

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Metzorah/Shabbat HaGadol
April 9, 2022 *** Nisan 8, 5782

Metzorah in a Nushell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1761/jewish/Metzora-in-a-Nutshell.htm
Last week's Parshah described the signs of the metzora (commonly mistranslated as "leper")—a person afflicted by a spiritual malady which places him or her in a state of ritual impurity. This week's Torah reading begins by detailing how the recovered metzora is purified by the kohen (priest) with a special procedure involving two birds, spring water in an earthen vessel, a piece of cedar wood, a scarlet thread and a bundle of hyssop.

A home can also be afflicted with tzaraat by the appearance of dark red or green patches on its walls. In a process lasting as long as nineteen days, a kohen determines if the house can be purified, or whether it must be demolished. Ritual impurity is also engendered through a seminal or other discharge in a man, and menstruation or other discharge of blood in a woman, necessitating purification through immersion in a mikvah.

Shabbat HaGadol

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shabbat-hagadol/>

The Sabbath immediately preceding Passover is called *Shabbat HaGadol*, the great Sabbath. According to tradition, the 10th of Nisan in the year of the exodus was a Saturday. It was considered a great event, in fact a miracle, that the Israelites could on that day select a lamb for sacrifice without being molested by their Egyptian masters, who, at other times, would have stoned them for such daring (Code of Jewish Law, *Orach Chayyim* 430: 1).

Another possible reason for the name is that the *haftarah* (Malachi 3:4-24), the prophetic portion, speaks of the "great day" of God on which the Messiah will appear. A novel explanation for the name of Shabbat HaGadol is that the people used to return from the synagogue later than usual on this Sabbath because of the unusually long sermon that was customary on this day.

The custom of reciting the Haggadah in the afternoon of Shabbat HaGadol was designed to familiarize the people with its contents in preparation for the Seder service that week (Code of Jewish Law, *Orach Chayyim* 430)

Haftarah for Shabbat HaGadol:Malachi 3:4-24

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/haftarah-for-shabbat-hagadol/>

The Shabbat before Passover is referred to as *Shabbat HaGadol*, or The Great Shabbat, a term that originates in the Middle Ages. Though it's not clear exactly why Shabbat HaGadol was given this name, some see it as a reference to a verse

at the end of the haftarah for this Shabbat, which has to do with a day in the future that will be "gadol" or awesome: "Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord." (3:23)

Malakhi, the prophet from whom read on Shabbat HaGadol, was the last of the 12 minor prophets. Malakhi means "messenger of God," so numerous commentators and biblical critics have argued that Malakhi was not in fact the name of the prophet but rather his title. Malakhi has been identified with Mordecai, Ezra, and Zekhariah by various sources throughout Jewish history.

Whatever Malakhi's real identity, his message in this haftarah is clear. The people have been committing a variety of egregious sins, including practicing sorcery, committing adultery, lying, cheating laborers, abandoning the tithe and contribution to the Levites, and treating widows, orphans, and strangers poorly. Malakhi imagines the people standing back-to-back with God, wondering how they could ever face God again. God reminds them that if they turn back toward Him, He will turn back toward them, giving them bountiful rewards (3:7).

Reward and Punishment

Malakhi notices that the people have become skeptical of the concept of divine reward and punishment. They have seen that behaving poorly can still lead to achieving wealth and prosperity, and so they longer fear retribution. However, Malakhi adamantly points out that a day will come when God will mete out appropriate punishments and rewards for everyone.

That day is described with language of heat and fire, as Malakhi portrays those who are evil being consumed: "For lo! That day is at hand, burning like an oven. All the arrogant and all the doers of evil shall be straw" (3:19). Meanwhile, those people who have been doing good will be healed, and will have all they need, "like stall-fed calves" (3:20).

The haftarah closes with a reference to the prophet Elijah who will be coming to herald the redemption in the time to come. Malakhi portrays the redemption as imminent, thus giving the people a strong incentive to repent and serve God. This parallels the redemption that we recall during Passover. Just as the people of Israel were redeemed from Egypt after generations of slavery, so too will the people be redeemed with the coming of the messiah in the time to come.

Food For Thought

[The Power of Shame – Metzorah by The Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l Legacy Trust](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/metzora/the-power-of-shame/)

On 20 December 2013, a young woman named Justine Sacco was waiting in Heathrow airport before boarding a flight to Africa. To while away the time, she sent a tweet in questionable taste about the hazards of catching AIDS. There was no immediate response, and she boarded the plane unaware of the storm that was

about to break. Eleven hours later, upon landing, she discovered that she had become an international cause célèbre. Her tweet, and responses to it, had gone viral. Over the next 11 days she would be googled more than a million times. She was branded a racist and dismissed from her job. Overnight she had become a pariah.[1]

The new social media have brought about a return to an ancient phenomenon, public shaming. Two recent books – Jon Ronson’s *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed* and Jennifer Jacquet’s *Is Shame Necessary?*[2] – have discussed it. Jacquet believes it is a good thing. It can be a way of getting public corporations to behave more responsibly, for example. Ronson highlights the dangers. It is one thing to be shamed by the community of which you are a part, quite another by a global network of strangers who know nothing about you or the context in which your act took place. That is more like a lynch mob than the pursuit of justice. Either way, this gives us a way of understanding the otherwise bewildering phenomenon of *tsara’at*, the condition dealt with at length in last week’s parsha and this one. *Tsara’at* has been variously translated as leprosy, skin disease, and scaly infection. Yet there are formidable problems in identifying it with any known disease. First, its symptoms do not correspond to Hansen’s Disease, otherwise known as leprosy. Second, the *tsara’at* described in the Torah affects not only human beings but also the walls of houses, furniture, and clothes. There is no known medical condition that has this property.

Besides, the Torah is a book about holiness and correct conduct. It is not a medical text. Even if it were, as David Zvi Hoffman points out in his commentary,[3] the procedures to be carried out do not correspond to those that would be done if *tsara’at* were a contagious disease. Finally, *tsara’at* as described in the Torah is a condition that brings not sickness but rather impurity, *tumah*. Health and purity are different things altogether.

The Sages decoded the mystery by relating our parsha to the instances in the Torah in which someone was actually afflicted by *tsara’at*. It happened to Miriam when she spoke against her brother Moses (Num. 12:1-15). Another example referred to was Moses who, at the Burning Bush, said to God that the Israelites would not believe in him. His hand briefly turned “as leprous as snow” (Ex. 4:7). The Sages regarded *tsara’at* as a punishment for *lashon hara*, evil speech, speaking negatively about or denigrating another person.

This helped them explain why the symptoms of *tsara’at* – mould, discolouration – could affect walls, furniture, clothes, and human skin. These were a sequence of warnings or punishments. First God warned the offender by sending a sign of decay to the walls of his house. If the offender repented the condition stopped there. If he failed to do so his furniture was affected, then his clothes, and finally his skin.

How are we to understand this? Why was “evil speech” regarded as so serious an offence that it took these strange phenomena to point to its existence? And why was it punished this way and not another?

It was the anthropologist Ruth Benedict and her book about Japanese culture, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*,^[4] that popularised a distinction between two kinds of society: guilt cultures and shame cultures. Ancient Greece, like Japan, was a shame culture. Judaism and the religions influenced by it (most obviously, Calvinism) were guilt cultures. The differences between them are substantial. In shame cultures, what matters is the judgment of others. Acting morally means conforming to public roles, rules, and expectations. You do what other people expect you to do. You follow society’s conventions. If you fail to do so, society punishes you by subjecting you to shame, ridicule, disapproval, humiliation, and ostracism. In guilt cultures what matters is not what other people think but what the voice of conscience tells you. Living morally means acting in accordance with internalised moral imperatives: “You shall” and “You shall not.” What matters is what you know to be right and wrong.

People in shame cultures are other-directed. They care about how they appear in the eyes of others, or as we would say today, they care about their “image.” People in guilt cultures are inner-directed. They care about what they know about themselves in moments of absolute honesty. Even if your public image is undamaged, if you know you have done wrong it will make you feel uneasy. You will wake up at night, troubled. “O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!” says Shakespeare’s Richard III. “My conscience hath a thousand several tongues / And every tongue brings in a several tale /And every tale condemns me for a villain.” Shame is public humiliation. Guilt is inner torment.

The emergence of a guilt culture in Judaism flowed from its understanding of the relationship between God and humankind. In Judaism we are not actors on a stage with society as the audience and the judge. We can fool society; we cannot fool God. All pretence and pride, every mask and persona, the cosmetic cultivation of public image are irrelevant: “The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). Shame cultures are collective and conformist. By contrast Judaism, the archetypal guilt culture, emphasises the individual and their relationship with God. What matters is not whether we conform to the culture of the age but whether we do what is good, just, and right.

This makes the law of tsara’at fascinating, because according to the Sages’ interpretation, it constitutes one of the rare instances in the Torah of punishment by shame rather than guilt. The appearance of mould or discolouration on the walls of a house was a public signal of private wrongdoing. It was a way of saying to everyone who lived or visited there, “Bad things have been said in this place.” Little by little the signals came ever closer to the culprit, appearing next on their bed or

chair, then on their clothes, then on their skin, until eventually their found themselves diagnosed as defiled:

And a blighted person, one bearing the disease – their clothing shall be torn, and the hair of their head disarrayed. And they shall cover their upper lips as they cry out, ‘Impure! Impure!’ They shall be in a state of impurity for as long as they have the disease; they are impure. They shall live apart; outside the camp shall be their dwelling. (Lev. 13:45-46)

These are quintessential expressions of shame. First is the stigma: the public marks of disgrace or dishonour (the torn clothes, unkempt hair). Then comes the ostracism: temporary exclusion from the normal affairs of society. These have nothing to do with illness and everything to do with social disapproval. This is what makes the law of tsara’at so hard to understand at first: it is one of the rare appearances of public shaming in a non-shame, guilt-based culture.^[5] It happened, though, not because society had expressed its disapproval but because God was signalling that it should do so.

Why specifically in the case of lashon hara, “evil speech”? Because speech is what holds society together. Anthropologists have argued that language evolved among humans precisely in order to strengthen the bonds between them so that they could co-operate in larger groupings than any other animal. What sustains co-operation is trust. This allows and encourages me to make sacrifices for the group, knowing that others can be relied on to do likewise. This is precisely why lashon hara is so destructive. It undermines trust. It makes people suspicious about one another. It weakens the bonds that hold the group together. If unchecked, lashon hara will destroy any group it attacks: a family, a team, a community, even a nation. Hence its uniquely malicious character: It uses the power of language to weaken the very thing language was brought into being to create, namely, the trust that sustains the social bond.

That is why the punishment for lashon hara was to be temporarily excluded from society by public exposure (the signs that appear on walls, furniture, clothes, and skin), stigmatisation and shame (the torn clothes, etc.) and ostracism (being forced to live outside the camp). It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to punish the malicious gossiper using the normal conventions of law, courts, and the establishment of guilt. This can be done in the case of motsi shem ra, libel or slander, because these are all cases of making a false statement. Lashon hara is more subtle. It is done not by falsehood but by insinuation. There are many ways of harming a person’s reputation without actually telling a lie. Someone accused of lashon hara can easily say, “I didn’t say it, I didn’t mean it, and even if I did, I did not say anything that was untrue.” The best way of dealing with people who poison relationships without actually uttering falsehoods is by naming, shaming, and shunning them.

That, according to the Sages, is what tsara'at miraculously did in ancient times. It no longer exists in the form described in the Torah. But the use of the Internet and social media as instruments of public shaming illustrates both the power and the danger of a culture of shame. Only rarely does the Torah invoke it, and in the case of the metzora only by an act of God, not society. Yet the moral of the metzora remains. Malicious gossip, lashon hara, undermines relationships, erodes the social bond, and damages trust. It deserves to be exposed and shamed.

Never speak ill of others, and stay far from those who do.

[1] Jon Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, London: Picador, 2015, pp. 63-86.

[2] Jennifer Jacquet, *Is Shame Necessary? New Uses for an Old Tool*, London: Allen Lane, 2015. [3] Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman, *Commentary to Sefer Vayikra* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1972), vol. 1, pp. 253–255. [4] Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946.

[5] Another example of shame, according to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was the ceremony in which a slave who did not wish to go free after the completion of six years of service, had his ear pierced against a doorpost (*Ex. 20:6*). See Rashi ad loc., and *Kiddushin* 22b.

Unlearning the Tzara'at from Our Walls by Rabbi Melanie Aron

<https://truhah.org/resources/parshat-metzora-melanie-aron-moraltorah/>

Anyone who has ever had water damage in their home can relate to the Levitical passage about *tzara'at* of walls (Leviticus 14:33-57) found in Parshat Metzora. Yes, the mysterious skin disease can also afflict houses, which can result in having to rebuild a wall or an entire building. Deciding when things can be repaired and when one has to tear it all down and start over is critical. Having to tear out sheetrock and flooring to dry out one's home is a large and unpleasant undertaking.

The classic midrash in *Leviticus Rabbah* 17:7 suggests that the Canaanites hid gold in their homes pre-conquest and that the destruction related to the elimination of *tzara'at* gives the Israelites access to these treasures. This is problematic on many levels. I prefer our tradition of considering the “leprosy” of walls something that “*lo hayah ve-lo nivrah*” (*Tosefta Negaim* 6:1), that doesn’t exist in real life and whose purpose is theoretical. This means that there is another message in these texts. What might it be?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the 19th century intellectual founder of Modern Orthodoxy, sees these laws as not about sanitary issues relating to mold but carrying a moral message. He notes that it is *tzara'at* specifically of walls – that is, of the part of the house that separates the owner from the community. When an owner acts as if his house is his alone, when his “egotism makes a man refuse to render brotherly service to his fellow man,” he is practicing the selfishness of the city of Sodom, where their motto was, “What I have is mine and what you have is yours.”

Pirkei Avot 5:10 at first identifies this as a common characteristic but then remarks

that it is the way of Sodom:

There are four types of character in human beings:

One that says: “mine is mine, and yours is yours”; this is a commonplace type; and some say this is a Sodom-type of character.

[One that says:] “mine is yours and yours is mine” is an unlearned person

[One that says:] “mine is yours is yours is yours” is a pious person.

[One that says:] “mine is mine, and yours is mine” is a wicked person.

For many in American society today, it seems adequate to avoid the wicked person’s assertion that “what’s mine is mine and what’s yours in mine” and to live a life of “what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours.” It is a theme I hear often, particularly in libertarian circles where ownership is preeminent and there is little sense of community responsibility.

Jewish tradition believes that it is a form of hubris to say that what we have is a result of our own strength and thus belongs to us alone. This theme is enunciated in Deuteronomy’s (8:12-18) fear that in times to come farmers in Israel will become haughty through their possessions. It comes through clearly also in the Talmud in Arachin 16a, where it is asserted that it is haughtiness that makes us claim that we made our house by ourselves and that therefore we don’t have to share. The Kli Yakar (16th century, Prague) similarly says that it is this stinginess that brings “*tzara’at* of houses,” that our refusal to share is what will ultimately destroy our homes and society.

Many American Jews claim that we pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps, implying that others should do the same. Yet we forget the benefits that our grandparents enjoyed in receiving a good free public school education, and a free university education as in New York’s CUNY system. Often our grandparents benefited from the GI Bill post-World War II, as well as government help in buying homes and other wealth creation. Rabbi Joel Fleekop has a wonderful exercise helping American Jews identify these sources of governmental assistance.

Those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder today do not have those extra handholds and footholds to help them progress. It is our responsibility, therefore, to fight for the allocation of resources to these stepping stones. Adequate funding for elementary and secondary education would be a good start, along with programs such as summer school to help students catch up from their Covid-related deficits. Debt forgiveness for college loans and programs to provide forms of free tuition would go even further. Without these programs, including some form of reparations, we are not facing up to the impact of generations of hurdles like redlining that have prevented others from experiencing our blessings. We are acting like those who brought *tzara’at* on their homes in earlier times.

Rabbi Melanie Aron is the rabbi emerita of Congregation Shir Hadash in Los Gatos, California, where she served for 30 years after a decade on the East Coast in New Jersey and Brooklyn.

Through her career, she was involved in justice issues including working with the labor movement, community organizing, and inter-religious dialogue. Currently in Washington DC, she is enjoying teaching, time with family and friends, and participating in Jewish life as a civilian as she did before rabbinical school.

Evergreen Lessons from the Haggadah – Pesach Shabbat HaGadol by Shuly Rubin Schwartz

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/evergreen-lessons-from-the-haggadah/>

The Passover seder—the most celebrated Jewish ritual—serves as a symbolic reenactment of the journey of the Israelites from slavery to freedom. The Haggadah commands us to experience it annually as a way of developing historical empathy for all who are oppressed, enslaved, displaced, and hoping for liberation; we have ritualized the recounting of our people’s enslavement and deliverance in part to cultivate a sense of moral responsibility toward those suffering in our own day.

The seder is meant to spark discussion of these issues, and thousands of Haggadot reflect the varied ways that communities have interpreted this directive over time, space, and interests. The Haggadot in my childhood home included several additional, mimeographed pages to remember those who perished in the Holocaust and express solidarity with a new generation of Soviet Jews yearning for liberation. Throughout my adulthood, new additions found their way into our seder.

Our understanding of freedom and liberation, so essential to the Pesah seder, was enriched and enlarged not only by using various Haggadot and topical inserts, but also by learning from seder guests who experienced the sweetness and joy of freedom viscerally—a formerly incarcerated person, a family who had escaped the shah of Iran, a victim of childhood abuse, and a colleague whose scholarship focused on the enslavement of African Americans in our own country. In each generation, we discover new ways to understand and personalize our ancient teachings.

As we approach Passover this year, our focus includes Ukrainians fighting valiantly to defend themselves against Russian invasion. Outraged by the violence, heartbroken by the loss of life, and appalled by the destruction, we feel an obligation to help the Ukrainian people by offering monetary support and help with resettlement. And we are especially attuned to helping the tens of thousands of Jews among them.

Exactly one hundred years ago, in April 1922, my great-grandparents emigrated to the United States with their four children, fearing for their lives in Kremenets, a city located in what is now present-day western Ukraine. My great-grandfather, Aaron Shimon Shpall, an educator and journalist, recorded his thoughts about leaving “the city that we were born in and that we spent years of our lives in,” acknowledging how hard it would be “to separate from our native land, and our birthplace and our father’s house.” But he was clear that the homeland he knew –

which was part of Russia – had “embittered our lives and saddened our souls. If not for the three million of our brothers who live there, it could be overturned along with Sodom and Gomorrah and the world would have lost nothing.”

My family succeeded in leaving because in the aftermath of World War I, the western part of Russia—including Kremenets—became part of the newly created modern Poland. Shpall’s brother and sisters, who had left previously and settled in Denver, Colorado, sent him the necessary travel expenses and affidavits, and Shpall and his family received Polish passports on June 21, 1921. Even after this date, it took months for them to leave. The situation worsened, and Shpall was arrested. He was eventually released, but when a local officer tipped him off to an impending second arrest—from which he would likely never return—the family resolved to leave. By this time the visa needed to be ratified again by the American Consul in Poland. In requesting ratification, Shpall provided the requisite reassurances: “I am going to Colorado, a province not populated very much, and my settlement there will have no bad influence upon the material life of the inhabitants,” given his level of education and his experience as an educator. The anguish of my family’s departure and, I can only imagine the feelings of refugees all over the world in every era, is captured in Shpall’s diary: “Nobody desired to go, but everybody had to go. We all run, or, to speak more correctly, we flee. And when somebody flees, there is no question: ‘Where to?’ Where your feet carry you! Where you have the possibility!”

After being reunited with his family in Colorado, Shpall and his family ultimately settled in New Orleans, where he served as teacher and then as assistant principal of the communal Hebrew school.

American Jewry has flourished thanks to ancestors like Shpall. Owing to their courage and determination, we are privileged to recount the Exodus from Egypt each year as citizens of a democratic state and to develop the empathy needed at moments like this to help others who fear for their lives.

For some, historical empathy for the plight of the Ukrainian people might be tinged with ambivalence, because of ancestors—like Shpall—who suffered from brutal antisemitism at the hands of Ukrainian neighbors or whose ancestors’ murder at the hand of the Nazis was abetted by local Ukrainians. How can we square these complicated emotions? In part, because we also know that countless other Ukrainians fought in the Russian army to defeat the Nazis; and, Ukraine has changed greatly over time. The Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, on the site of the largest massacre of Ukrainian Jews by the Nazis, is in the planning stages, and today, Ukraine is led by a Jewish president.

Most important, we quell our doubts because the Haggadah reminds us not to take our freedom for granted, pointing us instead to activate our sense of moral responsibility to help others who are fighting to secure their own. Our Haggadah prods us to recall our history so that it will conjure up our best selves, so that we

will do what we can to ensure that the future brings freedom, safety, and security to all. It's a sentiment I believe my great-grandfather would have shared. (*Shuly Rubin Schwartz is Chancellor and Irving Lehrman Research Professor of American Jewish History.*)

Yahrtzeits

Ron Weiss remembers his father Alfred Weiss on Mon April 11 (Nisan 10)

Mattye Gandel remembers her father H. Jay Messeloff on Fri April 15^t(Nisan 14)
