

PARASHAT TAZRIA-METZORA

Leviticus 12:1–15:33

Parashat Tazria-Metzora is one of seven designated Torah portions that, depending upon the number of Sabbaths in a year, is either read as two separate portions or combined to assure the reading of the entire Torah. While this volume will combine them, it will present an interpretation on each of their most important themes.

Parashat Tazria presents the rituals of purification for a woman after childbirth and the methods for diagnosing and treating a variety of skin diseases.

Parashat Metzora continues the discussion of skin diseases and the purification rituals for a person cured of them. Attention is given also to the appearance and treatment of fungus or mildew in the home and to the ritual impurity resulting from contact with the discharge of sexual organs.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

Moses tells the people that after the birth of a son a woman will remain in a state of impurity for thirty-three days, and if she bears a daughter for a period of sixty-six days. Afterwards she will bring a lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering. If, however, she cannot afford a lamb, she shall give the priest of the sanctuary two turtledoves for the offering.

· 2 ·

When a person notices a swelling, rash, or discoloration that develops into a scaly infection, it must be reported to the priests, who also function as physicians. If, in examining the infected area, the priests notice that the hair within it has turned white and the infection is deeper than the skin, they are to declare the person *tzara'at*, meaning "infected with a serious skin disease." *Tzara'at* may refer to such skin ailments as eczema, psoriasis, impetigo, or leprosy. Such an infected person is considered *tamei*, or "impure."

However, if the infection does not appear



deeper than the skin and the hair of the area has not turned white, the priests are to isolate the person for seven days. At the end of seven days, the person is to undergo another examination. If the discoloration is fading, the priests will pronounce that person cured and clean. Should the area remain infected, the person is to be quarantined for another seven days. Afterwards he or she is to be reexamined and pronounced either impure or clean.

Similar examinations were to be performed for scaly infections, for the appearance of a white discoloration of skin streaked with red, for an infection resulting from a burn by fire, or for an infection on the head or beard. In all these cases, priests were to isolate those infected for seven days and then reexamine them. If the infection had healed, the person was considered clean. If not, the person was pronounced *tzara'at*, or "infected," and, therefore, unclean.

A person declared *tzara'at* and unclean was to wear torn clothes similar to those worn by a person in mourning and was not to wear a head covering. Whenever such an infected person appeared in

public, that person was to call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" so that others might be protected from infection and impurity.

• 3 •

The same examination and rules applied to the discovery of an infection, or mold, on garments. After a seven-day period, if the garment was still infected, it was to be either washed or burned.

• 4 •

Moses also describes the ceremonies for welcoming the cured *tzara'at* back into the community after healing was confirmed by the priests. The cured *tzara'at* is to bathe, shave all the body hair, and wash his or her garments. Special offerings of lambs and birds are then to be presented at the sanctuary. Afterwards the *tzara'at* is pronounced cured and able to reenter the community and participate in all its sacred rituals.

If, however, the person is poor and cannot afford the required offerings, a reduced number is acceptable. The principle followed here is that a person will offer "depending upon his or her means—whichever he or she can afford."

• 5 •

Moses also instructs the people about what to do if mold or fungus is discovered in the home. In that case, the priests are to quarantine the house for seven days. If the mold remains, they will order either the walls removed or the entire structure destroyed. After seven days, if the mold is gone, repairs are to be made on the home and offerings brought to the sanctuary.

• 6 •

Regulations concerning the infection of sexual organs are also given to the people. Such infections, like *tzara'at*, make a person unclean. Bedding, clothing, or objects touched by an infected person are to be washed. Anyone who has touched the infected person, or who has used an object touched by that person, shall wash his or her body and clothes. He or she will remain unclean until evening. As with *tzara'at*, the people are told to wait seven days to make sure that the person infected is cured. Similar regulations are followed in the case of the emission of semen by men or

the discharge of menstrual blood by women, which, in ancient times, were signs of impurity.

Offerings at the sanctuary are to be made to celebrate the end of the impurity.

THEMES

Parashat Tazria-Metzora contains two important themes:

1. Medical-ritual practices and ethics.
2. The sin of slander.

PEREK ALEF: *Biblical Medicine, Ritual, and Ethics*

Parashat Tazria-Metzora presents us with what seems like a discussion of skin diseases and bodily infections. We are told that, upon finding a swelling, rash, or discoloration on the skin that results in a scaly infection, a person is to report the problem to the priest. This is also to be done if a person notices loss of hair, fungus on clothing, or mold on the walls of a home.

All these are signs of *tzara'at*, a variety of skin diseases, and of being considered *tamei*, "unclean" or "impure." The same applies to a person whose sexual organs are infected. In all these situations, waiting periods of healing are prescribed, as are ritual offerings at the sanctuary after one has been cured and pronounced "clean."

In these chapters of Leviticus we have an important view of ancient medicine and ritual. The priest functions not only in his religious role but also as a kind of diagnostician. As modern biblical scholar Baruch A. Levine notes, the priest "combined medical and ritual procedures in safeguarding the purity of the sanctuary and of the Israelite community, which was threatened by the incidence of disease. He instructed the populace and was responsible for enforcing the prescribed procedures." (Baruch A. Levine, editor, *JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1989, p. 75)

Most Torah interpreters throughout the ages, however, have not considered these chapters about skin infection to be a collection of "medical instructions." Priests prescribe rituals; they do not dispense treatments or medication. Even the use of quarantine regulations shows very little regard for guaranteeing public health. They are more a form of ritual than a means of isolating sick people. For instance, there is no mention of preventing

healthy people from contact with the contents of a house where disease has been discovered.

If, as most interpreters suggest, these commandments having to do with infections are not strictly "medical instructions," then what significance did they have to the people of Israel?

The ancients were undoubtedly baffled by skin diseases. Swellings, rashes, boils, and skin discolorations must have frightened and bewildered them. So did molds and fungi on the walls of homes or infections associated with sexual organs. Often they watched these symptoms progress into terminal diseases. Knowing little about the cause or treatment of such infections, they concluded that they must be the result of God's displeasure and that they endangered both the individual infected and the community.

That may explain why those diagnosed with such infections, or those whose homes were discovered with a threatening fungus, were labeled "unclean" and isolated from the rest of the community. In ancient times such people were considered "cursed" by God and "impure." Touching them, or anything that they may have touched, could spread the "curse" to others.

The important matter here, however, was not only looking for signs that the infected person had been cured but guaranteeing the community that the "curse" would not doom everyone. For that reason, priests not only examined the infected person or home, but they also conducted special rituals in the sanctuary celebrating the end of the infection. Their medical-ritual procedures were meant not only to provide some elementary sanitary safety for the community but, more significantly, to save the community from spreading among them what they understood as God's curse.

Because the diagnosis of such infections and the rituals celebrating their conclusion affected everyone in the community, the services of priests

had to be accessible and the costs of sanctuary offerings had to be affordable to everyone. Essentially, public need necessitated ethical and economic fairness. If the offerings required by the infected person could not be brought to the sanctuary because they were not affordable, the entire community might suffer a continuing curse.

For that reason, the Torah commands that, if a person is poor and cannot afford to bring birds, lambs, hyssop, cedar wood, crimson stuff, choice flour and oil as offerings for the altar of the sanctuary, “one lamb, one-tenth of a measure of choice flour with oil mixed in, and two turtledoves or pigeons—within his means—” may be acceptably substituted. In this way, the poor were made equal to those who could afford the medical-ritual procedures required. This reduction in the cost of offerings for the poor is mentioned several times in the Torah. (Leviticus 5:7–10; 14:21; 27:8)

The Torah identifies six categories of wrongdoing for which individuals were to bring offerings to the sanctuary: (1) a person who swears he has testimony to give but does not; (2) a person who promises to do a certain thing but does not; (3) a ritually unclean person who takes something forbidden or (4) who enters the sanctuary; (5) a woman in labor who swears that she will never again have intercourse with her husband; and (6) a person who suffers from a skin disease because of slandering others.

For such wrongdoing special offerings were required. Yet, in each situation, the Torah provides against financial discrimination. If the person who sinned is poor and cannot afford the offerings required, special provisions are made. Other less expensive sacrifices are substituted and are acceptable. The guiding principle of Jewish ethics, whether in the area of ritual or medicine, is equal treatment for the poor and rich. Each human being is created in God’s image. The offerings of each person, rich or poor, are of equal value to God.

The poor belong to God

The poor are called the people of God, as the sages expounded: “If you lend money to any of My people . . .” Who are “My people”? They are the poor, as it is said, “For the Eternal has comforted the people and has compassion upon the

poor among them.” At times a person who is rich does not pay attention to poor relatives. . . . However, this is not so with God. . . . God cares for the poor. The proof of this is what Isaiah has said: “The Eternal has founded the city of Zion, and in her the poor of God’s people take refuge.” (Bachya ben Asher, Kad ha-Kemach, Charles B. Chavel, translator, pp. 533–534)



Hirsch

In his commentary on Leviticus, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains the reason for making these offerings of the poor affordable. The “poverty-stricken and suffering people,” he writes, “often presume that they have been forsaken by God’s care, abandoned by God.” As a result, “they abandon themselves, give themselves up to despair . . . lose their self-respect. . . . They fall because they have given up all thoughts of betterment.” In commanding that the offerings be made affordable to the poor, the Torah demonstrates that the poor are as important to God as the rich. They and their offerings are equally sacred and acceptable. God has not forsaken them. (See comments on Leviticus 5:13ff.)

Commenting on charitable gifts of the poor, Rabbi Hillel Silverman draws a parallel to the offerings once given in the sanctuary. “Every Jew is enjoined to contribute offerings according to his or her individual means. The wealthy bring more; the poor bring what they can. In the words of the Talmud: ‘But one and the same are the generous and the meager offering, provided that a person’s intention and sincerity are directed to God.’ [Berachot 5b] . . . We should understand that the small gift of the less affluent person may be a far greater sacrifice than the large gift of the wealthy donor. A contribution of time and service given with *kavanah* [enthusiasm] is even more valuable than material gifts.” (*From Week to Week*, p. 105)

Jewish tradition seeks to heighten sensitivity to the plight of the poor without ever robbing them of their dignity. Perhaps that explains why the Torah insists on affordable sacrifices for those who must bring sin offerings to the sanctuary but who

are impoverished. There was to be no discrimination, no special access by the rich to the priests of the sanctuary who examined for skin diseases and conducted the rituals for declaring a person cured and ready for reentry into the community. Rich and poor were to be treated alike. Their gifts were of equal importance to God.

PEREK BET: *The Sin of Slandering Others*

As we have already noted, the Torah and its interpreters present neither a medical diagnosis nor treatment for the skin disorders of their times. While the ancient priests examined infections on the body or fungi in the home, they did not prescribe any medicine or therapy for healing. They did determine a period for quarantine, which may have been unrelated to the fear of passing the infection from one person to another. Instead, the isolation of the infected person seems to grow out of a concern for guarding the community against people who were “unclean” or “impure” because of some wrongdoing.

It is for that reason that the offering brought by a person who has been cured of a skin disease, or whose home has been infected, is called a “sin” offering. The rituals of the offerings in the sanctuary are meant to celebrate “purification,” the end of being considered unclean. All such wrongdoings that cause infections are forgiven through the sacrifices and offerings brought to the priest at the sanctuary.

Many commentators ask: “What was the wrongdoing or the sin that brought on such serious infections and prompted the emergency procedure of quarantine?”

In answering that question, interpreters focus attention upon the record of major biblical personalities who are said to have been afflicted with *tzara'at*, or “skin disorders.”



Rashi

Rashi, for example, points out that Moses suffered from a serious skin disease after he complained to God that the people of Israel would

not listen to him. Because he implied that the people refused to follow God's commandments, Moses was punished. The Torah says that “his hand became infected, as white as snow.” (See comment on Exodus 4:1–6.)

Earlier rabbinic tradition argues that Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, was stricken with a skin disease because she slandered her brothers by gossiping about their relationships with their wives. “They are busy leading the people and make no time to spend at home,” the rabbis accuse her of saying. They also point out that she embarrassed Moses publicly by questioning his marriage to a Cushite woman and by implying that she was as important a prophet as he was. For her gossip, slander, and public accusations, say the rabbis, Miriam was punished with a serious skin infection. (See Numbers 12:1–13; also *Leviticus Rabbah* 16:1.)



Zugot

Rabbi Yochanan, quoting Rabbi Yosi ben Zimra, warns that “spreading *leshon ha-rah*—slander, lies, or misinformation—is identical to denying the power of God.” God commands honesty and the truth. If a person is dishonest, God's desire is undermined. Such a person, says Rabbi Yochanan, will be punished with skin infections.

The talebearer is a cannibal

Teaching the power of gossip to do harm, the Talmud comments that “the gossip stands in Syria and kills in Rome.” (Jerusalem Talmud, Peah 1:1)

Have you heard something about someone? Let it die with you. Be of good courage, it will not harm you if it ends with you. (Ben Sira 19:10)

Your friend has a friend, and your friend's friend has a friend, so be careful of what you say. (Ketubot 109b)

*Where there is no wood, a fire goes out;
Where there is no whisper, a quarrel dies down.
(Proverbs 26:20)*

At another time, Rabbi Samuel bar Nachmeni, quoting Rabbi Yochanan, argues that “the serious skin infections mentioned by the Torah are the result of seven kinds of wrongdoing: slander, bloodshed, perjury, adultery, arrogance, misappropriation, and meanness.” Several examples are given: Joab is punished with skin disease because he murders Abner. (IISamuel 3:29) Gehazi is inflicted because he lies to Na’aman. (IIKings 5:23) Pharaoh is penalized because he takes Sarah away from her husband, Abraham. (Genesis 12:17) King Azariah is inflicted with skin disease because he seeks to appropriate the priesthood under his power. (IIChronicles 26:16) For the rabbis, all these examples prove that *tzara’at* is the result of wrongdoing. (*Arachin* 15b–16a)



Rambam (Maimonides)

It should not surprise us that Moses Maimonides agrees. The great physician and Torah interpreter maintains that “*tzara’at* [skin disease] is not a natural phenomenon but rather a sign and wonder for the people of Israel to warn them against *leshon ha-ra*—evil talk.”



Obadiah Sforno enlarges upon Maimonides’ observation, arguing that the quarantine ordered by the priest is meant to prompt a person to ask God’s forgiveness for his or her sins. The quarantine is a time to reconsider one’s actions, both the intentional and the unintentional ones. In confronting one’s shortcomings, honestly scrutinizing one’s treatment of others, there is chance for personal improvement and repentance. In this way the affliction of *tzara’at* leads to isolation, which leads to repentance, which brings about God’s forgiveness for wrongdoing and the rehabilitation of each sinful human being. (See comments on Leviticus 14:21.)



Leibowitz

Nehama Leibowitz extends Sforno’s logic in a different way. She quotes the Talmud’s observation that “the house affected by *tzara’at* . . . exists for the purpose of education.” In other words, she says that “the plague teaches us that society should take notice of the first sign of misconduct, however small. Just the same as a disease begins with hardly noticeable symptoms and can be stopped if detected in time, so a moral disease in society can be prevented from spreading if immediate steps are taken. Otherwise it will spread throughout the community.” (*Studies in Vayikra*, pp. 137–138)



Peli

Pinchas Peli also links the sin of *leshon ha-ra* to the skin infections and fungus mentioned in our Torah portion. He defines *leshon ha-ra* as “slander, gossip, talebearing, and all the other forms of damage to the individual and society that may be caused by words.” The result of such wrongdoing, says Peli, is a “justly deserved punishment—leprosy, an illness that cannot be hidden.”

Dangers of the tongue

The Book of Proverbs (18:21) teaches: “Death and life are in the hands of the tongue. . . .” One who loves the tongue and uses it to speak words of Torah and commandments will be justly rewarded, but one who speaks slander brings upon himself much sorrow. (Tze’erah u-Re’erah, comment on Leviticus 14:1–2)

A person may think, “Of what importance are my words? A word has no substance, neither can it be seen or touched. . . .” It is true that words have no substance and cannot be seen, but, like the wind, they can cause entire worlds to crash. (A.Z. Friedman, Wellsprings of Torah, 2 vols., Judaica Press, New York, 1969, p. 234)

Eleazar Ha-Kappar taught: "If you slander others, you will also commit other such wrongdoing." (Derech Eretz, chap. 7)

Why is the punishment so harsh? Peli explains: "Jewish tradition sees a lethal weapon in the evil tongue and minces no words in its condemnation. The Talmud equates speaking *leshon ha-ra* with flagrant atheism, with adultery, and with murder. In fact, it is worse than murder since it simultaneously destroys three people: the one who relates the gossip, the one who listens to it, and the one it concerns." (*Torah Today*, B'nai B'rith Books, Washington, D.C., 1987, pp. 127–131)

As we have discovered, most commentators connect the skin infections and the outbreak of fungus on clothing or in homes with the sins of an evil tongue. While today we may reject the connection, seeing no medical evidence between such afflictions and what people say or do, Torah interpreters still leave us with much to consider.

The spread of lies, gossip, slander, character assassination, derogatory statements, and fraudulent stories can infect society and destroy human lives. Drawing a parallel to the spread of contagious and dangerous disease, the commentators warn about the damage such evil talk can bring to individuals and society. Learning to quarantine such evil and to cure ourselves from the temptations of *leshon ha-ra* are still significant challenges today.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. The Torah teaches that there must be no financial discrimination between rich and poor

when it comes to the purchase of offerings for sacrifice in the Temple. The offerings must be affordable to all for the dignity of every human soul is precious to God. How would you extend this ethical principle to synagogue membership and to the cost of health care, hospital insurance, and education?

2. The *Zohar Hadash* teaches that "if a person be in debt to God because of his or her sins, God does not consider it a debt because poverty often misleads a person's powers for reasoning." (Comment on Leviticus 49) Is this so? How may such an argument justify accepting less from the poor by way of an offering for wrongdoing?
3. Rabbi Yannai told of a peddler who went from town to town crying out: "Who wants to purchase the secret of guaranteeing a long and happy life?" When he challenged the peddler to prove that he possessed such a secret, the peddler opened a Hebrew Bible to the Book of Psalms. He then pointed to the words: "Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech. . . ." (34:14; *Leviticus Rabbah* 16:2) Compare Rabbi Yannai's lesson to the dangers of slander emphasized by other Jewish commentators.
4. The Talmud asks the question: "Why does the sin offering of those with skin diseases consist of birds?" In answer, we are told: "Because the sin of such persons is gossip. They are chirping all the time. Therefore, their offering must remind them of their wrongdoing—warn them of how dangerous it is to engage in gossip." (*Arachin* 16a) Why do the teachers of Jewish ethics consider gossip and slander such serious offenses?