lay buried in the cellar of such-and-such Jew in such-and-such town, but am I going to set off on a journey there?!”

The name of the Jew was this man’s name, and the town was his home town!

Whereupon the Jew took a wagon hitched to two sturdy horses and hastened home. Upon his return, he went down to his cellar, and there discovered the treasure.

At the sight of it, the Jew declared:

“Now this mystery has been revealed to me. The treasure had always lain buried in my house, but I had to leave my town and wander far away to Vienna in order to discover it in my house.”

Rabbi Nachman taught the meaning of the parable to be this:

The awe of God is a buried treasure concealed in the heart of every one of us, but sometimes we have to journey to the bridge – the righteous who bridge heaven and earth – to discover it.¹⁴

Our children especially carry within them profound treasures. Beyond the beauty we seen in them with our naked eyes, each child contains dimensions upon dimensions, which need to be uncovered. What greater gift and responsibility do we have as parents to do whatever it takes – like gardeners – to weed the obstructions (*nega*), water and nurture the hearts and souls of our children and allow the flowers, that are our children, to blossom.

10. Undivided Attention (Joke)

Mr. Markowitz, who needed millions of dollars to clinch an important business deal, went to synagogue one evening after work to pray for the money.

By chance he sat next to a man who was praying for \$100 to pay an urgent debt. Mr. Markowitz took out his wallet and pressed \$100 into the other man’s hand. Overjoyed, the man got up and left the synagogue.

Mr. Markowitz then walked up to the *Aron Kodesh*, the Holy Ark, closed his eyes and began to pray: “And now, Lord, that I have your undivided attention...”

¹⁴ Translations and commentaries copyright © 2002, Lewis Glinert.

11. The Ultimate Treasure (Conclusion)

Our treasures are everywhere. Sometimes they may be handed to us in synagogue and sometimes they are under a bridge and sometimes they are in our own basements.

We all have God's undivided attention. All God asks is that we give Him ours.

Shabbat Shalom!

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