

***It's too bad that no one gets tzara'at anymore!***

Parashat Tazria/Shabbat Ha'Hodesh

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

I have never actually met an anti-vaxxer. An anti-vaxxer is someone who is either suspicious of or completely opposed to vaccinating their children. Like most conspiracy theories, the anti-vaccine movement is not based on scientific or medical knowledge. Instead, it's fueled by fearmongering, hoaxes, and deceit. Frighteningly, as I'm sure you've read or seen on the news, some of these anti-vaxxers have actually made inroads in certain places, and there has been a 30% global increase in measles, for example, including 17 documented outbreaks in the U.S. in 2018 alone.

Again, I have never personally met a parent who refused to vaccinate a child, although we did adopt a policy in our Early Childhood Center at Har Shalom that all kids must be vaccinated prior to enrollment. I have to believe though, that whatever illusions an anti-vaccination proponent might have, that they don't actually want their child to contract measles...or polio, or smallpox, or rubella or any of the numerous other diseases that vaccines have all but eradicated. They claim to be worried about the side-effects of vaccines, like the spurious claim that vaccines cause autism or other serious health conditions. But no one chooses not to vaccinate so that their child will get one of those awful, deadly diseases...even though 90% of unvaccinated people who are exposed to measles, for example, end up getting infected.

There is one condition, one disease that has been completely eliminated from the human species. For over 2,000 years, no person has been diagnosed with this disorder. The particular malady that I'm referring to, which at one time was diagnosed among Jews in particular, has not been seen in hundreds of generations. What I am referring to of course is *tzara'at*, which was described in explicit detail in this morning's parasha. That's right, I am talking about the *s'eit o sapachat o va'heret*—the swelling, rashes, and discolorations on the skin that that the Torah discusses; *V'haya b'or besaro l'nega tzara'at*, that develop into scaly infections called *tzara'at* or as some translate it mistakenly: leprosy. Leprosy does still exist, in some of the world's poorest countries in particular. That condition is more accurately known as Hansen's Disease. How do I know that *tzara'at* is not Hansen's Disease? Well for one thing, the Torah says that this discoloration, this eruption doesn't only occur on the skin, on the human body, it is also observed

on the walls of people's houses, and also on their clothing. In this case it's more like mold than disease. Also, the prescribed treatment for such an eruption is not a salve or a potion, it is a ritual that is overseen by a Kohen, by a priest, not by a physician. *Tzara'at* is a spiritual malady, not a physical one. It has nothing to do with your bodily health, but rather it is a warning sign about your spiritual health. And to paraphrase the commentary of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian rabbi Ovadia Seforno, it's too bad that no one gets *tzara'at* nowadays. I know that sounds strange. Seforno was not the renaissance version of today's anti-vaxxer. Rather he says, and I am referring to his commentary on Leviticus 13:47, it was out of God's love and compassion for the Jewish people that God used these eruptions on their homes, their garments, and their skin as a way to alert them that there was something seriously wrong in their souls. The appearance of *tzara'at* was God's way of warning people that if, for example their home had such an eruption, that they had better pay attention to what's going on inside their homes...how family members were interacting, how they were treating each other within the walls of their homes. If it appeared on your clothing, or worse, on your skin, you knew that you had better do some real introspection and figure out what was causing you to live in a way that was contrary to Torah values or luring you away from God. You see *tzara'at* was not meant to be thought of as a plague or a pestilence, rather it was, not so different from prophecy, a message from God that something was amiss in your life.

And Seforno teaches us that, also like prophesy—another phenomenon we haven't experienced in a very long time—a community had to be living on a very high spiritual level in order to merit that kind of attention and intervention from God. Nowadays, when crassness and cruelty have become the norm, *tzara'at* would be on so many of our houses, it would be so common that it wouldn't make all that much of a difference. Our ancestors lived in such a way that the Mishkan was at the center of their lives. They thought of God and Torah and mitzvot above all else. Deviation from a life of holiness was an anomaly. Today, the opposite is true. To be religious is to be countercultural. To live a life of piety is the extreme exception. To guard your tongue, and be careful about how you speak to and about others...this is all extremely rare today. And so Seforno teaches, we don't even merit to have *tzara'at*...we don't merit to have God's direct intervention to remind us when we get off track to recalibrate and remember who we are what we stand for.

So in this time-period when we do not have these divinely provided course corrections, how can we improve and heal our societies and our families? The most common explanation for the appearance of *tzara'at* in the Torah was *lashon ha'ra*...the proliferation of gossip, evil speech, and slander about others. If you practiced *lashon ha'ra*, you would get a big bad rash on your skin for all to see. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that an antidote to a culture of *lashon ha'ra* is to deploy as often as possible, *lashon ha-tov*...positive, good, favorable, affirming speech. He says that we should commit ourselves to a daily practice, a daily regimen of offering praise to other people. By committing ourselves to *lashon ha'tov*, we can literally change the airwaves in our families and communities, replacing evil speech, negative speech, critical speech, with speech that lifts people up and reminds them why they are important, cherished, and loved. Such a practice, he teaches, will “heal[s] what *lashon ha'ra* harms. Evil speech destroys relationships. Good speech mends them. This works not only in marriages and families, but also in communities, organisations and businesses. So: in any relationship that matters to you, deliver praise daily. Seeing and praising the good in people makes them better people, makes you a better person, and strengthens the bond between you.” Let’s start that right here, right now, in the hotbed of some of the most notorious yentas and gossips...the American synagogue. Let’s transform what happens within these four walls, on our tallises and yarmulkes, so that when we leave this place we go forth and praise our spouses, our parents, our children; our neighbors and coworkers. Let’s do our part to turn back the tide of negativity and rudeness, adding much more *lashon ha'tov* to the world than *lashon ha'ra*.