

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



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Parashot Tazria-Metzora
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פרשת תזריע-מצורע
ג' באייר תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 12:1-15:33

In these *parashot*, Hashem instructs Moshe on the purification rituals for mothers following childbirth; describes to Moshe and Aharon the procedures for identifying and responding to those infected with *tzara'at* (usually translated as leprosy), and the purification ritual for people and homes afflicted with leprosy; and instructs Moshe and Aharon on the laws regarding emission of bodily fluids.

The *tzara'at* presented in these *parashot* is a spiritual disease, not a physical one; it defies translation and is treated not by physicians but by *cohanim* (priests), the spiritual arbiters of the ancient Jewish world. Three manifestations of *tzara'at* are identified here: an affliction of human skin (13:2), of garments (13:47), and of houses (14:34). The Torah also speaks of *tzara'at* on two other occasions, one in reference to Moshe and the other in reference to his sister Miriam. In *Shmot* (Exodus) 4:6-7, when Moshe is standing before the burning bush, he doubts that the elders who lead Bnei Yisrael will believe that he is the messenger of God. God provides Moshe with two signs to prove his mission, the second of which is to cause his hand to be stricken with *tzara'at* and then to go back to normal again. In *Bamidbar* (Numbers) 12:10, Miriam is stricken with *tzara'at* for her involvement in slandering Moshe. Aharon asks Moshe to cure her via extraordinary means, because he claims that he, as her own brother – despite being the *cohen* tasked with treating her – cannot examine, confine, or purify her following the usual procedures. Instead, Moshe prays for his sister, and she is cured of the *tzara'at* but must remain in confinement for seven days.

The Torah describes what someone stricken with *tzara'at* needs to do (13:2):

אָדָם, כִּי-יְהִיָּה בְּעוֹר-בְּשָׂרוֹ שָׂאת אוֹ-סַפְחַת אוֹ בַּהֲרַת, וְהָיָה בְּעוֹר-בְּשָׂרוֹ, לִנְגַע
צָרְעַת--וְהוּבָא אֶל-אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן, אוֹ אֶל-אֶחָד מִבְּנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים.

When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a *tzara'at* infection of the skin of his body, it shall be brought before Aharon the *cohen* or to one of his sons, the *cohanim*.

According to some, the three subdivisions of skin *tzara'at* – *s'ayt*, *sapachat*, and *baheret* – are best left transliterated, rather than translated, because there are no equivalent English terms and any attempt to translate them greatly diminishes the distinctiveness and focus of the Hebrew term. Additionally, the verse points out that a diagnosis and treatment of *tzara'at* is not to be performed by anyone other than a *cohen*.

In today's day and age, we scoff at the notion of a spiritual disease, which seems paradoxical given our openness and acceptance of other kinds of diseases. We know that the human being exists on multiple planes: the physical, the intellectual, the emotional, the psychological, and the spiritual. We have always known that there are physical diseases, such as heart disease, cancers, and many, many others. Within the last 100 years, we have also come to recognize intellectual diseases such as Alzheimer's and other kinds of senile dementia; emotional diseases such as depression; and psychological diseases, such as OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder). Why, then, is it so far-fetched to think that the human being could be subject to a spiritual disease? Just as diseases on all of the other planes have etiologies, whether familial or environmental, so too does *tzara'at* have an etiology. And, just as for emotional or psychological disorders a person would seek guidance and treatment from a counselor or a psychologist rather than a physician, in this case, a person would go to a spiritual healer for treatment.

Having said all that, the concept of a spiritual disease is still difficult to understand. Words are intellectual entities; the arts and music convey emotion. We have no current means of communication with which to convey spiritual ideas fully. Nonetheless, the notion of a spiritual disease in response to a spiritual deficiency or misdeed is an intriguing one, not to be so easily dismissed.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- How does your life manifest itself in the physical, intellectual, emotional, psychological, and spiritual realms?
- If *tzara'at* is a spiritual disease, what kinds of things do you think might have caused it?
- Given what you now know about *tzara'at*, why do you think Hashem used *tzara'at* as a sign to prove Moshe's mission?