

Parshat Tazria-Metzora
Beyond Skin Deep
Rabbi Emily Goldberg Winer - Class of 2022

In Parshat Tazria, we are offered a window into the depths of Bnei Yisrael's anxiety. Without context or background, we are presented with a diagnosis and recovery plan for *tzaraat*, a skin ailment that has been categorized as leprosy:

אָדָם כִּי־יִהְיֶה בְּעוֹר־בְּשָׂרוֹ שָׂאת אֹזֶס־פֹּחַת אוֹ בְּהָרֵת וְהָיָה בְּעוֹר־בְּשָׂרוֹ לִנְגַע צָרַעַת וְהוֹבֵא
אֶל־אֶהֱרָן־הַכֹּהֵן אוֹ אֶל־אֶחָד מִבְּנָיו הַכֹּהֲנִים: וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַנֶּגַע בְּעוֹר־הַבָּשָׂר וְשָׁעַר בְּנִגְעֵ הַפֶּה | לָבֵן
וּמְרָאָה הַנֶּגַע עֵמֶק מֵעוֹר בְּשָׂרוֹ נִגַּע צָרַעַת הוּא וְרָאָהוּ הַכֹּהֵן וְטִמְא אֹתוֹ: וְאִם־בְּהָרֵת לָבָן הוּא בְּעוֹר
בְּשָׂרוֹ וְעֵמֶק אֵין־מְרָאָה מִן־הָעוֹר וְשָׁעֲרָה לֹא־הַפֶּה לָבֵן וְהִסְגִּיר הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַנֶּגַע שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: (ויקרא יג:
ב-ד)

When a person has on the skin of the body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of the body, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons, the priests. The priest shall examine the affection on the skin of the body: if hair in the affected patch has turned white and the affection appears to be deeper than the skin of the body, it is a leprous affection; when the priest sees it, he shall pronounce the person impure. But if it is a white discoloration on the skin of the body which does not appear to be deeper than the skin and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall isolate the affected person for seven days. (Vayikra 13:2-4)

A common association with leprosy is Miriam, Moshe's sister, who is afflicted with leprosy supposedly as a punishment for speaking *lashon hara*. Yet this detailed description of *tzaarat* suggests that such visible skin ailments have existed for Bnei Yisrael long before our commentators and rabbis ascribed particular meanings and theological analyses to them. The diagnosis of leprosy seems to rely on two factors: the *se'ar lavan* (hair that turns white) and – the area of deep spiritual meaning – the “*amok me'or b'saro*,” the beyond-skin depths of this infection.

What is it about *tzaraat* that causes the Torah to deem the skin of others as *tameh*?
What drives the fear of patches or rashes going deeper than the skin, causing the community to isolate the inflicted?

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Ishbitz sees *tzaraat* as a spiritual issue:

צרוע הוא כעס כי צרעת הוא בעון לשון הרע (ערכין ט"ו): זב הוא בעל תאוה, וטמא לנפש הוא עצבות.
ולכן הצרוע נשתלח משלש המחנות כי מדות כעס אין לו חלק בישראל, והזב משתלח רק ממחנה לוייה

וממחנה שכינה, היינו כי מדות התאוה לא יאות לתלמידי חכמים, וטמא לנפש זה אינו משתלח רק ממחנה שכינה, כי גם בתלמידי חכמים נמצא לפעמים מדות העצבות כמ"ש בגמ' (תענית ד'). אוריתא הוא דמרתחי ליה ורתחא הוא עצבות, ורק ממחנה שכינה משתלח כי עוז וחדוה במקומו. (מי השלוח , חלק א, ספר במדבר, נשא ד)

“Leprous” means anger, for the word for leprosy, (*tsara’at*) contains the word “evil,” *Ra’a*. (See Gemara, *Arachin* 15b. A “Zav” is a man who suffers from a gonorrheal emission, a man who entertains lusts. “One who comes in contact with the dead” is depression. The law requires that the leper is sent outside of all three encampments, because the attribute of anger has no place in all of Israel. The *Zav* was sent outside both the encampment of the Levites (see previous note) and the encampment of the Shekhina, for Torah scholars, exemplified by the *Kohanim* and the Levites, may not be steeped in lust. “One who has come in contact with the dead” is only sent outside of the *Machanei haShechina*, God’s camp, for Torah scholars also succumb at times to the attribute of sadness, as it is written in the Gemara (*Ta’anit*4a), “the Torah causes him to boil,” and this “boiling” is depression. Tainted by sadness, he is forbidden from entering into in the place of the *Shechina* [The Tabernacle in the desert or the Temple in Jerusalem, and so too the place where you have the greatest feeling of God’s presence because “strength and joy are in His place” (Divrei haYamim 1, 16:27). (Mei HaShiloach, Part I, Numbers, Naso 4)

For the Ishbitzer, *tzaraat* is the manifestation of anger. Depression and frustration cause people to figuratively boil in despair. These feelings of deep internal pain can be seen on the paleness and stiffness of the bodies of enraged people as they clench their fists and blink back tears. It’s perhaps where we derive the phrase “blood is boiling” when we feel enraged at something or someone in our midst. Our bodies are deeply impacted by the anger we feel, whether it’s through the presence of blistering rashes or the paling of our skin. And since the attribute of anger “has no place in all of Israel,” the individuals whose frustration causes their blood to boil must be removed.

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran reverend who founded “House for All Sinners and Saints” in Denver, Colorado, writes in an essay titled “God’s No Leper Left Behind Program,” that leprosy is the living reminder that there are people around us who are suffering, and we too are vulnerable to it. She writes: “I do not want to be reminded that I could be a day away from a cancer diagnosis and a cancer diagnosis away from being homeless. I am more comfortable believing that I am following a formula that is working. I want to believe that the reason I don’t have leprosy (or Coronavirus), and someone else does, is because I lead a moral life, or the reason I don’t have cancer and my friend Kate does is because I don’t eat

processed foods.” (Nadia Bolz Weber, “God's ‘No Leper Left Behind’ Program,” *The Corners*, March 9, 2020)

What might it look like for the camp of Bnei Yisrael to be able to hold individuals rather than isolate them? Whether it’s the suffering that Bolz-Weber is describing or the boiling anger that the Ishbitzer is diagnosing, the people we’ve categorized as impure with *tzaraat* are walking reminders that we will never truly be immune from these feelings of anguish. We channel that anxiety by removing lepers from our camps, encouraging angry people to calm down, silencing and marginalizing the embittered. But what if we chose the opposite response?

Tzaraat is a physical diagnosis to a spiritual crisis, one far more metastatic than *amok me’or b’saro*. The impulse to tamper the anger and bury the suffering is real, but we, too, are vulnerable to the moments that will make us twenty-first century lepers. May the angry, depressed, suffering, and anguished lepers of Parshat Tazria and our community in this moment alike feel seen, held, and appreciated as more than a diagnosis.

Shabbat Shalom!



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