

## Tazria: How To Become An Ex-Leper Miriam Lorie, Class of 2024

---

The legendary comedy troupe Monty Python (who I am proud to call fellow Brits), in their take on Second Temple life in *The Life of Brian*, did not fail to include the subject of this and next week's *parsha*—that of *tzaraat*, often translated as leprosy (although seemingly very different to its modern medical attribution):

Ex-Leper: Okay, sir, my final offer: half a shekel for an old ex-leper?

Brian: Did you say “ex-leper”?

Ex-Leper: That's right, sir, 16 years behind a veil and proud of it, sir.

If Tazria is a spiritual-medical journal, then the kohen plays the role of doctor, and *tzaraat* is described, diagnosed, and treated. However, *tzaraat* affects not just skin but also clothes and houses. As Aviva Zornberg says, “Classifying the human body together with clothing and housing creates a bizarre category of symptoms. It is difficult to find an analogy in modern clinical understanding.”<sup>1</sup>

We often look, therefore, to our commentators to explain *tzaraat*. Our Rabbis explain it as a *spiritual* rather than physical condition, famously connecting it to *lashon hara*—misuse of speech. The episode at the end of *parshat Beha'alotekha* in which Miriam is punished with *tzaraat* after speaking ill of Moshe seems to prove the point.

However, there is another place to look to understand this condition, and that is our *Haftarah*, which features the story of the Aramean general Na'aman who suffers from *tzaraat*. I recommend reading the narrative in full,<sup>2</sup> but for now here is a summary:

A Jewish girl was captured in war against the Arameans and taken to serve the wife of the General Na'aman. Rabbi Alex Israel points out the contrast between Na'aman's almost ironic description *ish gadol* “big man” and that of the *na'arah kitanah* “little girl” who, we will see, exceeds Na'aman in wisdom.<sup>3</sup> The girl suggests that Na'aman go to see the Israelite prophet to be healed. Na'aman arrives at the door of the prophet Elisha, along with horses and chariots. Elisha sends a messenger out with a simple instruction: “Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean” (II Kings 5:10). However this enrages Na'aman, who expected personal service from the prophet, pomp and circumstance:

“I thought,” he said, “he would surely come out to me, and would stand and invoke the LORD his God by name, and would wave his hand toward the spot, and cure the affected part. Are

---

<sup>1</sup> Aviva Zornberg, *The Hidden Order of Intimacy; Reflections on the Book of Leviticus*

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.sefaria.org/II\\_Kings.5?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/II_Kings.5?lang=bi)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/neviim/sefer-melakhim-bet/naaman-humility-and-hubris-ii-kings-ch-5>

not the Amanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? I could bathe in them and be clean!” And he stalked off in a rage (II Kings 5:12).

Na’aman here shows both individual and nationalistic hubris. He expected star treatment. He wanted fuss and attention from the prophet. He also was enraged that the river Jordan could heal, when the superior rivers of Damascus could not (particularly given the Arameans’ recent military success). We, the reader, realize at this point that it is not the river Jordan itself that will heal Na’aman from his *tzaraat*, but the act of humility needed to lower himself, and drop some of his pride. His servants coax him:

“Sir,” they said, “if the prophet told you to do something difficult, would you not do it? How much more when he has only said to you, ‘Bathe and be clean’” (II Kings 5:13).

So Na’aman acquiesces, lowering himself literally and figuratively:

*Va’yared va’yitbol ba’yarden shevah p’amim k’dvar ish ha’elokim va’yashev b’saro k’visar na’ar katan va’yithar.*

“So he went down and immersed himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had bidden; and his flesh became like a little boy’s, and he was clean” (II Kings 5:14).

We might note the “little boy” reference. What a contrast to the “big man” we met at the outset of the story! Na’aman acknowledges that “there is no God in the whole world except in Israel”—a sort of conversion moment—and presses gifts on Elisha, which are refused.

Our *Haftarah* teaches us a different side of *tzaraat*, one which is made explicit by the midrash:

*Tzaraat* comes from eleven things: cursing the Lord, illicit sexual relations, bloodshed, attributing to one’s fellow traits that he does not have, being arrogant, entering an area that is not one’s own, lying, stealing, swearing falsely, profaning the name of God, and idolatry... On being arrogant—that is Na’aman, for it says, “Na’aman, commander of the army of the king of *Aram*, was important.” What is meant by being important? That he was arrogant because he was a great warrior, and that is how he became leprous (Bamidbar Rabba 7:5).

*Tzaraat* therefore is not just connected with *lashon hara*, but with a litany of other misdemeanors, like the trait of arrogance illustrated by the “*ish gadol*” Na’aman.

I think it is fitting that the skin disease *tzaraat* is the effect of arrogance because, as Rav Alex Israel says:

Skin, clothing and house—these are the membranes which protect me from the outside worlds. They are also three things by which we make an impression. Our social cocoon and our social markers.<sup>4</sup>

Primarily with our behavior, but also with the way we display our skin, the clothes we choose to wear, and how we use our homes—all of these can be media for Na’aman—level arrogance and pride, used to show off what an “*ish gadol*” we are. Na’aman had worn the fierce skin of a warrior, the clothing of battle armor, and when it came to a home, he stopped outside Elisha’s home, waiting for the great prophet to come to *him*. He needed to be taught a lesson to conduct himself with humility, using the membranes of skin, clothing and home for good in the world.

In Biblical times, through *tzaraat*, these barriers became permeable. What was on the inside made its way to the outside. What was supposed to conceal actually revealed. Nowadays, just as God’s face is hidden, the immediate effect of arrogance, *lashon hara*, and the long list in Bamidbar Rabbah are hidden. Our skin may blush or burn but there is no shaming mark of misdemeanor. We live instead with the heavy curtains which distance action from effect.

Returning finally to Monty Python’s tenacious ex-leper, we are reminded that there is an endpoint to *tzaraat*, that it is treatable. That the isolation and shame of sin are temporary, and that our tradition offers paths back to purity. That even a Na’aman can repent of his arrogance and become an *ex-metzora*, finding a path to God, community, and truth.

---

*Miriam Lorie is from Borehamwood UK, where she is the Rabbi in Training at Kehillat Nashira—the first Orthodox British woman to hold a clergy role. Miriam co-founded a local Partnership Minyan in 2013, the first such minyan to regularly meet in the UK. Miriam has worked at Lead, developing Jewish leaders for the UK Jewish community, where she collaborated with the London School of Jewish Studies to develop and run an online Jewish literacy course for community leaders. Miriam is also a trained kallah teacher and has taught Jewish texts in a variety of adult education settings. Miriam was named one of the Jewish Chronicle’s “Sixteen under 30’s to watch in 2016” and in the Jewish News’ “40 under 40” in 2020.*

---

<sup>4</sup><https://elmad.pardes.org/2020/01/winter-2019-pardes-learning-seminar-ego-humility-and-the-distortion-of-religion/>