





Skin is the boundary between the body and the world. When things happen to the skin, it reflects something awry in the organ itself, or something awry in the body, or something possibly awry in the soul. It needs to be looked at carefully by qualified individuals. The priests. Here is how the Torah presents the skin laws in Lev. 13:1-2:

<p>וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר. אָדָם כִּי יִהְיֶה בְּעוֹר בְּשָׂרוֹ שֹׂאֵת אוֹ סַפְחַת אוֹ בַהֲרַת וַיְהִי בְּעוֹר בְּשָׂרוֹ לִנְגַע צִרְעַת וְהוֹבֵא אֶל אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן אוֹ אֶל אֶחָד מִבְּנָיו הַכֹּהֲנִים.</p>	<p>God spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying: [Any] person— when there is on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a shiny-spot and it becomes on the skin of his body an affliction of tzaraat, he is to be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests.</p>	<p>Bible translator Everett Fox notes that nobody really knows what a שֹׂאֵת or a סַפְחַת or a בַּהֲרַת is. Bible scholar Jacob Milgram, called these terms, "obscure." Commonly</p>
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translated as a **swelling (or discoloration), scab, and shiny spot**, they are all dermatological anomalies.

שֹׂאֵת <i>se'et</i>	נִשָּׂא	"lift"	a thing that is lifted up; a swelling.	
		"a mark" (in Arabic)	a discoloration	
סַפְחַת <i>sapahat</i>	סַפַּח	"erupt," "after-growth"	a thing that grows by itself; a scab.	
בַּהֲרַת <i>baheret</i>	בָּהִיר	"clear" "white"	a whiteness; shiny spot.	

Upon the discovery of such an anomaly, we imagine that a small drama takes place between the afflicted individual and those in his or her immediate circle. They note if this anomaly heals, and if it doesn't, and begins to take on a scale-like appearance, he or she is brought before a priest, who determines whether this is **צִרְעַת**-



¹ We now translate **tzara'at** as scale disease. Some scholars believe that **tzara'at** should be identified as psoriasis, an auto-immune disorder, but there is no consensus. It used to be translated as leprosy, which today is referred to as

tzara'at.¹ If the afflicted individual (the *tzarua*) is determined to be positive for **tzara'at**, then the *tzarua* has to do the following, according to Lev. 13:45-46:

<p>וְהִצְרוּעַ אֲשֶׁר בוֹ הִנָּנֶה בְּגָדָיו יִהְיוּ פְרָמִים וְרֹאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פְרוּעַ וְעַל שִׁפְמֵי יָטָה וְטָמֵא טָמֵא יִקְרָא. כָּל יְמֵי אֲשֶׁר הִנָּנֶה בוֹ יִטָּמֵא טָמֵא הוּא בְּדָד יֵשֵׁב מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה מוֹשְׁבוֹ. וַיִּקְרָא יְגִמֵּה-מִן</p>	<p>Now the tzarua (one with tzara'at) that has the affliction, his garments are to be torn, his head is to be made-bare, and his upper-lip is to be covered; Tamei! Tamei! he is to cry out. All the days that the affliction is on him, he shall remain-tamei; tamei is he, alone shall he stay, outside of the camp is his staying-place.</p> <p>Lev. 13:45-46</p>
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In short, the *tzarua* must: **1.** Tear his garments. **2.** Bare (or dishevel) his head. **3.** Veil or cover his upper lip. **4.** Call out to all passersby, **Tamei Tamei**, as a warning, (or, according to the rabbis, as a summons for their mercy on his behalf). And **5.** Dwell alone outside the camp. Some of these rituals are recognizable to us from other contexts in and outside of the Bible. Take for example, the tearing of clothing. The first person in the Bible to tear his clothing is Reuben. We recall that Reuben piously implored his brothers not to spill Joseph's blood, but to throw him into a pit in order to save him and have him brought back to his father. (Gen. 37:22). But when he inexplicably (and unforgivably!) exits the scene, Judah and the other brothers decide to sell Joseph to the passing caravan of Ishmaelite (or Midianite) traders. When Reuben returns to the empty pit, **וַיִּקְרַע אֶת בְּגָדָיו** - **he tears his clothing** (v. 29). Later, when Joseph's bloody tunic is brought to Jacob, Jacob tears his clothing: **וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב וַיִּשְׁמְלֵתֵי** (v. 34). In both of these instances, and several others too numerous to list here, the tearing of clothing signifies great loss, trauma, or irrevocable crisis. It is the external manifestation of the internal state of mind. While in the case of the *tzarua* here, the Torah uses the word **פְּרָמִים** for **tearing**, it is synonymous with the more common **קָרַע**. The bottom line is that tearing clothing is something that mourners do, right up to this very day. We customarily perform **keriah** prior to the funeral to acknowledge the severity of our loss and to transition from the state of limbo prior to mourning, known as **aninut**, to the state of mourning, known as **aveilut**, (which begins in full force following the burial). In addition to tearing a garment, the *tzarua* also has to either shave or dishevel his hair. This is also a signifier of mourning. We know this precisely

Hansen's disease, and we still see that term in the discussions of this topic. But that disease, which arises from a bacterial infection, was not widespread in the Middle East until well after the biblical period.

because of what took place in last week's parasha. Last week, when Aaron's sons were incinerated, Aaron and his remaining sons were specifically commanded **not** to tear their clothing and **not** to dishevel their hair. They were **prohibited** from engaging in any mourning rituals; they were forbidden to behave like anybody else in such a situation of the loss of a son or a brother. They were not allowed to display outward signs of mourning, even in such extreme circumstances. Their obligation, as leaders, was to maintain a permanent state of purity, that is, they were to be removed from any proximity to death, in order for God, the life-giving force, to remain forever present in the community and not be repulsed. The purity of the High Priesthood was a matter of life and death for the people, therefore, even when they experienced personal loss, they could not act in accordance with the mourning rituals and customs of the common folk. Incidentally, the third symbolic act, the veiling of the upper lip, is another symbolic act of mourning. We see it in Ezekiel, when he is told not to mourn and not to veil his upper lip upon the death of his wife (Ezek. 24:16-17).

What are we to make of this? Why is the *tzarua* to behave as if he or she were a mourner? And in the end, who are they mourning? In order to answer this question, we should avail ourselves of some rabbinic commentary, specifically this statement: *a metzora (or tzarua) is considered as a dead person* (Avoda Zara 5a). From where is this idea derived? Recall, that when Miriam spoke against Moses on account of his Cushite wife, she was afflicted with *tzara'at*-scale disease (Num. 12:1, 10). Aaron turned to Moses and implored him on her behalf. **אל תהי כמת** - **Do not, pray, let her be like the dead**, he said (Num. 12:12). Since he compared Miriam to a dead person, the rabbis extrapolated that a *tzarua* is considered to be *as if* they were dead. But there is another obvious answer: a *tzarua* actually appears like a corpse! In all of the symptomology presented by the Torah, the *tzarua's* white, wan, sickly, paleness, makes him or her look like...a walking corpse! And this is deeply symbolic of divine anger and divine punishment, as Bible scholar Yonatan Grossman writes:

<p>כל כלה של מחלת הצרעת הוא רמז לאדם על כעס ה' כלפיו, וכל מבנה ומשמעותה של מחלה זו נעוצים בעולם הרמזים...</p>	<p>...the entirety of the disease of <i>tzara'at</i> is intended as an allusion to the individual regarding God's anger towards him, and the entire structure and meaning of this disease, is connected to the world of allusions...</p>
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In other words, the rules and rituals surrounding the *tzarua* are part of a symbolic system in which the *tzarua* understands himself as someone who has incurred God's anger for having committing a terrible transgression. The

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tzarua is a kind of zombie-like living-dead and is positioned right on the boundary between the zone of the living and the zone of the dead.

If that is the case, then when the individual performs all of these mourning rituals, who is he mourning? Again, Yonatan Grossman:

<p>התורה העתיקה את דיני האבלות לדיניו של המצרע שכן המצרע הוא אבל על עצמו. הוא עצמו 'מת', ולכן עליו לנהג מנהגי אבלות.</p>	<p>the Torah applied the laws of mourning to the laws of the <i>metzora</i> as it seems that <i>metzora</i> is mourning himself. He himself has 'died' and therefore it is upon him to practice the laws of mourning.</p>
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The answer: the *metzora (tzarua)* is mourning himself. The *tzarua* has committed a transgression so serious, that he experiences a temporary physical 'death,' and a temporary social 'death.' What sin would incur such a serious penalty? According to the rabbis, *tzara'at* is the punishment for *Lashon Hara*, the kind of speech which destroys a person's reputation, which was to them, akin to murder, as this often-quoted line attests:

<p>כל המלבין פני חברו ברבים כאלו שופך דמים. ב"מ נח.</p>	<p>One who shames his fellow in public is considered to have spilled blood. Bava Metzia 58b</p>
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In the biblical system, the gravest crime against another human being is murder, for which you pay the heaviest price: your own life. If you destroy someone's reputation, you have symbolically destroyed their life, even though the victim is still quite alive. In this system, God punishes the perpetrator with *tzara'at*, a symbolic death, *מדה כנגד מדה, measure for measure*. In this state of temporary 'death', the perpetrator is detached from the community, and goes into a temporary state of mourning - and since there is no one else to mourn for him, *he mourns for himself*. We may balk at the strangeness of this interpretation, but a few compelling ideas stand out, especially in our present era, when it is so easy to cause damage to another person's reputation, online through social media. Indeed, people, especially young people, who have been bullied and shamed on social media, have often taken their own lives because their sense of humiliation was so great. *A good name is precious. Priceless even*. When a good name is defamed, whether it belongs to a person, business, or an institution, it is often impossible to recover. There is now an entire industry devoted to repairing individual and corporate reputations that have been wrongly or unfairly defamed say on Yelp or Google Reviews. It is not the actual shedding of blood, but to the victim, whether human or corporate, it certainly feels like a potentially mortal wound and that recovery, if it ever happens, will take a long time. May we all be spared from that! Shabbat Shalom!

It has been 187 days of agonizing captivity for the hostages and their families. We pray that they are still alive. May God watch over them and may they be freed now! May God shield and protect Israel from all attacks.