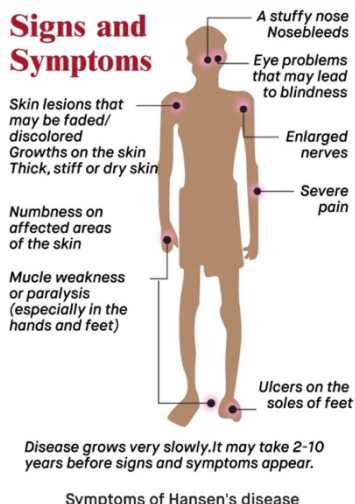


Whenever we encounter these two pivotal parshiyot in the priestly Torah of Leviticus, we run the risk of falling into the trap of projecting modern medical ideas onto ancient biblical civilization. We stutter and stumble when it comes

Signs and Symptoms



to providing a precise definition of the term **צָרַעַת-tzara'at**. What is **tzara'at**? Over the centuries there have been a number of definitions:

1. Tzara'at is leprosy (Hansen's Disease). The misconception derives from what we might call a "textual broken telephone." When the Bible was translated into Greek, **tzara'at** was rendered as **λέπρα-lepra**, which comes from the

word **lepis** (scale) and **lepo** (peel). Consequently, the Greek translators considered **tzara'at** as a term that encompassed a variety of skin conditions and diseases in which the skin forms scales or peels off. When the Bible was translated into Latin, the Latin translators simply borrowed the word **lepra** from the Greek and transliterated the Greek letters **λέπρα** into Latin letters **lepra**. Enter the Arabs. Like the Greeks, the Arabs had a precise system for naming diseases. For the specific disease whose symptoms are illustrated above, the Greeks gave the name: **Elephantiasis Graecorum**¹; the Arabs named it **Juzam**². When European physicians began classifying diseases in the Middle Ages they turned mostly to the Arabic sources. However, in the case of this disease, they mis-translated the Arabic **Juzam** into the Latin **lepra**. Consequently, **lepra** became the Latin term for the Elephantiasis disease (above), not scale disease. **Lepra** became **leprous** and then turned into **leprosy** and that is how that word entered the English language for the Elephantiasis disease. That means that Greek and English speakers understood two different things when they read the Bible in translation.

¹ **Elephantiasis** means **inflammation of skin similar to the hide of elephants**.

² Evidently, they already had a disease with the Arab term for elephant in it, so they gave it a different name.

³ They would have read the King James Version, the dominant English translation of the Bible, first published in 1611. It had a profound influence not only on the understanding of the Bible but also on the English language.

⁴ Fun Fact: Hansen's Disease is named for Gerhard Armauer Hansen (1841-1912) the Norwegian physician who discovered the bacterium that caused leprosy. In Jerusalem diagonally across from the Jerusalem Theater there is an

Greek speakers and scholars understood the malady described in Leviticus 13-14 as a scale-disease of the skin. But from the 17th right up until the mid-20th century,³ when English readers consulted the King James Version, they thought that the Bible was referring to the Elephantiasis disease, what we now call Hansen's disease.⁴ This verse is typical (Lev. 13:2):

KJV: When a man shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising, a scab, or bright spot, and it be in the skin of his flesh like the plague of leprosy; then he shall be brought unto Aaron the priest, or unto one of his sons the priests.

אדם כי יהיה בעור בשרו שאת או ספחת או בהרת והיה בעור בשרו לנגע צרעת והובא אל אהרן הכהן או אל אחד מבניו הכהנים. (ויקרא יג:ב)

2. Tzara'at as "Scale Disease." We turn to the pre-eminent scholar of Leviticus, Jacob Milgrom to provide some scholarly assistance in this matter. He writes: **(The identification of this disease) is uncertain. I invited a respected San Francisco Bay Area dermatologist, Marvin Engel, to address my graduate seminar on the subject. After carefully studying the biblical text and its derivative medical literature, he stated his conclusions without any hesitation: the symptoms described in Leviticus 13 do not correspond to any known skin disease. His main difficulty, surprisingly, was not the diagnosis but the treatment. Chronic skin diseases, he claimed, such as psoriasis, favus, and vitiligo, will not disappear or even change appreciably within one or two weeks. Thus, if these are the diseases described in Leviticus 13, the prescribed quarantine period is ineffectual and, indeed, can be**



Hansen House in Jerusalem

elegant old building (pictured above) situated diagonally across the street from the Jerusalem Theater. Completed in 1887, it was originally a **leprosarium** - a leper hospital which served Jerusalem's leper population through the 1960's. When it was acquired by the Jewish National Fund in 1950, it was renamed Hansen's House in honor of the man who discovered leprosy. In 2009 the municipality of Jerusalem acquired it and transformed it into one of the loveliest cultural spaces in Jerusalem with a beautiful walled garden and park. In addition to event spaces and galleries it boasts of one of the finest organic farm-to-table dairy restaurants in all of Israel called Meshek Ofaimme!

misleading. The safest statement that can be made about these diseases is that they share one feature in common: they produce scales. Hence I have rendered the Hebrew term as "scale disease."⁵

3. Tzara'at as Melanoma. A recently published article asserted that *tzara'at* might very well have been a form of melanoma.⁶ Dermatologists remind us to identify melanoma following the first five letters of the alphabet:

A A symmetry	The symptoms of <i>tzara'at</i> accord somewhat with those criteria.
B I rregular B orders	
C C olor	
D D iameter	
E E levated and E volve in A ppearance	

According to Dr. Chaim Trachtman, *tzara'at* has the following characteristics:

A symmetry: <i>Tzara'at</i> can assume the irregular shape of a swelling (שָׁאֵת), scab (סִפְחָה) or bright spot (בְּהֵרֵת). (Lev. 13:2)
B orders: The lesion could look like the scar of a burn (צָרְבַת הַמִּכּוֹה; v. 28), suggesting that the border was not smooth.
C olor: <i>Tzara'at</i> is described as white (לִבְנָה; v. 4) or somewhat reddish (אֲדָמָה; v. 19). The hairs ranging in color from black to yellow to white is consistent with melanocytes (pigment producing cells) being the cell of origin of the lesion.
D iameter: There is no size criterion in Lev. 13 (so no correspondence on this account but no contradiction either necessarily).
E levated and E volve in A ppearance: Although the text does not describe elevated lesions, <i>tzara'at</i> was not flush with the skin and initially was depressed, either deep (עֵמִיק; v. 4) or lower (שָׁפֵל; v. 20), than the surface of the skin. <i>Tzara'at</i> could evolve over time and either spread (פָּרְקָה) or recede in intensity (בָּקָה; v. 21).

However, even Dr. Trachtman advises caution with this approach. As interesting as it is to offer these conjectures, we are reconciled to the fact that we may never really know what *tzara'at* is or that, as Prof. Milgrom stated, *tzara'at* might in fact be a disease that no longer exists.

The exercise of trying to identify the disease is almost like trying to understand the Creation story from the perspective of astrophysics - does Genesis 1 describe the Big Bang? - or the emergence of different categories of life from the perspective of evolutionary biology - from the lower forms of life - vegetation on Day 3 - to the highest form of life -

⁵ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics. A Continental Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004. p. 127.

⁶ Chaim Trachtman, "Tzara'at as Cancer" TheTorah.com (2016). <https://thetorah.com/article/tzaraat-as-cancer>

⁷ Num 12:10, the case of Miriam who was afflicted for speaking about Moses' wife; 2 Sam 3:29, where David curses Joab for the murder of Avner by invoking *tzara'at* as one of the punishments

the human being on Day 6. These are interesting intellectual exercises, but they lead us to the same conclusion that we get to with *tzara'at* namely, *that the Bible is not trying to convey to us a set of scientific truths*. Rather, the Bible is trying to convey to us a moral view of the world. The Creation story and the rules relating to *tzara'at* teach us that life emerged as a result of divine will and that there are no forces in the universe other than God. God, not a chance explosion and its consequences, structures the way all matter interacts, and directs the flow of life in all of its myriad categories and conditions, *including the maladies that a person may experience*. In the case of *tzara'at*, while we do find biblical texts that explain its occurrence as a punishment for sin⁷ we find other texts, including the ones in this section of Leviticus that see it as being built into creation without direct causality from sin. Leviticus 13-14 is the manual for how the priests were to interact with an individual afflicted with this unique but not uncommon disease. Because it makes the afflicted person look like a living corpse, it blurs the boundary between life and death. *Tzara'at* places the afflicted individual in a zone of uncertainty and chaos, which the Torah categorizes as impure. In the end, the rules pertaining to *tzara'at* are intended to enable an afflicted person to traverse from the zone of chaos and uncertainty - impurity - to the zone of order and certainty - purity. Insight from another scholar, Yitzhaq Feder, may also be helpful here.⁸ He cites some strikingly similar practices in adjacent cultures involving a disease that very closely resembles *tzara'at*. But he also points out three main differences: According to Feder

1. The Torah does not focus on the danger of the disease or its contagiousness. The others do.
2. The Torah (here) makes no causal link between sin and the disease. The others do.
3. The Torah offers no healing ritual from the disease only purification rituals. The others do.

Leviticus 13-14 is a polemic against the surrounding cultures who saw this disease as a consequence of their gods' displeasure and utilized magic to bring its sufferers healing. The Bible will have none of that. Rather, in

the worldview of Leviticus, *tzara'at* is built into creation and so is its cure. An afflicted person simply requires the symbolic vocabulary and priestly assistance to navigate the spiritual and emotional consequence of the disease and come back into the living community. Shabbat Shalom!

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Carla and Bruce Herniter in honor of the birth of their grand-daughter, Miriam Eta Birnbaum Herniter. Mazal Tov!

that should befall him; 2 Kings 5:27 where the prophet Elisha punishes his servant Gehazi with *tzara'at* for stealing from the Aramean general, Naaman; 2 Chr 26:19-20 where King Uzziah is punished with *tzara'at* (on his forehead!) for trespassing in the holy area of the Temple and attempting to offer incense.

⁸ Yitzhaq Feder, *Behind the Scenes of a Priestly Polemic: Leviticus 14 and its Extra-Biblical Parallels* in Journal of Hebrew Scriptures, 15 (2015), article 4.