IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

My wife, Sharon and I have been looking at houses over the last few weeks. We're no where near ready to buy anything, but we like to look and see what is out there. A few weekends ago, we spent a whole Sunday driving from house to house in the valley looking into people's homes. It was an exceedingly odd and uncomfortable experience. As anyone who has even been house hunting knows. You walk into some stranger's house, you don't even knock on the front door, just walk right in and start looking at all there stuff. Your intention is to look at the house, the walls, the floor plan, the yard. But you can't help looking at their stuff. You comment on their taste, or lack there off. Why is it that people selling there houses always seem to decorate their home so differently than we would? How many times have you walked through an open house and said to yourself, or maybe to anyone in earshot, OY, why would a person do that, paint that color, choose that carpet.

As I was walking through the houses another thought entered my mind as well, it was an old game that my parents used to play with me when we would go to view historic houses in my native San Francisco. We called it, "If these walls could talk". As you walk through a home you don't know, perhaps a really old home, do you ever wonder, who used to live here? Do you ever wonder about the family?

I do, I see a bedroom that was added on and I wonder was it there to accommodate a new child that had been born, or an elderly parent that had

moved it. I walk through a kitchen and smell the smells and wonder what the family dinners were like here, did they have seder, thanksgiving, where did people sit. In some of the homes we visited there would be a mezuzah left on the door (Jewish tradition by the way is to leave the mezuzah on the doorpost when you move) and I would wonder if the family belonged to a temple, how they would feel if they knew another Jew was looking at there home? If these walls could talk? What did these walls see? What took place in this home that was once so filled with people and possession and is now just an empty shell?

This week is *parshat Tazria*, the bane of every bar mitzvah boy and bat mitzvah girl. Why because this is the one, along with its companion next week *Metzora*, that deals with leprosy or skin disease. Every year I get calls from anxious parents when the Torah portions are allotted to our b'nai mitzvah students, I am sure Rabbi Vogel gets them as well. "Rabbi, please I don't want my son to have to talk about skin disease on his bar mitzvah, can't we change it. Its horrible, its gross, why do we have to read this on such a happy occasion!"

If we look closely at the *parsha*, we discover that not only is it about people getting skin disease, but if we read carefully we see that houses are afflicted as well. "The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying; When you enter the land of Canaan that I give you as a possession, and I inflict an eruptive plague upon a house in the land you posses the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, saying "Something like a plague has appeared on my house."

How might you ask can a house get skin disease? To answer that question we have to answer another which is how do people get it? On this the

Torah is unclear, but commentators over time have deduced that one was afflicted with skin disease if he was a gossip. The look to the examples of Moses, Miriam and a host of others who each participated in gossip and were then stricken with the disease. The punishment of the individual seems to support this conclusion. They would be cut off from the community, where presumably they would feel anguish over what might be being said about them in their absence, quarantined, so that they could not continue to spread rumors and gossip and then not allowed back in until they had made sin offering before God.

But how then does as house commit the sin of gossip? Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger, a great *kabbalist* and Jewish commentator who died in 1905, answers this question in a mystical way. For Rabbi Yehudah, the disease on the walls of a house is a symbol for sin, as it is the walls of houses that are witnesses to the sinful behavior of those who dwell within. For Rabbi Yehuda, the walls may not talk but they for sure listen, they hear all that takes place within them and reflect back what takes place. In the case of a house stricken with a plague or mold, they reflect back the infectious, contagious and deadly speech that all too often takes place within the walls of our homes. Hurtful words and slanderous accusations between husband and wife, brother and sister, family and friends. Imagine for a moment if the walls in your home could speak, what would they say, what would they report on what goes on inside them?

The rabbis of the tradition teach that we should make our home *mikdash m'at* a smaller version of the holy sanctuary in Jerusalem and that like that holy place in

Jerusalem, only holy sacred and worthy things should take place inside its walls. When I counsel couples about to be married I remind them of this teaching from out tradition, encouraging them to set aside a room in their house where they never fight, sanctuary where only words of kindness and love are exchanged, where holy things take place. This *parsha* reminds us of that same lesson, that for a house to truly be a home, worthy of the sacred things and memories that are created within its walls we must not only be mindful what we say within it, but that nothing we say to another person goes unheard, not by them and not by God. What if our walls could talk, what would they say about how we live our lives, how we treat our family and friends inside them? I don't really know if walls, talk or see or listen, and ultimately that is not what is most important, what is most important and what our parsha teaches this Shabbat is that we should act within our homes and with the people we love and care about as though they do.