

Leviticus 14:34-7

“When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as a permanent possession (la’achuzah), I will place (v’notati) a surface-rot (*nega*) on the house of the land that is your permanent possession (eretz achuzatchem).

The one to whom the house belongs (asher lo habayit) says to the priest: “Something like a surface-rot has appeared to me (nir’ah li), on the house.

At the priest’s command, they will empty the house before he comes to examine the surface-rot, so that everything in the house will not become ritually impure (if the priest declares the house to have a *nega*). Then the priest will come to examine the house.

He will examine the surface-rot. The *nega* is in the walls of the house, green or red blisters, and they appear sunk into the wall.”

(As the process goes on, the offending materials are removed from the house and the house is rebuilt - this happens twice.)

On Sanhedrin 71a, the Talmud records an opinion stating that *negas* on houses have never happened and never will, but were described in the Torah to give reward to those interpreting the description. Similar opinions are recorded regarding the “rebellious son” and “idolatrous city”. In each case, a contrary opinion is recorded. However:

- 1) Whereas the relegation of the rebellious son and idolatrous city to the realm of the hypothetical appears ethically motivated – killing entire cities is inherently troubling, and the rebellious son does not seem to have committed a capital crime – there seem no similar grounds with regard to house-*negas*.
- 2) The opposition to the claim that the rebellious son and idolatrous city never happened seems to be ideological, and is couched in hyperbole (at least as I read the Talmud), whereas the opposition with regard to house-*negas* simply cites contrary physical evidence.

On a technical level, the justification offered for the first position is the shift from “walls” to “wall” in the final verse above – this is interpreted by R. Elazar son of R. Shimon to require a surface-rot across a corner but on different stones, and of unlikely dimensions.

Interpreters also disputed the cause of house-*negas*. Their suggestions include

- 1) sins, especially theft and stinginess (especially when accompanied by false protestations of poverty). The suggestion of theft stems from the requirement to empty the house – while this is formally to save the contents from ritual impurity, in fact it exposes those contents to public scrutiny. The suggestion of stinginess adds to that evidence “and the one asher lo habayit”, reading that to mean “the one who set the house aside for himself” and did not share his possessions when appropriate. See Talmud Arakhin 16a.
- 2) the commandment to destroy houses in the Land of Israel built for the sake of idolatry. As the inhabitants of Canaan fled as the Jews advanced, the Jews had no knowledge of the histories of the houses they moved into. House-*negas* identified the houses in need of destruction. This explains why this section is preceded by “when you come to the land”.

Kli Yakar notes that this explanation should theoretically result in a plague of house-*negas* immediately following the Jewish possession of the land. He suggests that one need only destroy houses whose history is known, and so long as the householder is virtuous, G-d does not reveal that history.

- 3) hidden treasure – when the house is torn down, these treasures are discovered. This is based textually on the attribution of the house-*nega* to G-d (v’notati) without providing His motivation, and on *nir’ah li – li* after a verb is often interpreted midrashically to imply self-interest. See Rashi. This would, however, be the only case of a positive *nega*.

Question: Which, if any, of these suggestions square with the opinion that house-*negas* never happened and never will?

Note that Seforno regards this entire section as a prefiguring of the destruction of the first two Temples and ultimate building of the third. Others, working with suggestion 2) above, suggest that the first Temple was destroyed because King Menasheh transformed it, albeit temporarily, into a house of idolatry. These suggestions are based on “the house (singular) of the land that is your permanent possession”, i.e. the house that embodies everything that is special about the land. Note that many commentators here state the idea, later developed formally by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l, that the sanctity of the Land is an attenuated extension of the sanctity of the Temple. Shabbat Shalom!