

Tazria/Metzora through commentary brought by Avivah Zornberg

Source Sheet by Rabbi Amy Bernstein

Avivah Zornberg (21st century) (from *The Hidden Order of Intimacy*, p. 111)

Tzora'at, as a category of "issues from the human body," is set apart from impurity originating in the world outside. Here, impurity originates not in consumption or contact with the world; rather, it emerges from the unknown interior of the body onto the body surface. Its progress through time is a significant factor in diagnosis...

Symptoms appear on the skin, that sensitive envelope that separates the body contents from the outside world. The skin is a liminal area, a space between, in which are registered both inner malaises, physical and emotional, and reactions to the outside world. It is a responsive organ, reacting to food, touch, climate, to attractions and repulsions, fears and pleasures. The Hebrew word for skin is *or* in these Torah passages, it is often called *or bessoro* (the skin of his flesh). It functions as a porous barrier between inside and outside. The Hebrew or evokes alertness, responsiveness, vitality. The pathology of *tsora'at*, in which the skin is bleached of color, is associated with death.

Leviticus 13:47

(47) When an eruptive affection occurs in a cloth of wool or linen fabric,

ויקרא י"ג:מ"ז

(מז) וְהַפָּגַד כִּי־יִהְיֶה בּוֹ נֹגַע צֹרְעַת
בְּבִגְד צֹמֵר אֹךְ בְּבִגְד פְּשֻׁתִים:

Ramban (13th century Spain) on

Leviticus 13:47:1

AND WHEN THE PLAGUE OF LEPROSY IS IN A GARMENT. This is not in the natural order of things, nor does it ever happen in the world [outside Israel], and similarly leprosy of houses [is not a natural phenomenon]. But when Israel is wholly devoted to God, then God's spirit is upon them always, to maintain their bodies, clothes and houses in a good appearance. Thus as soon as one of them commits a sin or transgression, a deformity appears in his flesh, or on his garment, or in his house, revealing that God has turned aside from him. It is for this reason that Scripture states, *And I shall put the plague of leprosy in a house of the Land of your possession*, meaning that it is God's punishment upon that house. Thus [the law of leprosy of houses] applies only in the Land which is *the inheritance of the Eternal* even as God said, *When ye are come into the land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession*. Now the reason [why this law does not apply outside the Land of Israel] is not because it is a duty which attaches to the ground, but the reason is because this matter [of Divine indication of sins] occurs only in the Chosen Land, wherein

רמב"ן על ויקרא י"ג:מ"ז:א'

והבגד כי יהיה בו נגע צרעת זה איננו בטבע כלל ולא הווה בעולם וכן נגעי הבתים אבל בהיות ישראל שלמים לה' יהיה רוח השם עליהם תמיד להעמיד גופם ובגדיהם ובתייהם במראה טוב וכאשר יקרה באחד מהם חטא ועון יתהוה כיעור בבשרו או בבגדו או בביתו להראות כי השם סר מעליו ולכך אמר הכתוב (ויקרא י"ד:ל"ד) ונתתי נגע צרעת בבית ארץ אחוזתכם כי היא מכת השם בבית ההוא והנה איננו נוהג אלא בארץ שהיא נחלת ה' כמו שאמר (שם) כי תבאו אל ארץ כנען אשר אני נותן לכם לאחווה ואין הדבר מפני היותו חובת קרקע אבל מפני שלא יבא הענין ההוא אלא בארץ הנבחרת אשר השם הנכבד שוכן בתוכה ובתורת כהנים (מצורע פרשה ה ג) דרשו עוד שאין הבית מטמא אלא אחר כבוש וחלוק ושיהא כל אחד ואחד מכיר את שלו והטעם כי אז נתישבה דעתם עליהם לדעת את ה' ותשרה שכינה בתוכם וכן אני חושב בנגעי הבגדים שלא ינהגו אלא בארץ ועל דרך הפשט מפני זה יחזירו הכתוב בכל פסוק ופסוק "הבגד או העור

the Glorious Name dwells. And in the Torath Kohanim the Sages further interpreted that a house does not contract impurity until after the conquest and division [of the Land by Israel], and until after each and every individual clearly knows his portion. The reason for this law is that only then do they have the ease of mind to know the Eternal, and the Divine Glory dwells among them...And by way of the simple meaning of Scripture, the reason why it repeats in every verse the expression "*the garment, or the skin, or the wrap and the woof,*" is because the matter is miraculous.

או השתי והערב" כי הדבר נס

Avivah Zornberg

This blotch on skin or clothing or housing indicates a disorder in the spiritual world. Such a situation in which physical symptoms directly indicate spiritual disorder is a unique dispensation paradoxically a kind of gift ("When you come into the Land...I shall give the plague of tzora'at" [Lev. 14:34]).

Ramban emphasizes the connection with the Holy Land, not because of any particular agricultural commandment but because the Chosen Land is the site of God's presence. In this heightened atmosphere, human misdeeds register directly.

Furthermore, he cites Torat Kohanim to the effect that tzora'at on houses appears only after the Land has been fully conquered and apportioned. Only when "each recognizes what is his," only in a state of *yishuv ha-da'at*, of general social and cultural order, is the individual capable of "knowing God." And only in such a condition can tzora'at manifest itself.

In a nation finely tuned to holiness, individual disruptions will register in the aesthetics of skin and clothes and walls. When the baseline of spiritual life is set high, the tzora'at phenomenon becomes a privilege; it constitutes a miracle.

Leviticus 14:34-35

(34) 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 possess, (35) the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, "Something like a plague has appeared upon my house."

ויקרא י"ד:ל"ד-ל"ה

(לד) כִּי תֵבֵאוּ אֶל-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר
אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם לְאֶחְזָה וְנִתְתִּי נִגַע
צֹרְעַת בְּבַיִת אֶרֶץ אֲחֻזַּתְכֶם: (לה)
וּבֵא אֲשֶׁר-לּוֹ הַבַּיִת וְהִגִּיד לַכֹּהֵן
לֵאמֹר כְּנִגַע נִרְאָה לִי בְּבַיִת:

Avivah Zornberg

A sense of being personally stabilized in the geography of the Holy Land is the condition for the individual homeowner to bring his *tzora'at* to the Priest. The intimacy of possession is the ground on which blotches become meaningful.

Leviticus 13:45-46

(45) As for the person with a leprous affection: the clothes shall be rent, the head shall be left bare, and the upper lip shall be covered over; and that person shall call out, "Impure! Impure!" (46) The person shall be impure as long as the disease is present. Being impure, that person shall dwell apart—in a dwelling outside the camp.

Rashi (11th century France) on

Leviticus 13:45:5

AND HE SHALL CALL OUT, UNCLEAN, UNCLEAN — he must proclaim aloud that he is unclean, so that people may keep away from him (Sifra, Tazria Parashat Nega'im, Chapter 13 7; Moed Katan 5a).

Moed Katan 5a:17 (Talmud, Babylon 5th century)

The Gemara asks: **But** with regard to **this** verse, **does it come to teach this idea? That verse is needed for that which is taught** in the following *baraita*: **“And he shall cry: Impure, impure”**; this teaches that the leper **must inform the public of his distress, and the public will pray for mercy on his behalf.**

ויקרא י"ג:מ"ה-מ"ו

(מה) וְהִצְרוּעַ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ הַנִּגַּע בְּגָדָיו יְהִינּוּ פְרָמִים וְרֹאשׁוֹ יְהִי פְרוּעַ וְעַל-שָׂפָם יַעֲטֶה וְטָמֵא וְטָמֵא יִקְרָא: (מו) כָּל-יְמֵי אֲשֶׁר הַנִּגַּע בּוֹ יְטָמֵא טָמֵא הוּא בְּדָד יֵשֵׁב מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה מוֹשְׁבֹו: {ס}

רש"י על ויקרא י"ג:מ"ה:ה'

וְטָמֵא טָמֵא יִקְרָא. מִשְׁמִיעַ שְׁהוּא טָמֵא וְיִפְרְשׁוּ מִמֶּנּוּ (ספרא, מועד קטן ה')

מועד קטן ה' א:י"ז

וְהֵאֵי לְהִכִּי הוּא דְאֵתָא? הֵהוּא מִיבְעֵי לֵיהּ לְכַדְתְּנָא: "וְטָמֵא טָמֵא יִקְרָא". צְרִיךְ לְהוֹדִיעַ צְעָרוֹ לְרַבִּים, וְרַבִּים מְבַקְשִׁין עָלָיו רַחֲמִים!

Avivah Zornberg

The cry of the leper communicates, not the public health hazard he represents but his sheer pain. In this reading, it is a religious requirement to affect others, so that they will pray for him in his suffering. His desolation creates a connection with others whose compassion is stirred.

The cry of the sufferer interrupts, appeals, demands. The one who hears him must ask for compassion. This is an ethical moment. Whether or not neurons are at work, the moment assumes the reality of compassion-suffering with the other who is apart from him...

The voice of the *badad* condition strikes a common chord with remote others. Moreover, the leper should proclaim his pain in public, so that the many (*rabbim*) will hear and ask for compassion. The public sphere is strangely re-created in this uncanny scene. The leper does not ask for compassion, but he knows there is a world of others who will respond by themselves asking for divine compassion. (p.128)

Chullin 60 b (Talmud, Babylon 5th century)

§ Rav Asi raises a contradiction between two verses. It is written: **“And the earth brought forth grass”** (Genesis 1:12), **on the third day of the week** of Creation. **And it is also written: “No shrub of the field was yet in the earth”** (Genesis 2:5), **on Shabbat eve**, the sixth day of Creation, immediately before Adam was created. Rav Asi explains:

חולין סי' ב

רב אסי רמי כתיב (בראשית א, יב) ותוצא הארץ דשא בתלת בשבתא וכתיב (בראשית ב, ה) וכל שיח השדה טרם יהיה בארץ במעלי שבתא מלמד שיצאו דשאים ועמדו על פתח קרקע עד שבא אדם הראשון ובקש עליהם רחמים וירדו גשמים וצמחו ללמדך שהקב"ה מתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים

This teaches that the grasses emerged on the third day and stood at the opening of the ground, but they did not grow until Adam, the first man, came and prayed for mercy upon them, and rain came, and they sprouted. And this is meant to teach you that the Holy One, Blessed be He, desires the prayers of the righteous.

Avivah Zornberg

This is a story about God's desire for the moment of *bakashat rachamim*: when a human being asks for compassion. Here, we return to the midrash about the cry of the leper and the response of those who hear it. The expression implies that the human being asks, not for a thing (e.g., for rain, or for the healing of the leper) but for a non-thing-*rachamim*. "Com-compassion arises in the matrixial embrace experienced in, and symbolized by, the womb. Com-compassion is a connectedness that is also a kind of border crossing, and it is the source of responsibility and care."

The voice of prayer acts like a touch: in the womb, "borders can be crossed without being removed entirely... 'I' and 'non-I' are always linked in the matrixial." To ask for compassion is to be possessed by this connection-in-difference.

This "matrixial" state is experienced as vulnerable, even helpless. Both Adam in a dry world and the leper disconnected from the vital energies that hold the social world together discover this state. *Rachamim* evokes not only the womb but its linkage with the breast that suckles and nurtures life. It is striking that in rabbinic Hebrew the verb *rachem*-to have compassion-becomes the technical expression for suckling in animal and human life. It is used without self-consciousness, as a concrete analogue to its metaphorical usage as compassion.

Without this instinctual movement of active interlacing of mother and child, the world could not continue. Perhaps some thing like this is also true of the human and the divine in the position of prayer. In Aramaic translation, the *rachem* root represents, simply, love. (p.132)

Rabbi Sheila Pelz Weinberg (21st century) (from God Loves the Stranger, p. 67)

The Collective. Sometimes I cannot connect to any of the above or any of the other skillful tools that help lift me or remind me that my life is not permanently stuck on the down dial. Sometimes, maybe often, I cannot lift myself up. But you-my friend, my teacher, comrade, colleague, fellow seeker-you can. I call out and you answer. You remind me that I am not always like this. You remind me that I have had other moments, and I will again. You remind me that this happened before... and *remember?* In your presence, I am no longer alone. I am no longer separate. The very exchange of our breath reminds me that my borders are far more permeable than I suppose.

Source Sheet created on Sefaria by Rabbi Amy Bernstein