

Short Comments on Metzora - Shabbat Hagadol

Rabbi Eliot Malomet April 9, 2022 8 Nisan 5782

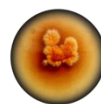
ויקרא י"ד:ב' זאת תהיה תורת המצורע ביום שחרתו והובא אל-הכהן:

Leviticus 14:2 *This is to be the Instruction [regarding] the one-with-tzara'at, at the time of his being purified: he is to be brought to the priest. What exactly is tzara'at? It is a scale disease that affects the skin and renders the sufferer corpse-like in appearance. The afflicted individual lives in a state of isolation, outside the boundaries of the camp, wears torn clothes (similar to a mourner) and hair unkept and was to call out, *tamei, tamei* (Unclean!Unclean!) as a warning to refrain from contact. The Torah is concerned with the establishing and preservation of boundaries between life and death, purity and impurity etc. Why then, would the Torah be concerned about skin? *Human skin is a long continuous boundary that demarcates the most basic of borders, the border between the human body and the world outside it. Breaches in the skin [such as those of צרעת] are attacks on the body's wholeness.* (Rachel Adler). When there are anomalies on this "boundary" it signifies the presence of disorder. Skin discloses that which takes place beneath it and erupts because of irritants that are outside it. Recall that the primary source of impurity is death and the person afflicted with *tzara'at* was, in the world of biblical Israel, considered to have come close to the life/death boundary. Tikva Frymer-Kensky: *The afflicted individual, like one who has been in contact with a corpse, might have been considered to be in a no-man's-land between two realms which must be kept rigidly apart. In order for the afflicted individual to regain access to the living community, that individual must undergo a ritual of re-entry. Two clean birds are taken, one of which is killed over a bowl with running water. The living bird is dipped in the blood of the dead bird, the leper is sprinkled with the blood of the slain bird, and the living bird is let loose in the field. The formal similarity between this ritual and the ritual of the Day of Atonement is apparent: both involve two creatures, one of which is killed and the other set free. In the case of the leper, the symbolism focuses on the living bird who has been in contact with death (dipped in the blood of the killed bird) and is then set free; so too the leper**

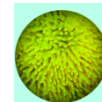
has been set free from his brush with death. The leper may then return to the camp, although he is still impure and must remain outside his tent seven days before undergoing a ritual of readmission and resuming normal life. We note that the priest's role is part healer and part adjudicator of the individual's status, and the whole process of diagnosis and rehabilitation required very close contact.

י"ד:ל"ד כי תבאו אל-ארץ כנען אשר אני נתן לכם לאחוזתה ונתתל גבע צרעת בבית ארץ אחוזתכם:

14:34 *When you enter the land of Canaan that I am giving you as a holding, and I place an affliction of tzaraat on a house in the land of your holding... In biblical Israel, diseases can not only affect an individual's personal boundary to the world, their skin, but also the spatial boundary of their domiciles, namely their walls. Homeowners have been aware forever that walls, floors and ceilings can be susceptible to mold, especially in damp and dark places where mold tend to flourish. Fungi, the class of organisms to which molds belong, play a significant role in nature particularly in the decomposition of organic matter. Even if our ancestors were not aware of this scientifically, they had to understand that these "diseases" also hover on the boundary of life and death. Fungi, signify death, but without them, there is no life! Regardless of how*



Epicoccum nigrum



Myxomycetes

*important they are in the ecosystem, you don't want them in your home! The Torah speaks of reddish and greenish molds. If your home was afflicted by a *tzara'at*, it would have to undergo a rigorous inspection, cleansing or even a demolition. The possibility of demolition gave rise to a fascinating midrash found in Rashi's commentary on this verse:*

ונתתי נגע צרעת. בשורה היא להם שהנגעים באים עליהם; לפי שהטמינו אמוריים מטמוניות של זהב בקירות פתייהם כל ארבעים שנה שהיו ישראל במדבר, ועל ידי הנגע נותן הבית ומוצאן (ויקרא רבה י"ד):

When you come to the land I will put the plague of tzara'at... They heard this (ritual) as a "heraldic announcement" that (when they came into the land) these plagues would befall them. Why? Because the Amorites (Canaanites) con-

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sealed treasures of gold in the walls of their houses during the whole 40 years the Israelites were in the wilderness. As a consequence of the plague (of *tzara'at* that would befall them) they would demolish the house and discover the treasure hidden in the walls (*Leviticus Rabbah* 17:6). In other words, the Amorites (Canaanites) were afraid that the freed Israelites would overtake their homes. Anticipating their eventual victory over the intruders, the Amorites hid their valuables in the walls of their homes so that they could retrieve them once the Israelites retreated. But that didn't happen. The Israelites took over the Amorites' dwellings. When these dwelling succumbed to *tzara'at* they had to be demolished. The Israelites' misfortune was offset by the discovery of the treasure hidden in the walls. While it is a bit of a stretch, the midrash relies on the folk motif of "hidden treasure in the walls" which is not uncommon even today. People find everything from art to cash tucked into their walls and ceilings. The midrash turns a calamity into a windfall and hears this verse as a promise, not a curse: *When you come into the land...Wow! What could be bad about that?* But the ethical questions remain: is a new owner allowed to keep "hidden treasure" or required to return it? Discuss.

SHABBAT HAGADOL gets its name either because it is the last Shabbat before Passover and because the word, *הַגְדֹּל*, figures in the second last verse of the Haftarah. Not much is known about its author, Malachi, other than that he lived in the period of the returning Exiles, around 500 BCE, and that he was the last of the prophets. The Haftarah is the last oration of the last prophet, i.e. the last words of prophecy ever uttered.

מלאכי ג':ד' וְעָרְבָה לָהּ מִנְתַּת יְהוָה וַיְרִישְׁלָם פִּימִי עוֹלָם וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ קוֹלֵי הַיָּם:

Malachi 3:4 *Then the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of yore and in the years of old.* In context, this is not about reinstating sacrificial worship, but reconstituting Israel on moral and ethical grounds. It is in that context that the *offerings will be pleasing to God.*

מלאכי ג':ז' לְמִימֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם סָרְתֶם מִחֻקֵּי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי וְשָׁבוּ אֵלַי וְאָשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת וְאַמְרָתֶם בְּגוֹי נְשׁוּב:

Malachi 3:7 *From the very days of your fathers you have turned away from My laws and have not observed them. Turn back to Me, and I will turn*

back to you—said the LORD of Hosts. But you ask, "How shall we turn back?" It is fascinating that the last words of prophetic literature form the foundation of one of the most important concepts in Judaism: *teshuvah*-return is reciprocal. If you return to God, God will return to you.

מלאכי ג':כ"ב זָכְרוּ תוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה עַבְדִּי אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי אוֹתוֹ בְּהָרֵב עַל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל הַקְּדוֹשִׁים וּמִשְׁפָּטֵיהֶם:

Malachi 3:22 *Be mindful of the Teaching of My servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel.* The era of prophecy ends by looking back to Israel's past. In this verse Malachi stresses the need to remember the teaching of Moses, the laws and statutes, most specifically the Ten Utterances at Horeb/Sinai which are the basis of life. And prophecy ends by looking forward as well. Malachi says:

הִנֵּה אֶנְכִּי שְׁלַח לְכֶם אֶת אֵלֶיָּה הַנִּבְיָא לִפְנֵי בּוֹא יוֹם ה' הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא:

Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. (3:23) Elijah the fiery zealot who hears the "still small voice" and ascends to heaven in a chariot, whom the rabbis transform into the one who will reconcile all disputes, and to whom the Jewish folk tradition gives miraculous powers as a healer, miracle worker, and secret messenger of God's salvation, is the herald of the redeemed world. וְהָשִׁיב לִב־אֲבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים וְלִב־בָּנִים עַל־אֲבוֹתָם פֶּן־אָבִיא וְהִפַּתִּי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ חָרָם:

He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction.(3:24) Elijah's mission? To reconcile parents with their children and children with their parents.

The unredeemed world is fractured along the most elemental divide, the divide between parents and children. The rupture of that relationship is the most painful thing a person can experience. In Malachi's vision, Elijah's job prior to the *great and awesome day of Lord* is not to bring about world peace, it's simply to guide parents and children to accept each other, embrace each other and listen to each other. Reconciliation radiates from there inspiring reconciliation everywhere, bringing redemption to the world. The connection to Pesach? Pesach effectuates the parent/child relationship more than any other holiday. When children and parents engage in questions and answers and retell the founding story of our people, past and future redemption - meet in the present.

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