

Disease is a feature of human life. We fear it. We try to prevent it. We try to mitigate it. We seek medical help and go to great lengths to heal ourselves from it. As of March 2025, *Malacards: the Human Disease Database* listed 22,458 identifiable diseases, of which closed to 14,000 are considered to be rare. Several diseases are mentioned in the Torah, including **עיוורון-blindness** (suffered by Isaac and Jacob, due to indeterminate causes), **עקרות-infertility** (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah), **דבר-pestilence** and **שחין-boils** (inflicted upon the Egyptians), and a litany of others listed in the **תוכחה-the great rebuke** (Deut. 22:15-68) including this trio of trios: **דלקת קדחת-consumption, fever and inflammation**, **חריש-hemorrhoids, boil-scars, and itch** (22:22, 27) and **שגעון עיוון תמהון לבב-madness, blindness, and depression**. Abraham prays for the healing of Avimelekh and the Philistines (Gen. 20:17), Moses prays for Miriam (Num. 12:13) and Jeremiah's prayer, **Heal me, God, and let me be healed; Save me, and let me be saved; For You are my glory** (Jer. 17:14) is part of our weekday *amidah*. Healing is also, unsurprisingly, a big theme in the Psalms. Listing all of this demonstrates by contrast, just how unique the disease of **tzara'at** is. In the past, **tzara'at** was understood to be leprosy, today referred to as Hansen's disease, a disease which still afflicts millions worldwide. Up to 225 cases are diagnosed each year in the US. But scholars argue that biblical **tzara'at** was probably a form of a severe skin disease, (a scale disease) that no longer exists in the modern era. Notwithstanding that, **no other disease in the Bible gets as much attention as tzara'at**. An entire chapter of Torah deals with its symptomology and another chapter deals with rituals pertaining to one who is afflicted with this disease. That is because, as Prof. Rachel Elior of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem said, **Tzara'at is not only a disease. It is much more than a disease**.¹ There are two cases of **tzara'at** in the Torah. The first occurs in Exodus, just after the Burning Bush episode where Moses argues before God that the people will not believe that God has sent him:

וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר וְהֵן לֹא יִאֱמִינוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא
 נִרְאָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ ה' (ש"מ' ד:א)

Moses spoke up, he said: But they will not trust me, and will not hearken to my voice, indeed, they will say: God has not been seen by you...! (Exod. 4:1)

God responds by giving Moses three signs including **tzara'at**.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לוֹ עוֹד הֵבָא נָא יָדְךָ בְּחִיקֶךָ וְנִבֵּא יָדוֹ בְּחִיקוֹ וַיּוֹצֵאֵהָ וְהִנֵּה
 יָדוֹ מְצֻרֶת כַּשָּׁלֵג. וַיֹּאמֶר הֲשֵׁב יָדְךָ אֶל חִיקֶךָ וַיִּשָּׁב יָדוֹ אֶל חִיקוֹ
 וַיּוֹצֵאֵהָ מִחִיקוֹ וְהִנֵּה שָׁבָה כַּבָּשָׂרוֹ. (ש"מ' ד:ב-ד)

God said further to him: Pray put your hand in your bosom! He put his hand in his bosom, and then he took it out, and here: his hand had tzara'at, like snow! Now he said: Return your hand to your bosom! He returned his hand to his bosom; then he took it out of his bosom, and here, it had returned [to be] like his flesh. (Exod. 4:6-7)

The second example of **tzara'at** in the Torah occurs in the book of Numbers when Miriam and Aaron speak about Moses and his Cushite wife:

וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל אֲדוֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי
 אִשָּׁה כַּשִּׁית לָקַח. וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרָק אֵךְ בְּמֹשֶׁה דְּבַר ה' הֲלֹא גַם בְּנוֹ דְּבַר
 וַיִּשְׁמָע ה'. וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנּוּ מֵאֵד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה.
 וַיֹּאמֶר ה' פֶּתַח אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל מִרְיָם צֵאוּ שְׁלֹשְׁתֵּיכֶם אֶל
 אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁלֹשָׁתָם. וַיֵּרֶד ה' בְּעָמֹד עָנָן וַיַּעֲמֵד פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל
 וַיִּקְרָא אֶהֱרֹן וּמִרְיָם וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם. וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַעוּ נָא דְבָרִי אִם יִהְיֶה
 נִבְיֵאֵיכֶם יִהְיֶה בְּמִרְאָה אֵלָיו אֲתוֹנֵדע בְּחִלּוֹם אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ. לֹא כֵן עֲבָדִי
 מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל בֵּיתִי נֶאֱמָן הוּא. כֹּה אֶל פֶּה אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא בְּחִידָת
 וְתִמְנָת ה' יָבִיט וּמִדּוּעַ לֹא יִרְאֶתֶם לְדַבֵּר בְּעֲבָדִי בְּמֹשֶׁה. וַיִּסַּח אֵף ה'
 בָּם וַיִּלֶּךְ. וְהָעָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהִנֵּה מִרְיָם מְצֻרֶת כַּשָּׁלֵג וַיִּפֹּן אַהֲרֹן
 אֶל מִרְיָם וְהִנֵּה מְצֻרֶת. וַיֹּאמֶר אַהֲרֹן אֶל מֹשֶׁה בִּי אֲדֹנִי אֵל נָא תִשָּׁא
 עָלֵינוּ חַטָּאת אֲשֶׁר נִוְאלְנוּ וְאֲשֶׁר חָטְאוּנוּ. אֵל נָא תֵּהִי כַּמֶּת אֲשֶׁר
 בְּצִאתוֹ מִרְחֹם אִמּוֹ וַיֹּאכַל חֲצִי בָשָׂרוֹ. וַיַּצַּעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' לֵאמֹר אֵל נָא
 רַפָּא נָא לָהּ. (ב"מ' יב:א-יג)

Now Miriam spoke, and Aaron, against Moses on account of the Cushite wife that he had taken [in marriage], for a Cushite wife had he taken. They said: Is it only, solely through Moses that GOD speaks? Isn't it also through us that he speaks? And GOD heard. Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble, more than any human who was on the face of the earth. And GOD said suddenly to Moses, to Aaron and to Miriam: Go out, the three of you, to the Tent of Appointment! So the three of them went out. And GOD descended in a column of cloud and stood at the entrance to the Tent; he called out: Aaron and Miriam! And the two of them went out. He said: Pray hear my words: If there should be among-you-a-prophet of GOD, in a vision to him I make-myself-known, in a dream I speak with him. Not so my servant Moses: in all my house, he is trusted; mouth to mouth I speak with him, in-plain-sight, not in riddles, and the form of GOD he beholds. So why were you not too awestruck to speak against my servant, against Moses? And the anger of GOD flared up against them, and he went off. When the cloud turned away from above the Tent, here, Miriam had tzaraat like snow! Aaron faced Miriam, and here, she had tzara'at! Aaron said to Moses: Please, my lord, do not, pray, impose on us guilt-for-a-sin by which we were foolish, by which we sinned! Do not, pray, let her be like a dead-child who, when it comes out of its mother's womb, is eaten up in half its flesh! Moses cried out to GOD, saying: O God, pray, heal her, pray! (Num. 12:1-13)

¹ YouTube lecture by Rachel Elior, *The Hidden Meaning of Tzara'at*. Hebrew. Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, April 2005.

We have been accustomed by the rabbinic tradition to associate *tzara'at* with *leshon hara*-speaking ill of someone, based on the pun between the one afflicted the *metzora* and the phrase *motzi shem ra* which means *one who debases the name of another*. This midrash sums up the rabbinic view:

אמר רבי פדת, ברית כרותה להקדוש ברוך הוא בעולם, כל מי שמספר לשון הרע, ילקה בצרעת. מנין, ממה שקראו בענין זאת תהיה תורת המצרע, אל תקרי המצרע אלא המוציא שם רע. אמרו רבותינו זקונים לברכה: אין הנגעים באים על האדם אלא על לשון הרע שמוציא מפיו. (תנחומא מצורע א)

R. Pedat said, "The Holy One, blessed be He, has made a covenant with the world that anyone who utters evil speech receives leprosy." Where is it shown? From what is written on the matter (in Lev. 14:2), "This shall be the law of the leper (hametsora)," [i.e.] the one who debases another (literally, brings out evil on the name of another) (hamotsi' ra'). Our masters have said, "Plagues only affect a person on account of the evil speech which comes out of his mouth." (Midrashash Tanhuma Metzora 1)



Entire books of halakha have been devoted to permitted and forbidden speech.² All well and good, but the first instance of the *tzara'at* on Moses' hand has nothing to do with speech. Likewise, all the other instances of *tzara'at* in the Bible have nothing to do with speech.³ Nevertheless, there is something else that connects at least three of the

cases. **The *tzara'at* of Moses, Miriam, and Uzziah are all a result of loss of trust in God.** The *tzara'at* that Moses receives is a response to his initial lack of trust that the people will listen to him. This is an affront to God. In the case of Miriam, her question is actually a challenge to God's choice of Moses. And King Uzziah was afflicted with *tzara'at* after his attempt as a non-kohen to offer incense, a privilege reserved only to kohanim. That too is a refutation of God. All three biblical cases then, have at their core an issue of trust in God's authority, not speech. In Rachel Elior's words:

צרעת היא ענש על מי שמטיל ספק בודאות אלהית.

Tzara'at is the punishment that is visited upon someone who casts doubt in the certainty of God.

Tzara'at is unique because unlike the other diseases listed above, it is the only disease in the Bible whose causality is a specific area of human transgression, **namely a defiance of God in a private space.** Consider: Moses' act takes place in private between him and God. Miriam and Aaron's conversation is in private. Uzziah's attempted offering happens in the private zone of the incense altar, located just outside the Holy of Holies. We would assume that had each

of those transgressions taken place in more a public space, they would likely have incurred a greater punishment, probably death. A private defiance of God's certainty incurs the punishment of *tzara'at*, which is a kind of *half-death*, so to speak, a state in which the victim appears to be dead -in the language of the Bible, *white as snow* - but is still very much alive. There is, a kind of logic to this. When Miriam is afflicted, Aaron is astonished at her corpse-like appearance (see above). It is probably this gray zone of living-dead *zombiness* that alarmed the kohanim. Evidently, this was unlike every other disease. The kohanim saw the victim is their absolute opposite. In Elior's words:

הצרעת עוסקת במעין תמונה הפוכה של הקדשה הכהנית

Tzara'at is a disease with set of symptoms that is an opposite picture of the priestly holiness.

In this framing, the extent to which the Torah discusses the disease and the rituals of purification for those who are afflicted makes sense. **The victim is the kohen's mirror image. The victim, who represents death, is in contact with the kohen, who represents life.** The very presence in the camp or community of a person afflicted with this strange disease means that God has been defied in private. While this triggers an alarm for the community and requires quarantine and remediation, it also elicits compassion from the kohen. If we follow the rituals of remediation in slow-motion, we discover that there has to be a close contact between the kohen and the victim in order for the victim to move through the stages of the disease to a complete rehabilitation in the community. That cannot happen with a spirit-doctor, medicine-man, or charlatan. It has to happen with an agent of God, who under ordinary circumstances is a kohen, and extraordinary ones, as is the case of Miriam, a prophet, who is also her brother. Last word to Rachel Elior:

השא אשמה וענש אלה הדברים שתרבות מבססת עליהם.

Sin, guilt and punishment, these are the things upon which a culture is based.

Tzara'at is a unique disease that navigates between guilt and atonement, sin and expiation, purity and impurity, private and public, life and death. On the one hand, we are thankful that it does not exist anymore. On the other hand, there is something about it that we can all relate to on the deepest levels. Shabbat Shalom.

Today is Day 575. We continue to pray for the return of the hostages being held in captivity in Gaza by evil messengers of destruction. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, heal the wounded and shield Israel from continued terror. Amen!

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Sharon Frant Brooks, Ken Brooks and Phyllis Frant Gunther to commemorate the 9th Yahrzeit of Sharon and Phyllis' father, Milton Frant, z'l.

² The most noteworthy of course is the one entitled Chafetz Chaim ("Desirer of Life," a reference to Psalms 34:19) written by Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan (Belarus, 1838-1933).

³ Aramean general, Naaman (2 Kings 5:1), King Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:19), the four lepers outside the gates of Samaria, (2 Kings 7:3)