

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Tazria
April 9, 2016

פרשת תזריע
א' בניסן תשע"ו

Torah Reading: *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 12:1-13:59
Maftir for *Parshat Hachodesh: Shemot* (Exodus) 12:1-20

In this *parasha*, God instructs Moshe about the purification rituals for mothers following childbirth; God then describes to Moshe and Aharon the procedures for identifying and responding to those infected with *tzara'at* (usually translated as leprosy).

Commentators, most notably Rashi, maintain that the Torah is written in thematic order so that we can ascertain how each section is somehow connected to the sections before and after it, an interpretive method called *smichut parshiyot*, the juxtaposition of the sections.

How then is childbirth connected to *tzara'at*?

A clue may be found in chapter 13, verse 45: “...והצרוע אשר-בו הנגע, בגדיו יהיו פרמים – And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent....” Making a tear in one’s clothes is similar to what a mourner traditionally does upon hearing of the loss of a close relative. *Tzara'at* is one of the things that the rabbis of the Talmud (Tractate *Nedarim* 64b) considered tantamount to death. (The others being blindness, poverty, and childlessness.)

Not only did *tzara'at* remind one of human mortality through the ugly, painful sores which appeared, but it resulted historically in the leper being sent outside the camp

and living in isolation for a minimum of seven days. Without human company and companionship, one might as well be dead, as articulated by Raba in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Ta'anit* 21a: “או חִבְרוּתָא אוּ מִיתוּתָא – Either companionship or death.”

The most famous example of the interchangeable nature of death and leprosy in the *TaNaKH* involves Uzziah, the reigning king at the beginning of Yeshayahu's (Isaiah's) time of prophecy. Chapter 6, regarded almost universally as Yeshayahu's first prophecy, begins: “בְּשָׁנַת-מוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ עֲזִיָּהוּ, וַאֲרָאָה אֶת-אֲ-דְנִי יֹשֵׁב עַל-כִּסֵּא רָם וְנֹשֵׂא – In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw Hashem sitting on a high and exalted throne...”

Targum Yonatan (Jonathan ben Uzziel, 2nd century Babylonia), Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 11th century Franco-Germany), and RaDaK (Rabbi David Kimchi, 12th century Provence) all interpret this verse to mean the year that Uzziah contracted *tzara'at*. It is perhaps best explained by Metzudat David (Rabbi David Altshuler, 18th century Galicia):

When he became leprous as a result of entering the Temple to bring incense, as it is written in II Chronicles, chapter 26:16-21, 'But when he (Uzziah) was strong, his heart was lifted up so that he did corruptly, and he trespassed against the Hashem his God; for he went into the Temple of Hashem to burn incense upon the altar of incense. And Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him eighty priests of the Hashem, that were valiant men; and they withstood Uzziah the king, and said to him: "It does not pertain to you, Uzziah, to burn incense to Hashem, but to the priests the sons of Aharon that are consecrated it pertains to burn incense; go out of the sanctuary; for you have trespassed; neither shall it be for your honor from Hashem God." Then Uzziah was angry; and he had a censer in his hand to burn incense; and while he was angry with the priests, the leprosy broke forth in his forehead before the priests in the house of Hashem, beside the altar of incense. And Azariah the chief priest, and all the priests, looked upon him, and behold, he was leprous in his forehead, and they thrust him out quickly from there; even he himself made haste also to go out, because Hashem had smitten him. And Uzziah the king was a leper until the day of his death, and dwelt in a house set apart, being a leper;

for he was cut off from the house of Hashem; and Yotam his son was over the king's house, judging the people of the land.' For a leper is considered as if he is dead.

If the connection between childbirth and *tzara'at* is indeed intentional, it is sensitive of the Torah also to connect a link to the full cycle of life and to remind us that, even if someone should contract *tzara'at* – even if someone should actually pass from this world – humanity still continues with new life being created and born even more often than old life passes. It lends hope to a section which on its own may seem hopeless. The Rabbis claim that *lashon hara* (unkind speech) was one of the primary reasons for contracting *tzara'at* during the Biblical era (See Rashi's comment on *Devarim* 24:9.). If this is so, then it is truly a section filled with futility. How many of us today would be lepers if such a thing existed? Yet hope springs eternal, and every moment, a new soul who has not uttered a false or unkind word, comes into this world, bringing the promise of tomorrow.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What do you think Raba meant when he said, “Either companionship or death?”
- How is being separated from the rest of the camp and remaining in isolation for a minimum of seven days a natural consequence of speaking unkindly of others?
- Do you think that people were more careful about *lashon hara* during Biblical times? Why or why not?