

TAZRIAH-M'TZORAH

Taught by Steve Bailey

A DISEASE OF THE SOUL

Vayik.13

These two sidrot have evoked centuries of discussion and debate, leaving many commentators simply perplexed. *Tazriah* begins by continuing the theme from the past sidra of "tahir" and "tamei" (symbolic purity and impurity¹) and applying it to the case of natural childbirth -- that's understandable. But then there is an abrupt switch to a detailed description of various skin diseases, mold-like conditions of clothing and a type of rot affecting the structure and walls of houses. Moreover, not only are the dermatological conditions described in detail, but also differential diagnostic symptomatology and various courses of healing are delineated in similar detail. If these chapters were bound in a separate booklet, it could be entitled, "*A Medical Treatise on Dermatological Conditions of the Ancient Far East.*"

Surely such a booklet would not be a national best seller. In fact, not many laymen would be remotely curious about its contents. And it's just this point that has perplexed Torah commentators for generations. Why is a detailed medical treatise part of the Torah? We have always viewed the Torah as a guidebook of moral, ethical and spiritual dimensions -- even the structure and furnishings of the Mikdash could be understood as metaphors for spiritual concepts.

Taking another tact, we might say that the Torah is concerned with our physical well-being and health regulations are appropriate. But if that's the case, why detail just these diseases and no other, more commonplace, maladies (like fevers, injuries)?

Let's leave these questions in abeyance and assume the premise, for argument's sake, that the Torah is, in fact, discussing a disease of Biblical times, called leprosy, and its effects on the community. Here is what the popular Hertz (not Hirsch) commentary says:

"The prominence given to this subject must be due to the prevalence of this class of malady in the Near East....Many authorities regard these regulations as based only on sanitary principles. A suspected person was isolated for a period of time, until his diagnosis became more certain; and when he was found to be affected, he was compelled to reside outside the camp."

¹ For the present study, we can say that "tahir" and "tamei" in these sidrot refer to psychological/spiritual states of mind that prevent a person from participating in the functions of the Sanctuary (while in the "tamei" condition) or allow full participation and appreciation of the Temple ceremonies and korbanot (the "tahir" condition). What these states are and why they have an effect on a person's relationship to the Mikdash is beyond the scope of a footnote.

In other words, these chapters are seen as sanitary health regulations, including detailed diagnostic and treatment procedures to prevent contagion.

Rav Hirsch vigorously challenges these assumptions. The Torah, as an ethical and spiritual work, would not present arbitrary, selective medical advice. He presents a series of facts gathered from the text, oral tradition and medicine to support his claim.

- 1) Clinically, leprosy follows a slow, progressive disease process, with a poor prognosis for recovery (average life expectancy is 18 years after onset). With the disease called "*tzara'at*," we see that not only is it curable within a few weeks, but strangely enough, if the disease covers the whole body, the person is *not* isolated nor given any treatment, and is declared "*tahor*" (spiritually pure!; vv.12,13)!
- 2) The kohanim are the ones to diagnose the disease. However, there is no indication anywhere in the Torah that they had any knowledge or skill in health care or medical treatment of the people.
- 3) In terms of the diagnostic procedure, the kohane only inspects skin which is directly visible to the eye (v.12); skin which is normally covered by clothing is irrelevant for the diagnosis. Also, only if healthy skin is forming on the diseased spot is the person considered in need of isolation. If the healing process has not yet started, the person is *not* declared diseased and *not* isolated (vv.14-17)! Both of these procedures are quite incomprehensible if we are trying to diagnose a disease and prevent contagion.
- 4) Even more strange is the law that during the week of a wedding, Shabbat or any of the festivals (when tens of thousands of pilgrims converge on Yerushalayim) the examinations were suspended! Certainly, if we are concerned with public health, it is irrational to suspend the diagnostic procedures just at those times when the city is crowded with people!
- 5) In 14:36, when diagnosing a case of suspected "*tzara'at*" that has affected a house, the Torah says that the kohane has to remove all the articles from the house, before making the inspection, lest he find the house "*tamei*" and the owner would suffer financial loss through the destruction of his clothing and furniture! If the purpose of the diagnosis is to prevent further contagion, removing the infected material to avoid financial loss is ludicrous.
- 6) Finally, all these laws of examination and isolation do not apply to non-Jews living in Israel. Neither do they apply to rural areas or towns without walls -- only to the original walled cities during the time of Joshua's conquest. These laws are quite strange, since it is obvious that diagnosis and treatment of a disease in the interest of public health has nothing to do with a person's faith or type of city in which he dwells.

There are many more details that similarly argue against considering "*tzara'at*" as the disease of leprosy, needing diagnosis and isolation.

So if we are to reject the opinion that these are health regulations, how are we to understand this compendium of laws? Hirsch directs us to find the Torah's mention of "*tzara'at*" other than in the text that we are studying.

We find an important reference to "*tzara'at*" in Devarim 24:8-9. In this chapter, the Torah discusses social matters dealing with respect to our fellow-man and our duty to be concerned with the well-being of others. In the midst of these social laws, we read, "Be aware of the disease of "*tzara'at*"...do all which the priests teach you....Remember what God did to Miriam on the way out of Egypt." The event referred to regarding Moshe's sister, Miriam, is in Bamidbar 12:1-15. Albeit with good intentions, Miriam slandered her brother by implying that his relationship with his wife was suffering because he had become too spiritual and aloof. As the result of her unjust comment, God caused her to be struck with "*tzara'at*" and, despite the appeal of Moshe, sent her out of the camp for seven days to contemplate her shameful behaviour.

Thus, the skin disease of "*tzara'at*" was a punishment, caused by God, for Miriam's social sin of audaciously speaking against her brother. Therefore, in a listing of social laws in Devarim, the Torah inserts a reminder of this event to make us aware that the disease of "*tzara'at*" is to be viewed as a sign of God's displeasure at *social misbehaviour* -- especially the misuse of speech. Just as Miriam was stricken and had to be isolated to consider her misdeeds, so will those who abuse others with speech be cast out of the social community. Many comments in the Talmud and midrash consider the disease of "*tzara'at*" as a deserved consequence for gossip, slander, pride, perjury and selfishness.

Now, if this hypothesis is correct, we have to explain the various laws associated with the diagnosis and treatment of this disease, evident in our text, in the light of it being an indication, by God, of a person's social misbehaviour.

First of all, the fact that "*tzara'at*" is not medically equivalent to leprosy is no surprise; we are dealing with a God-caused symbolic disease of the skin, not an infectious organism. Why is it a disease of the skin and, in fact, only the visible portions of skin, as we noted? Well, the social attractiveness of a person is closely tied to a person's outward appearance. A person who abuses his power of speech to hurt others, has made himself unappealing and unattractive to his fellow-men. If God wished to indicate that there were areas of "disease" in a person's social behaviour, an effective sign is to make the person physically unappealing and repugnant to society. It is an obvious message to the affected person that he or she should take a serious look at his or her own social behaviour and begin working for self-betterment.

This working for self-betterment helps explain the treatment by social isolation for weekly periods. It accomplished two important purposes. First, it showed the person that

by his abuse of speech, he had lost the privilege of remaining in the community. But more importantly, it provided a week of being alone with himself, which forced him to seriously evaluate his attitudes and behaviour towards others. It was a *forced retreat* for self-confrontation and self-evaluation.

After seven days, the kohane returned to see if there were spots of healing on the lesions. It was just this sign that required *another* seven days of isolation. If there was no healing, and the disease spread to the whole body, the person was told to return to the community! What sense does this make? To use an analogy from psychotherapeutic work, the only time that it worthwhile to continue to work with a patient, *is when there are beginning signs of healthy change*. If a patient is quite resistant to change and unable to confront the issues at hand, there is no use for continued therapy. He goes back to his family and friends where he will continue to be confronted with his problems. The patient is advised to return when he recognizes that change needs to be made and is willing to progress towards healthy functioning.

Now let's apply this process to the case of "*tzara 'at*." When the kohane sees that *some* healing has begun, it shows that the person has begun to recognize his errors, and another seven day period of self-reflection is worthwhile. However, if he is completely covered with the sign of his social crime, and there is *no indication of a healing process*, continued isolation will produce no benefit. Thus his "therapy" is postponed and he is put back into society to face a community who will avoid social contact with him and thereby, continually remind him of his need to confront his behaviour. When he is ready to recognize his errors, healing will begin and the kohane will re-institute the therapeutic isolation.

It may be seen from all of this that the kohane requires no special medical skills or healing arts. He is, as it were, a spiritual therapist, which is well within his role as representative of the Sanctuary. We also see that fear of contagion was not a relevant factor and that the application of these special Divine signs of displeasure was appropriate for God's model nation and not the non-Jews living in the land.

In closing, we may feel thankful that such consequences do not manifest themselves in modern times. If our bodies, clothes or houses would show disease, mold and rot as a consequence of our social misbehaviour, we would have a continuous epidemic! But the Ramban saw these signs as indications of God's Presence with the people and it is because of our unworthiness that we no longer merit the direct, observable intervention of God in our lives. He writes,

"This is no natural phenomenon at all, and existed nowhere else in the world. So long as the B'nai Yisrael were in harmony with God, His Spirit was always upon them, as evident in the healthy appearance of their bodies, clothing and houses. Whenever one of them committed a sin, he would suffer a discoloration of his skin, garments or house, indicating that God departed from him".

Is the absence of "*tzara 'at*" a blessing or a curse?