

Gratitude from the Torah

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Parashat Metzora

How Can We Transform Our Homes from the External to the Internal Dimension?

How do I Reunite the Torn Apart Pieces of my Psyche?

I feel the ground is being torn down from under my feet. Everything is topsy-turvy! The house never looks as messy as at the peak of Pesach cleaning. With my head in the depths of the kitchen cabinet and pots and pans scattered all over the kitchen floor, I am overwhelmed by a feeling of dissolvment. It is as if all the different parts of myself are turning into torn-apart pieces, that I must sort out and bring back together in a different composition. There are treasured, vital items in the kitchen, and in my character that I must give their proper place, remove any external grime or dust, and make them shine. Some things are still important and usable, yet to a lesser degree. I will also remove their external attachment and keep them while relegating them to the backstage of my kitchen cabinet and psyche. There are other items that I painfully must be ready to let go of. It could be a favorite tunic or utensil that has been used up and become utterly threadbare and tattered or completely dilapidated. Correspondingly in my psyche, this could refer to a strong will to keep a thought, an attachment, or a relationship that no longer serves me. In the wake of Pesach, we are shedding layers on many levels and learning to let go. With every chametz crumb – we discard – we mustn't forget to include its inner dimension and let go of any ego attachment. When I become humbled by feeling powerless and unable to keep my life under control, that is when I invite Hashem inside to help me reorganize my torn-apart pieces into a new and greater whole.

The Blessings in Disguise within Plagues

Even among the hardest tests we undergo, we can find many matters for which to be grateful. *Parashat Metzora* which is mostly about the plague of the spiritual skin disease of *tzara'at*, teaches us about the treasure found within the agony of the plagues. Similarly, we have experienced positive effects during our recent plague of the coronavirus pandemic, such as reduced road traffic accidents, better communication, closeness among the family units, and other blessings in disguise. I believe the Coronavirus has helped us to discard the external or superfluous while treasuring the essential and internal. It has taught us that rather than dispersing our energy to the outside, it is vital to strengthen our connection with our loved ones, focusing, and investing more in them. In other words, the coronavirus has taught us a lesson on living more inner lives.

ספר ויקרא פרק יד פסוק לד

כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְכֶם לְאֶחְזָה וְנָתַתִּי נֶגַע צָרַעַת בְּבַיִת אֶרֶץ אֶחְזָתְכֶם:

“When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as a possession, I will place a lesion of *tzara'at* upon a house in the land of your ancestral possession” (*Vayikra* 14:34).

This is [good] news for them that plagues would come upon them, (*Torat Kohanim* 14:75), because the Amorites [residents of Canaan] concealed treasures of gold in the walls of their houses during the entire forty years that the Israelites were in the desert, and in consequence of the plague they would demolish the house and discover them [*Vayikra Rabbah* 17:6]; (Rashi, *Vayikra* 14:34).

How Can Plagues be a Result of Elevating the Sparks?

Rashi explains that the plague on the house is good tidings for its owner because *tzara'at* required the owner to tear down the whole house, which revealed treasures buried underneath by the previous Canaanite owners, amounting to far more in value than the worth of the entire house. The inner meaning of the “good tidings” is not only finding the material treasure” but the process of elevating divine fallen sparks. Kedushat HaLevi reminds us about the rule that the true joy we experience is when we elevate the fallen sparks from the Shechinah bringing them to the level of serving their Creator. When we succeed in elevating fallen sparks, then the innerness within these sparks elevates not only the inner part of ourselves but even the sparks of the exterior part of ourselves, known as the **חיצוניות**/*chitzoniyyut*, so that we are enabled to discard this part of ourselves. Our house has an internal and external dimension. The internal dimension is comprised of elevating the sparks, whereas the discarded parts constitute the external dimension. Comparing the human soul to the inner spark, and the body without the soul to the exterior, explains why the body of a deceased becomes impure. This is because it has lost the inner spark that connects it with the divine – the source of purity. Similarly, once the sparks within the external parts of our home are elevated, then these external parts likewise become impure by losing their connection to the Divine. When our Torah verse speaks of the house’s exterior suddenly displaying signs of a plague, this is nothing other than the foul-smelling residue left behind in their house after the Israelites had elevated fallen sparks by fulfilling G-d’s mitzvah (*Devarim* 20:16) not to allow any of the Canaanite residents to survive. Rashi speaks of the glad tidings for the Jewish people when they discover *tzara'at* upon the houses in the land of Israel that they newly conquered, referring to their joyful discovery of being able to raise the sparks so that they became elevated to spiritually higher regions. Yet after these sparks had left the houses, the houses became exterior and had to be demolished. This is the good news for the treasures that were found after demolishing the houses are the sparks, for the main happiness is to raise up sparks (Based on Kedushat Halevi, *Parashat Metzora*).

What is the Recipe for Elevating Sparks?

People often ask me “How do we elevate sparks?” I explain that raising sparks entails focusing on and connecting with Hashem through even the most pleasurable or the most painful experiences. For example, when we eat the most delicious Shabbat meal in a way that rather than succumbing to the temptation of taking selfish pleasure, we dedicate the pleasure we experience to serving Hashem by honoring Shabbat. Conversely, when we go through the hardest pain, which could easily make us feel that Hashem has forsaken us, yet we nevertheless choose to trust Hashem believing that this too is for the best, then we also elevate sparks. In both situations, a person is naturally so entrenched in the intensity of his experience that it is a great challenge to devote this personal experience completely to G-d. This principle applies firmly to the original war of conquering the Land of Israel without “allowing any soul to live from among these peoples’ cities, which Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance” (*Devarim* 20:16). Being a combat soldier ready to kill in a war is about the greatest pain a person can experience. It can tempt a person to succumb to his lowest animal instincts of anger and aggressiveness while fighting for the sake of victory for its own sake. When the soldier rises above his own selfish survival instinct to engage in violence and rather focuses on the mitzvah of serving Hashem by obliterating every single person among the evil enemy, what could be a greater way of raising up fallen sparks?

A Woman's Pesach Cleaning - The Rectification from the Tree of Knowledge

The strong connection with Hashem that is necessary against all the odds to raise up sparks transforms us from living in the חיצוניות/*chitzoniut* - 'exterior realm' to entering into the פנימיות/*penimiut* - 'internal realm.' Rav Shlomo Carlebach teaches us that during Pesach Hashem illuminates such a great light for us, through our innerness, that we are bound to enter the internal realm. When Hashem wants to give us something so heavenly, we need to purify the external so we can stand completely 'inside,' without allowing any stronghold for the 'exterior realm.' Cleaning the house is one of the greatest rectifications for the sin of the Tree of Knowledge. This rectification is handed over to the woman. It may seem lonely at times, for as much as the husband and children try to help, they can never enter totally into the domain of the woman's rectification. In the place where a woman cleans and organizes while investing so much depth and seriousness - in that place, she is truly alone (Based on Rav Shlomo Carlebach, *Lev HaShamayim: Pesach* pp.85-88). Everything about the Tree of Knowledge is about the external dimension. It is what brought about the very first exile, from the utmost innermost place - the Garden of Eden. When we clean the house mindfully, we shed its external layers of dust and grime and thereby transform our home from the external dimension of the Tree of Knowledge to enter the internal dimension of the Tree of Life. Through Pesach cleaning, we have the opportunity to touch such an elevated place, which only a woman can reach.

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Metzora

"Japanese people have always regarded cleaning as more than a common chore. It's normal there for elementary and junior high school students to clean their classrooms together. Cleaning is carried out not because there is dirt, but because it's an ascetic practice to cultivate the mind." (Shoukei Matsumoto, *Guide to a Clean House and Mind* p. 3). Every year, before Pesach, we are commanded to prepare our homes by getting rid of all the chametz, to start fresh and clean, to sweep out all the gunk and crumbs. We can do the same thing with the homes called our bodies, where we store a lot of aches, pains, annoyances, disturbances, stresses, maladaptive habits, etc. Guided meditations are a great way to clear your mind/body of the "chametz" before Pesach.

- **Invite Your Community to Join Your Guided Meditation** - preparing their minds and psyches for Pesach. Set the mood by lighting candles or dimming lights and turning off phones and other distractions. You may ask the following four questions as part of your Pesach meditation.
 1. What will you be cleaning for Pesach?
 2. Why will you be cleaning for Pesach?
 3. Does cleaning your space free you to be able to focus your attention inwards?
 4. Which items are meaningful to you? How will these items help inspire you this Pesach?
- **"We are Closer to G-d when We are Asking Questions Than When We Think we Have Answers" (Avraham Yehoshua Heschel)** - While you go about your Pesach cleaning ask yourself questions about the chores you are doing that will inspire you to shed exterior layers of yourself. For example, when cleaning a certain kitchen drawer, you could ask how this drawer is a reflection of the state of your psyche, and how you can reorganize it in a way that will affect your inner being positively. When you scrub stubborn stains, you could ask, what are the stubborn stains of my character that I need to remove? and what would be the most effective way to remove them? How do you think the process of cleaning and searching for chametz impacts your spiritual preparation for Pesach?

- **Look for Hidden Treasures** - Pray to Hashem to find your lost objects while you clean for Pesach. Perhaps during your ordeal of Pesach cleaning you may find a long-lost precious earring or any other item you may have displaced. Rejoice and feel grateful to Hashem for opening your eyes to find hidden treasures!
- **Allow Yourself to Be Grateful for the Healing Opportunity of Cleaning** - While we focus on removing all of the physical chametz from our homes, notice how the act of cleaning can spark an internal process of introspection, and strengthen your connection to Hashem. You can make your Pesach cleaning a collaborative event by engaging in a post-cleaning discussion and celebration to share what you gained from the experience and discuss what stands out to you most about your experience of cleaning for Pesach.
- **Set an Intention for Your Pesach Cleaning to Remove the External Chametz for the Sake of the Mitzvah** - so that you can elevate the sparks and transform your home to be aligned with the inner dimension. Focus on how the process of cleaning for Pesach is a way to rectify eating from the Tree of Knowledge - the source of everything external.