

Parashat Tazria-Metsorah

This morning we turn once again to one of the most enigmatic of all Biblical texts - that relating to the condition of tzaraat. Let us begin by first of all observing that it is a mistake to connect the disease with which our portion is primarily concerned, the disease known as tzaraat, with leprosy, as has unfortunately so often been the case in the history of commentary. Leprosy and the Biblical disease of tzaraat are not to be confused with one another in spite of some surface parallels. For sure, both leprosy and tzaraat are skin diseases, and the Biblical practice of isolating the infected person mirrors the traditional practice of quarantining the leper. But beyond this the similarities cease. In the Hebrew text therefore tzaraat, unlike leprosy, is not merely a disease which affects human skin, but is one that can infect inanimate objects too. We therefore read in Vayikra 14:33 that "Adonai said to Moshe and Aharon, 'When you have entered the land of Kena'an which I am giving you as a possession, and I put an infection of tzaraat in a house in the land that you possess, then the owner of the house is to come and tell the cohen, 'It seems to me that there may be an infection in the house.'" Indeed, the Torah proceeds, as we have said, to describe in great detail the procedure for diagnosing tzaraat as an infection of a building and explains the methods that ought to be used in order to prevent the spread of the disease to other materials. Leprosy, we should note however, is spread only between human beings by the airborne transmission of a bacterium. Furthermore, as Rabbi Nosson Scherman helpfully writes in the Artscroll commentary on Vayikra, "if the reason for the metzora's confinement [the metzora is the name applied to someone with tzaraat] is to prevent the spread of the disease then some of the mitzvot in our portion would be ludicrous. For example, if the malady covers the victim's entire body he is not tamei (unclean), but if his skin begins to heal, he becomes tamei. In the case of a house that is afflicted, the Torah prescribes that before the house is pronounced tamei, all its contents should be removed, because they, too, would be contaminated if they were to be inside at the time of the pronouncement. But if there were a danger of contagion it would be irrational for the afflicted household items to be excluded from the quarantine." "In perhaps the most telling example," he continues, "the Talmud teaches that if the symptoms of tzaraat appear on a newlywed or during a festival season, the Kohen does not examine the affliction or declare it to be tamei, in order not to interfere with the celebration. But if the purpose of these laws is to prevent the spread of disease, it would be absolutely imperative to enforce the laws at times of great overcrowding and mingling!" "Clearly," he concludes, "as the Sages teach, tzaraat is not a bodily disease, but the physical manifestation of a spiritual malaise, a punishment designed to show the malefactor that he must mend his ways."

Indeed, as we read in Devarim 24:8-9, Hashem said, "When there is an outbreak of tzaraat, be careful to observe and do just what the cohanim, who are L'vi'im, teach you. Take care to do as I ordered them. Remember what Adonai your G-d did to Miryam on the road after you left Egypt." In this passage Hashem clearly connects outbreaks of tzaraat with the fate of Miryam the prophetess, who was infected with the disease because she spoke against her brother Moshe's leadership, and it is on this basis that outbreaks of tzaraat have been traditionally

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understood within Judaism to have occurred as a direct divine response to the sin of lashon ha ra or evil talk. An article in the Jewish Chronicle a few years ago wonderfully summarised this traditional understanding: "The Talmud," it said, "tells us that the plague of tzaraat comes only as a punishment for lashon hara (evil talk). Much ink has been spilt on the evils of lashon hara, but one of the most telling pieces is to be found in the Talmud tractate Eruchin, 'Evil talk kills three people: the speaker, the listener, and the one who is spoken of.' The Psalmist refers to lashon hara as being comparable to 'sharp arrows of the warrior and coals of broom' (Psalm 120:4). The arrow once released cannot be withdrawn, and the coals of broom continue smouldering for a very long time. Once we utter those malicious words, they cannot be withdrawn and their negative impact continues to reverberate far into the future. And thus lashon hara kills the soul not only of the speaker and the listener, but also of the subject as well." In fact, the Messianic Writings also tell us in this respect that our tongues possess the power to deal out death, for "the tongue is a tiny part of the body," it says, "yet it boasts great things. See how a little fire sets a whole forest ablaze! Yes, the tongue is a fire, a world of wickedness. The tongue is so placed in our body that it defiles [that is it makes tamei or unclean] every part of it, setting ablaze the whole of our life; and it is set on fire by Gei-Hinnom itself. For people have tamed and continue to tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures; but the tongue no one can tame - it is an unstable and evil thing, full of death-dealing poison!" It is for precisely this reason therefore that, according to the Torah, Hashem afflicted the gossip - the one who spoke evil against another, who slandered or undermined someone else's reputation and therefore effectively dealt death by their manner speech. According to the Torah Hashem placed the sign of death, this terrible skin disease, in their bodies in order to indicate both to themselves and others the manner of their spiritual lives, and it is interesting to note in this respect, as R' Yisrael Salanter comments, that although the previous portion detailed the kosher and non-kosher animals one is not punished with tsaraat for eating treif. On the contrary, says Rabbi Salanter, "That awful, isolating, public rebuke by G-d comes in retribution for gossip and slander, the 'clever' behaviour that devours people and their reputations. People tend," he says, "to be very careful about what they eat, but they are lax about what they say. Yet G-d does not bring tzaraat upon someone who devours pork, only upon someone who devours people!" Once tzaraat had been diagnosed the metzorah was to be isolated from the community. As the Scripture states, "Everyone who has tzaraat sores is to be unclean; since he is unclean he is to live in isolation; he must live outside the camp." Thus separated from the community, the metzorah had no further means of infecting it with his bile and could no longer deal out their form of death to others, for as the Midrash asks: "What is special about the person afflicted with tzaraat that the Torah says, 'He shall live alone; he must live outside the camp'? The Holy One blessed be He said, 'Since this person sought to create division between man and wife, or a person and his neighbour, [he is punished by being divided from the community], which is why it says, 'Let him live alone, outside the camp.'"

The life which the metzorah was now forced to live was certainly not an enviable one. In the desert, which of course provides the immediate context in which these mitzvot concerning

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tzaraat are to be found, to be 'outside the camp' meant to be exposed to all kinds of mortal physical and spiritual dangers. To be 'outside the camp' meant to be cut off from the spiritual life of the community, with no access to the sacrificial rites and therefore without possibility of forgiveness. Outside the camp was where our ancestors were commanded by Hashem to execute sinners. It was where the carcasses of animals were burnt up, and where our people were instructed to place their latrines. Outside the camp was the place most likely to be attacked by an enemy, and the place most likely to come into contact with dangerous wild animals. It was also the place where the demons of the field were said to roam, seeking to devour souls. Moreover, by Second Temple times, outside the camp was the place that had become synonymous with hell because not only was Gei Hinnom, the valley outside of Jerusalem, the place where the pagans had once sacrificed their children to their gods, but it had also become the place where the city's rubbish continually burned; thus it was perpetually filled with fire and smoke. So to sum up therefore, to be placed outside the camp was to be placed in the symbolic equivalent of hell. It was a place of no return, a place of death in which, for all intents and purposes all hope was extinguished. For although our portion certainly contains detailed instructions as to the procedure that had to be followed in case of a metzorah's healing, apart from Miryam, the Tanakh contains not one single episode of a Jewish metzorah being healed. It is precisely for this reason that the sages came to the considered opinion that the healing of a Jewish metzorah would be a Messianic miracle - in other words, it would be a miracle which only the Messiah could achieve. In the Talmud therefore one of the names attributed to the Messiah is the "Metzorah scholar": "as it is written, Surely he hath born our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him a metzorah, smitten of God, and afflicted." And again in relation to Tehillim 95:7, which states "For he is our God, and we are the people in his pasture, the sheep in his care", the Talmud says: "R. Joshua b. Levi met Eliyahu standing by the entrance of R. Simeon b. Yohai's tomb. He asked him: 'Have I a portion in the world to come?' He replied, 'If this Master desires it.' R. Joshua b. Levi said, 'I saw two, but heard the voice of a third. He then asked him. 'When will the Messiah come?'-Go and ask him himself,' was his reply. 'Where is he sitting?-'At the entrance.' And by what sign may I recognize him?-'He is sitting among the poor metzorim: all of them untie [them] all at once, and rebandage them together. whereas he unties and rebandages each separately, [before treating the next], thinking, should I be wanted, [it being time for my appearance as the Messiah] I must not be delayed [through having to bandage a number of sores].'"

The Zohar, Shemot, Section 2, also speaks of the leper Messiah: "When the Messiah hears of the great suffering of Israel in their dispersion, and of the wicked amongst them who seek not to know their Master, he weeps aloud on account of those wicked ones amongst them, as it is written: But he was wounded because of our transgression, he was crushed because of our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5). The souls then return to their place. The Messiah, on his part, enters a certain Hall in the Garden of Eden, called the Hall of the Afflicted. There he calls for all the diseases and pains and sufferings of Israel, bidding them settle on himself, which they do. And were it not that he thus eases the burden from Israel, taking it on himself, no one could

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endure the sufferings meted out to Israel in expiation on account of their neglect of the Torah. So Scripture says, "Surely our diseases he did bear, etc. (Isaiah 53:4). A similar function was performed by R. Eleazar here on earth. For, indeed, beyond number are the chastisements awaiting every man daily for the neglect of the Torah, all of which descended into the world at the time when the Torah was given. As long as Israel were in the Holy Land, by means of the Temple service and sacrifices they averted all evil diseases and afflictions from the world. Now it is the Messiah who is the means of averting them from mankind until the time when a man quits this world and receives his punishment, as already said."

Here and elsewhere then the Messiah is presented as one who will minister healing to those afflicted with tzaraat, and given that this is so it is little wonder that in the written accounts of Yeshua's life he is attested to have brought about the healing of many who were afflicted with this disease. In Mark 1:40-45 we therefore read that "A man afflicted with tzara'at came to Yeshua and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Yeshua reached out his hand, touched him and said to him, "I am willing! Be cleansed!" Instantly the tzara'at left him, and he was cleansed. Yeshua sent him away with this stern warning: "See to it that you tell no one; instead, as a testimony to the people, go and let the cohen examine you, and offer for your cleansing what Moshe commanded." But he went out and began spreading the news, talking freely about it; so that Yeshua could no longer enter a town openly but stayed out in the country, where people continued coming to him from all around." And similarly, in Luke 17:11-19 we read: "On his way to Yerushalayim, Yeshua passed along the border country between Shomron and the Galil. As he entered one of the villages, ten men afflicted with tzara'at met him. They stood at a distance and called out, "Yeshua! Rabbi! Have pity on us!" On seeing them, he said, "Go and let the cohanim examine you!" And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, as soon as he noticed that he had been healed, returned shouting praises to God, and fell on his face at Yeshua's feet to thank him. Now he was from Shomron. Yeshua said, "Weren't ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found coming back to give glory to God except this foreigner?" And to the man from Shomron he said, "Get up, you may go; your trust has saved you."

A common feature of both these episodes of healing is Yeshua's insistence that the metzorah go immediately to the cohanim for inspection so that the prescribed ritual of cleansing - the same ritual with which our portion is concerned this morning - might take place. And given that this is so can you imagine for a moment the consternation of the cohen who received these healed metzorim? No Jewish metzora had ever been healed of tzaraat, meaning that the ritual had never been carried out. Indeed, we can imagine the cohen's panic as he examined the metzorim, determined that they were now clean and rushed to the very same portion that we read today in order to ascertain what had to be done! There was literally no one that he might consult as to how this ceremony ought to be carried out. So we should make no mistake about it, when Yeshua healed these metzorim he sent out an unmistakable message to the leaders of our people, providing the cohanim with proof positive of his messianic credentials. To put all this into a contemporary context, it is akin to those scientists

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who have scoured the universe for decades for evidence of intelligent life suddenly receiving the unequivocal message: 'We are here!' In this case it was the Messiah that sent the message, 'Here I am!' How the hearts of the cohanim must have skipped a beat when the metzorah that Yeshua healed appeared before them and they recognised the clear message that these people represented. Messiah has come! Indeed, perhaps this helps to explain why so many cohanim became followers of Yeshua, for as we read in Acts 6:7, "The number of talmidim in Yerushalayim increased rapidly, and a large crowd of cohanim were becoming obedient to the faith."

The precise rituals by which the metzorim that Yeshua healed had to undergo are detailed for us in our portion and include the sprinkling of sacrificial blood on the metzorah and his immersion in *mayim chayim* - living waters. But as previously noted it is important to understand that this ritual was not curative. The whole point was that the metzorah had *already* been healed so that the ceremony merely set the seal on what had already happened. By means of the ceremony, moreover, the Priest created a vivid symbolic experience which spoke to all who saw it. Blood, taken in this case from a slaughtered bird, is a common detergent in the Priestly rituals and is used to remove the impurity from the healed person. The blood of the slain bird magically absorbs the disease from the metzora and transfers it to the water. The live bird then reabsorbs the disease when it is dipped into the water and transports it away into the open country. The transfer of impurity to the live bird leaves the person pure. The dispatch of the bird into the open country completes the ritual sequence by removing the impurity from the community and its holy places. The bird flies instead to the place outside the camp once inhabited by the metzora with its overtones of death and hell. Thus, in essence the ceremony symbolised the victory of life over death. Indeed, every element of the ceremony represents life: the live birds, the living waters, the blood and reddening ingredients all shout "life." Thus, explains Jacob Milgrom, the metzora, who had been as close to death as it was possible, transitioned to the opposite end of the spectrum. "The entire purification process is nothing but a ritual, a rite of passage, marking the transition from death to life." In other words, these are liminal stages, stages of transformation, and of reabsorption by the community. As the cured metzora re-enters his community, his home, and his sanctuary, he passes from impurity to holiness and from death to life, and is reconciled with his God."

In summary, therefore the theme of this ritual is not just life but rebirth. The use of the mayim chyaim in particular, that is the service of tevilah, conveys to us the essential idea that the metzorah had now been reborn, because the practice of immersion consciously echoes the process of birth, with the spiritually transformed metzorah emerging new and clean from the womb-like waters just as a baby emerges from his or her mother's womb. Indeed, the metzorah's skin, which was once so scaly and broken, has now become new and soft like that of a baby. The metzorim who presented themselves before the undoubtedly flabbergasted cohanim were therefore people who had, in a very real sense, been reborn. They were people who had transitioned from a place of death, symbolised by their terrible disease and by their

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residence 'outside the camp', to the place of life symbolised by the community of Israel and its sanctuary. Their restored bodies, the sacrificial rites and their passage through the mayim chayim all testified to their complete transformation by means of Yeshua's touch and verified what so many tens of thousands of our people also came to believe, that he was and still is our promised Messiah - the metzorah scholar who compassionately binds up the wounds of the sick and befriends the outcast. As indeed we read of him, "While Yeshua was in the house eating, many tax-collectors and sinners came and joined him and his talmidim at the meal. When the P'rushim saw this, they said to his talmidim, "Why does your rabbi eat with tax-collectors and sinners?" But Yeshua heard the question and answered, "The ones who need a doctor aren't the healthy but the sick. As for you, go and learn what this means: 'I want compassion rather than animal-sacrifices.' For I didn't come to call the 'righteous,' but sinners!"