

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Tazria
April 13, 2024 *** Nissan 5, 5784

Tazria in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1545/jewish/Tazria-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Tazria," means "conceives" and it is found in Leviticus 12:2.

The Parshah of Tazria continues the discussion of the laws of tumah v'taharah, ritual impurity and purity.

A woman giving birth should undergo a process of purification, which includes immersing in a mikvah (a naturally gathered pool of water) and bringing offerings to the Holy Temple. All male infants are to be circumcised on the eighth day of life.

Tzaraat (often mistranslated as leprosy) is a supra-natural plague, which can afflict people as well as garments or homes. If white or pink patches appear on a person's skin (dark red or green in garments), a kohen is summoned. Judging by various signs, such as an increase in size of the afflicted area after a seven-day quarantine, the kohen pronounces it tamei (impure) or tahor (pure).

A person afflicted with tzaraat must dwell alone outside of the camp (or city) until he is healed. The afflicted area in a garment or home must be removed; if the tzaraat recurs, the entire garment or home must be destroyed.

Haftorah in a Nutshell: II Kings 4:42 – 5:19

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/659332/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah describes how a prophet miraculously cured an Aramite general of his tzara'at ailment. The bulk of this week's Torah reading discusses this skin disease and its related impurity.

The haftorah begins with a brief mention of one of the prophet Elisha's miraculous feats. He received a paltry gift of twenty loaves of bread and a sack of grain. At Elisha's insistence, this gift was shared amongst his hundred students. The food was enough for all—and there was even leftovers.

Naaman, general of the powerful Aramite armies, contracted tzara'at. A young captive Israelite maid advised him to seek the assistance of the "prophet in Samaria." Acting on this suggestion, the king of Aram dispatched a message to the king of Israel, "Behold I have sent Naaman my servant to you, and you shall cure him of his tzara'at!"

The king of Israel panicked, until Elisha sent him a message: "Why have you rent

your garments? Let him come to me now, and let him know that there is a prophet in Israel!"

Elisha advised Naaman to immerse in the Jordan River. Despite his initial reluctance to do so, Naaman carried out the prophet's orders, and was immediately healed.

Elisha refused to accept any gifts from Naaman. The general promised Elisha that he would no longer serve any deity other than the One G-d, and he departed.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[Othello, WikiLeaks, and Mildewed Walls by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l \(orig. 5771\)](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/tazria/othello-wikileaks-and-mildewed-walls/)

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It was the Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, that translated tsara'at, the condition whose identification and cleansing occupies much of Tazria and Metzora as "lepra", giving rise to a long tradition identifying it with leprosy.

That tradition is now widely acknowledged to be incorrect. First, the condition described in the Torah simply does not fit the symptoms of leprosy. Second, the Torah applies it not only to various skin conditions but also to mildew on clothes and the walls of houses, which certainly rules out any known disease. The Rambam puts it best:

"Tsara'at is a comprehensive term covering a number of dissimilar conditions. Thus whiteness in a person's skin is called tsara'at. The falling off of some of his hair on the head or the chin is called tsara'at. A change of colour in garments or in houses is called tsara'at." Hilchot Tumat Tsara'at 16:10

Seeking to identify the nature of the phenomenon, the Sages sought for clues elsewhere in the Torah and found them readily available. Miriam was smitten by tsara'at for speaking badly about her brother Moses (Num. 12:10). The Torah later gives special emphasis to this event, seeing in it a warning for all generations:

"Be careful with regard to the plague of tsara'at . . . Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam along the way after you came out of Egypt." Deut. 24:8-9

It was, in other words, no normal phenomenon but a specific Divine punishment for lashon hara, evil speech. The Rabbis drew attention to the verbal similarity

between metzora, a person afflicted by the condition, and motzi shem ra, someone guilty of slander.

Rambam, on the basis of rabbinic traditions, gives a brilliant account of why tsara'at afflicted both inanimate objects like walls and clothes, and human beings:

It [tsara'at] was a sign and wonder among the Israelites to warn them against slanderous speaking. For if a man uttered slander, the walls of his house would suffer a change. If he repented, the house would again become clean. But if he continued in his wickedness until the house was torn down, leather objects in his house on which he sat or lay would suffer a change. If he repented they would again become clean. But if he continued in his wickedness until they were burned, the garments which he wore would suffer a change. If he repented they would again become clean. But if he continued in his wickedness until they were burned, his skin would suffer a change and he would become infected by tsara'at and be set apart and alone until he no more engaged in the conversation of the wicked which is scoffing and slander. Hilchot Tumat Tsara'at 16:10

The most compelling illustration of what the tradition is speaking about when it talks of the gravity of motsi shem ra, slander, and lashon hara, evil speech, is Shakespeare's tragedy Othello. Iago, a high-ranking soldier, is bitterly resentful of Othello, a Moorish general in the army of Venice. Othello has promoted a younger man, Cassio, over the more experienced Iago, who is determined to take revenge. He does so in a prolonged and vicious campaign, which involves among other things tricking Othello into the suspicion that his wife, Desdemona, is having an adulterous affair with Cassio. Othello asks Iago to kill Cassio, and he himself kills Desdemona, smothering her in her bed. Emilia, Iago's wife and Desdemona's attendant, discovers her mistress dead and as Othello explains why he has killed her, realises the nature of her husband's plot and exposes it. Othello, in guilt and grief, commits suicide, while Iago is arrested and taken to be tortured and possibly executed.

It is a play entirely about the evil of slander and suspicion, and portrays literally what the Sages said figuratively:

"Evil speech kills three people: the one who says it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is said." Arachin 15b

Shakespeare's tragedy makes it painfully clear how much evil speech lives in the dark corners of suspicion. Had the others known what Iago was saying to stir up

fear and distrust, the facts might have become known and the tragedy averted. As it was, he was able to mislead the various characters, playing on their emotional weaknesses, distrust and envy, getting each to believe the worst about one another. It ends in serial bloodshed and disaster.

Hence the poetic justice Jewish tradition attributes to one of the least poetic of biblical passages, the laws relating to skin diseases and mildew. The slanderer spreads his lies in private, but his evil is exposed in public. First the walls of his house proclaim his sin, then the leather objects on which he sits, then his clothes, and eventually his skin itself. He is condemned to the humiliation of isolation:

'Unclean! Unclean!' he must call out . . . Since he is unclean, he must remain alone, and his place shall be outside the camp. Lev. 13:45-46

Said the Rabbis: Because his words separated husband from wife and brother from brother, his punishment is that he is separated from human contact and made an outcast from society (Arachin 16b).

At its highest, WikiLeaks aims at being today's functional equivalent of the law of the metzora: an attempt to make public the discreditable things people do and say in private. The Sages said about evil speech that it was as bad as idolatry, incest, and murder combined, and it was Shakespeare's genius to show us one dramatic way in which it can contaminate human relationships, turning people against one another with tragic consequences.

Never say or do in private what you would be ashamed to read about on the front page of tomorrow's newspapers. That is the basic theme of the law of tsara'at, updated to today.

[Charting a Way Back by Ayelet Cohen](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/charting-a-way-back/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/charting-a-way-back/>

The book of Vayikra can be understood as an exercise in transition; if one imagines the Torah as the lifecycle trajectory of Israel, this book represents adolescence/early adulthood. The Israelites are still transitioning from being an enslaved people toward becoming a free people. With their newfound autonomy, they must learn responsibility to one another and service to God. They struggle with faith, patience, ethical behavior, interpersonal relationships, and boundaries—in short, all of the things that are hard about maturation and adulthood. Ancient Israelite religion is making a parallel transition, from the extreme and often brutal moral and legal codes of the ancient Near East, to a proto-Judaism. If we try to translate the norms and codes of Vayikra directly through a lens of contemporary values, we may see only how archaic it is. We know the ways that

certain verses have been magnified and distorted to criminalize and declare immoral the lives of LGBTQ+ people, control women's bodies, and ostracize people with illness, among other things. We also see the beginnings of a system of justice and communal responsibility. If we are able to see Vayikra as a document of transition, we can discern the beginnings of an ethos not only of keeping people out of the tent, but allowing for a way back in.

Tazria contains everything that makes Sefer Vayikra fascinating, challenging, painful, and rich. The text offers an account that is graphic yet belies the squeamishness that expresses the ancient fear and anxiety about misunderstood bodily processes. This anxiety, and the desire to control those bodily processes in order to manage anxiety, has persisted throughout Jewish law, Judeo-Christian tradition, and human culture. Much of this is rooted in misogyny and the fear of illness and death. Any blood that came from a source the presumably male authors feared or did not understand, specifically blood of menstruation and childbirth, and any bodily substance that they thought to have the potential for life and death, was deemed tameh. The less they understood it, the more it was associated with female and menstruating and birthing bodies, the longer the tumah persisted.

Those designated as tameh are separated from the camp, reinforcing a fear of contagion, as well as the association of menstruation and childbirth with illness. As if the condition of being a menstruating woman or giving birth was transmissible and therefore all the more dangerous. Male priests are afforded the authority to decide if someone is ready to return.

Biblical tumah is rooted in the terror of death, the discomfort with bodies and bodily fluids, and an assumption that female bodies are at best, mysterious, at worst, of lesser worth. None of this is surprising in its context. The spectre of death was ever present in an ancient world, and likely even more terrifying than it is for us today. And yet, while we now understand these processes, the devaluing of female bodies and the impulse to control and legislate them continues to have a powerful and strengthening hold in the Christian society of the contemporary US.

Perhaps for this reason, what is most remarkable about Tazria is not the desire to remove certain people from the camp, but that the rituals of the sacrificial system offer people a way back into the camp. In their ancient context, the kohanim are enacting a radical system. These sacrifices and rituals offer a way back into the camp. In nearly every case, when a person is marked by tumah they are not cast out of the camp forever. There are specific rituals for ensuring the reentry of those who have been deemed tameh, such as this process prescribed for one recovering from childbirth:

On the completion of her period of purification, for either son or daughter, she shall bring to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. (Lev. 12:6)

The text continues to offer a more expansive version of the ritual, to make sure that the ritual of return is not out of reach for anyone economically:

If, however, her means do not suffice for a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. The priest shall make expiation on her behalf, and she shall be pure. (Lev. 12:8)

Similar rituals are introduced for one afflicted with tzara'at and other skin conditions, who are deemed ready to return to the camp. Midrash acknowledges the vulnerability and fear of those who are set outside of the camp. Notably, our tradition tells us that the people refused to move on without Miriam when she was removed from the camp in the Book of Numbers. Midrash Rabba, imagining both the privacy issues of having Miriam's brother, Aharon examine her, and the spiritual vulnerability of being excluded from the camp, imagines that God was present with her, leading her through the rituals of return. ⁷

The Holy One of Blessing said: 'I am the priest, I quarantine her, I deem her ritually pure.' That is what is written: "The people did not travel until Miriam was readmitted" (Num. 12:15). If so, the people were with the Divine Presence and the Divine Presence was waiting for her. (Vayikra Rabba 15:8)

These texts are an important part of our spiritual and religious evolution as Jews. Every year, Tazria urges us to question our own impulses to turn away from what is unfamiliar or frightening to us in the lives, and illnesses and bodies, of others. It invites us into discomfort and impels us to craft responses enabling those who are excluded from the community due to fear and ignorance to find their way in and be honored in the fullness of a being created betzelem Elohim. It prompts us to consider how ancient understandings and misunderstandings of life and death, illness and healing, gender and sex, led to moral understandings and legal systems that we now endeavor to reframe or transform. This week, the Torah calls each of us to seek out and build new pathways which enable those who are marginalized to return, to come back into an ever-expanding camp. *(Ayelet Cohen is the Pearl Resnick Dean of the Rabbinical School and Dean of The Division of Religious Leadership at JTS)*

Tazria: Fear of Impurity by Rabbi Amy Small

https://truah.org/resources/amy-small-tazria-moraltorah_2024/

Recently, I was unexpectedly rebuked by a friend and colleague, an Israeli rabbi whom I hold dear, who was visiting New York. He pointed to the charm on the necklace I was wearing, which is an outline of Israel. It is small in size, so I had not expected anyone to notice the outline it showed — or perhaps I was kidding myself into believing it didn't matter. Its shape shows the entire Land of Israel, with no demarcation for the West Bank or Gaza. "Amy," he said with chagrin, "you know that shows the occupied territory as part of the shape of Israel." His tone and his facial expression conveyed disbelief that I would wear this. "I know," I said, "but I was hoping no one would notice. Truth is, an Israeli friend gave this to me when I recently visited Israel, so I cherish it — after all, this was during a solidarity mission shortly after the horrific events of October 7."

I have been wearing that charm since that visit, as my heart has been heavy with grief and fear for my friends in Israel and for all those in harm's way at this time of war. Yet, we are now increasingly concerned about the way the war is portrayed in the media and the public square. Words matter, and the harm to the Jewish community has spread through words. How could the horrific events of October 7 and since be portrayed with the "spin" that Israel is to blame for all of it? The war of words has become a distressing addition to the violence that is causing so much suffering.

The complexity of the situation resides within a very sick, very troubled larger world. There are many days when, in outrage and distress, I exclaim aloud, "Why do so many people believe misinformation?" What is truth, and how do our language and our public conversation subvert the pursuit of shared truth? In a time when many news stories that are deep and complex are perverted into simple formulas of "us vs. them" or "good vs. bad," it can feel like the very foundation of our shared society is slippery.

How can we get our footing? How can the wisdom of our sages guide us? Surprisingly, we find wisdom regarding the dangers of distorted and harmful speech in commentaries for Parashat Tazria and the subsequent portion, Metzora. On the literal level, Tazria's detailed descriptions of frightening diseases may seem outdated for modern readers, yet our ancestors' fears of contagion are resonant in our time. Rabbi Eli Garfinkel writes:

The biological identity of tzara'at is ultimately unimportant, as both our biblical and rabbinic ancestors considered it to be a spiritual and not a medical problem. Spiritually, then, one could reasonably ask why laws relating to leprosy are worth hours of time in synagogue and the beit

midrash. One answer is that while this communicable impurity is no longer relevant in modern times, the concepts of illness, recovery, and care for those who are ill have always been relevant and always will be.[1]

This understanding of sickness as potentially a spiritual problem leads to rabbinic commentaries that relate the ethics of caring for each other to the realm of speech. The words we speak and publish and share may soothe our spiritual and emotional wounds when spoken in kindness, while the opposite is sadly also true. Speech has the potential to “sicken” us, as individuals and as a society when spoken in malice, betraying truth and/or lacking kindness. The rabbis of the Talmud understood the descriptions of leprosy and infectious disease to apply to the disease of harmful, malicious speech. Rashi comments on Leviticus 13:46:

HE SHALL ABIDE SOLITARY — This means that people who are unclean from other causes than that of leprosy shall not abide with him (Pesachim 67a; cf. Sifra). Our Rabbis said: Why is he (the leper) treated differently from other unclean persons that he should abide solitary? They replied: Because he, by slanderous statements (cf. Numbers 12:10), parted man and wife, or a man from his friend, he must be parted from everybody (Arakhin 16b).

Our public discourse today, particularly in the realm of political speech, is ill, filled with misinformation, untruths, and nastiness. When we ask, “What is truth?” and “How does our language and our public conversation subvert the pursuit or sharing of truth?”, we are seeking to diagnose a painful sickness in our world today. Rabbi Eli Garfinkel reflects on this in his commentary “Eretz Yisrael: Tzara’at and Malicious Gossip”:

The affliction of tzara’at has always been connected with the concept of leshon hara, malicious gossip or true but hurtful speech. In the Torah, tzara’at is seen as a punishment for spreading rumors; God gave Miriam tzara’at when she publicly complained about Moses’ marriage to a Cushite woman. In the Talmud, Resh Lakish (first century Palestine) took the matter further, making a phonetic connection between the word metsora (a person who has tzara’at) and a motzei shem ra, one who commits the sin of slander (B. Arakhin 15b).

Kikar Rabin (Rabin Square) in Tel Aviv is a poignant reminder of the power of malicious speech. Formerly known as Kikar Melakhim (Kings Square), it was renamed in memory of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated there by an ultranationalist zealot on November 4, 1995.

Rabin's murderer drew inspiration from those who called the prime minister a Nazi, a traitor, and a "pursuer" for signing the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians. By calling Rabin a pursuer, extremists were saying that there was a halakhic obligation to kill him. In halakhic terminology, a pursuer (rodef) is one who can be legally killed to prevent the death of the innocent.[2]

Nearly every day, as I read or watch the news, I am filled with upset and worry for our world. So much of our society's current malaise emanates from malicious speech. Where is the relief, the cure, and the future? Here in the commentaries on Tazria, our sages remind us that this is an age-old problem, as ancient as humanity itself. Fortunately, we know the medicine and the cure: caring, concern for all people, honesty and truth, and the pursuit of justice with a shared vision of a world repaired. This year, as we reflect on this small piece of Torah, we recommit ourselves to do all we can to help our world cure the sickness of malicious speech. By working together to heal this age-old malady, we can help to recover our world's health and thriving. [1] JPS Jewish Heritage Torah Commentary. Rabbi Eli L. Garfunkel. Jewish Publication Society. 2021. Page 185 [2] ibid. Page 193

(Rabbi Amy Joy Small recently retired from serving as Senior Rabbi of Ohavi Zedek Synagogue in Burlington, VT. She is a Senior Rabbinic Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute and regularly attends their rabbinic programs. She was ordained from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1987 and served on the board of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association 2001-2007, including as president 2003-2005. Rabbi Small resides in New Jersey, where she is discovering the next chapter of her rabbinate.)

Tazria: Healing Ourselves, Healing Our Planet by Rabbi Natan Greenberg(1) Edited by Shoshi Ehrenreich at Grow Torah

<https://www.growtorah.org/vayikra/2022/3/30-parshat-tazria-healing-ourselves-healing-our-planet>

Parshat Tazria discusses the sickness and healing of a person who contracts tzara'at. Tzara'at is the Biblical skin condition sometimes referred to as leprosy in English (although it is not the same as the disease known as leprosy). What manifests as a physical symptom of the skin is in fact a spiritual condition at its core, healed both by medical practice (quarantine) and spiritual reflection and cleansing.[2]

The Talmud pinpoints seven spiritual sources of tzara'at, with one being a condition called "tzarut ayin," or narrowness of vision.[3] Narrowness of vision, in this context, means acting without consideration of the wider ramifications, guided by immediate gratification.[4] Unfortunately, this danger can present itself in varying domains of our lives - health, parenting, relationships, ethics, and more. In

this sense, routinely acting with tzarut ayin is the opposite of acting with wisdom. As Pirkei Avot puts it, "Who is truly wise? One who foresees the result." [5]

The climate crisis is a prime example of tzarut ayin. For years, climate scientists, the government, and even major corporations have had enough research available to guide their actions toward sustainable development. Yet we continue to emit more carbon than ever. [6] Our ability to ignore the uncomfortable reality using our narrow field of vision has led us to rationalize our continued use of disposables. [7] The waste we have already created has made its mark on our planet. The spiritual blemish of tzarut ayin characterizes many environmentally unsound practices today.

We frequently discuss humanity's responsibility in Gan Eden to till and tend it—to work and protect it. This mandate has individual applications - roles for the self and his immediate surroundings, but also communal and global applications. As Rabbi Yosef Albo stated, "Every person is a small world, and the world is a giant person." [8] The globe is a canvas for humanity's actions; we can produce an artistic masterpiece if we make the right choices. However, affecting the global community (or even your community) can seem daunting; but there are concrete, manageable steps we can take to effect change. Culture does not change overnight; it involves a slow shift in the perception of what is normative, followed by integrating those normative practices into everyday routines. There is a publication available on the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's website, authored by psychologist, Christie Manning, Ph.D., outlining some of these concrete steps individuals and communities can take to strive for a more sustainable way of living. [9] One such step is viewing a change in an environmental habit, not as a stand-alone change, but rather one that comes as a byproduct of another. As Manning puts it in her essay:

The context in which a habitual behavior occurs can be enough to trigger the habit, and, if the context doesn't change, then the habit tends to stay. However, a relatively simple change in life circumstances can be enough to disrupt a habit (Wood, Witt, & Tam, 2005; Verplanken & Wood, 2006). Fortunately, there are many points in life when circumstances are disrupted for perfectly normal reasons: change points. Research shows that people are most able to handle new habits (sustainable ones!) when old habits are changing anyway. [10]

Perhaps a family you know moves into a new house. You can suggest separating their waste into compost now that they are starting anew. Offer to show them another household in the community that has implemented a successful composting strategy. Or say your friend just got a new job. Brainstorm carpooling possibilities to commute to the new office. When we identify the individual steps

necessary to achieve our “wide-visioned” goals, it makes it infinitely more achievable.

A more expansive spiritual perspective sees harming the physical world as damaging to the spiritual world. Though the world is in a state of physical and spiritual imbalance, we have the power to grow and change it. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (Israel, 20th cent.), in teaching about prayer, mentioned that within a process, something is always imbalanced. At every stage of life, something is not in harmony. This is because imbalance leads to new growth.[11] The imbalance of global climate change requires us to come to a new awareness and take on new responsibilities to change how we live. Spiritual imbalance and global ecological imbalance are an opportunity for growth toward sustainability, spiritually as well as physically. (*Rabbi Natan Greenberg is the Rosh Yeshiva of the Bat Ayin Yeshiva in Israel*)

[1] The author would like to acknowledge Sareet Benayahu for her involvement in this essay. [2] Vayikra 13:45 [3] Commentary of the Rif (R' Yitzhak Alfasi, Morocco 11th/12th cent.) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 14a. [4] Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (Ukraine, 18th cent.) mentions the connection between wisdom and seeing, for example in Likutei Moharan teaching 94 [5] Mishna Avot 2:9, for further discussion, see Talmud Bavli, Tamid, 32a, commentary on the words “ha’ro-eh et ha’nolad” [6] See the IPCC reports, or this 2015 expose on Exxon for examples of our historical knowledge of climate change, and Our World in Data for carbon emissions statistics. [7] See, for example, the Our World In Data statistics on plastic waste. [8] Rabbi Yosef Albo (Spain, 15th cent.), Sefer Ha’ikarim, Ma’amar Sheni, Chapter 31. [9] See here for further reading. [10] Ibid. [11] “Inyanei Tefilah” Olat Ra’ayah, Mossad Harav Kook Press, Jerusalem, 1983, “Inyanei Tefilah,” p. 10-18

Table for Five: Tazria – A Humbling Experience

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/table-for-five/2024/04/09/tazria-a-humbling-experience/>
Dini Coopersmith, Director, Orot HaTorah Israel

Oy. What a humbling experience to be a metzora! Our Sages tell us in the Talmud: “the lowest of the low is a metzora”. The word “leper” is synonymous with “ostracized.”

Can you imagine, in our shaming, cancel-culture generation, a person with a “leprous infection” going to the priest, who declares him (or her??) impure, leaving the community, tearing one’s clothes, walking around bare-headed and calling out: “don’t come near me- I’m impure?” Amazingly, this self-shaming, self-cancelling and self-ostracizing process would take place in the days of the Temple.

Metzora comes from the words “motzi ra” – brings out bad. In this case, the Jew with leprosy has become an agent for evil, and it is affecting his/ her whole internal being. In those days, we were guided and taught by priests, who would interpret for us the divine messages in the world. It was clear that illnesses were

messages from a loving God who wanted us to realize we were on the wrong path, recalibrate, and grow and develop as human beings.

Now, although we no longer have kohanim who can tell us why we are suffering, we still have a Father who is sending us messages, nationally and individually. If calamities befall our nation, if we are ostracized or cancelled individually or collectively on social media, may we hear the message, evaluate where we went wrong and come up with a plan for tikun (repair).

[Rabbi Shlomo Yaffe, The Alliance of Orthodox Congregations, Springfield, MA](#)

In Tractate Shabbat (67A) The Talmud remarks that it is permissible, in the case of a tree that sheds its fruit before becoming ripe, to paint it with red paint. It asks "what healing is he performing with this?" The answer: "so that people will see the tree and pray for mercy for it." It then quotes the above verse "(he) will cry: Impure, impure" (Leviticus 13:45). "He must announce his pain to the masses, and they will pray for mercy on his behalf."

Maimonides at the end of describing these laws writes (MT Tza'raat 16:10) "These changes... which the Torah described with the general term of tzara'at is not a natural occurrence. Instead, it is a sign and a wonder prevalent among the Jewish people to warn them against lashon hora, 'undesirable speech.'" This is speech which denigrates a person to others. Even if the recounted shortcoming is true, it is nevertheless wrong to speak about it.

Inasmuch as this is a personal failing on the part of an afflicted person who must then change him/herself, how is praying for him going to help? An answer is that all of us are part of a single soul-entity. Prayer is the act of drawing down a new divine life force to our collective self. When we focus that power on a particular person in need, it can cause what the Mystics call "an awakening from above" and jump-start introspection and self-transformation by drawing down G-dly inspiration upon the afflicted individual.

[Rabbi Peretz Rodman, Head of Israel's Masorti/Conservative bet din](#)

When a person is stricken with "tzara'at", a skin affliction that seems to appear from nowhere and abates after the required cleansing is performed, he [or she] must announce his arrival by calling out a warning: "Tamei! Tamei!" ("Impure! Impure!"). Is this an instance of forced self-abasement, as if one must announce, "Shame on me"? It's possible, as our sages suggest it is a punishment for speaking ill of others.

Or are we looking at a public health regulation? If the disease were communicable, that would make sense. But there are no hints that the condition is contagious. The Aramean general Naaman went about his life as usual even when afflicted with this repulsive disease (2 Kings ch. 5). As the late Jacob Milgrom

pointed out, the Torah's treatment of tzara'at focuses on the appearance, not the disease itself. And that provides a hint at what our verse is about.

Leviticus seems to make a particular assumption: that Israelites would feel compassion toward the unfortunate person suffering from tzara'at. His tattered clothes, disheveled hair, and, one must assume, pitiable demeanor would arouse sympathy. Good, decent Israelites would approach with offers of assistance, perhaps assuming he is a mourner, whose appearance is similar. They are warned away not because of a health risk but because of ritual impurity, which indeed can be imparted by touch. Would that we might all assume such kindness would be forthcoming from strangers.

[Kylie Ora Lobell, Jewish Journal Community Editor](#)

Tazria deals with all the ways in which a person can become "impure," with this particular passage focusing on leprosy caused by lashon hara – evil speech/gossip. When we speak ill of others, it not only corrodes our soul; in Biblical times, it also showed up on us physically. There's a story we often hear: A rabbi instructed a man who often gossiped to open up a pillow and let the feathers float away with the wind. Once the man did this, the rabbi then told him to go and fetch all the feathers. The man declared that he couldn't possibly do that. The rabbi then said, "Once a rumor, a gossipy story, a 'secret,' leaves your mouth, you do not know where it ends up. It flies on the wings of the wind, and you can never get it back." These days, it is so easy to gossip. We can do it during a casual conversation with a friend or anonymously through social media. But as Hashem warns, it hurts us and it ruins the reputations of others. Gossip can lead to a person being harmed, so we take it very seriously. In the parsha, the person who is afflicted with this spiritual disease must separate physically from the community, because that is what they did spiritually when they spoke ill of others. Even though this type of leprous affliction is not inflicted upon us now, we must always guard our tongue, speak well of others, and avoid lashon hara – which is not a victimless crime.

[Rabbi Tova Leibovic-Douglas, Founder of The Ritual house](#)

How do we hold the parts of our wisdom tradition that don't feel right? For many rabbis, the conclusion is to avoid the moments that go against the progressive values of today. There is an avoidance to share that in our beloved Torah, there are sections that cast people out for merely having a disease, as this verse suggests. Yet, it is up to us not to avoid them but rather to find our way into these ancient ways of being despite them seeming misaligned with our moral compass. We are here to ask what they are teaching us, especially when they are challenging. I see the individual with the leprous affliction and feel their pain and their sense of otherness. And how unimaginably painful it must be for one with an

uncomfortable and visibly embarrassing disease to be cast out by the community. Each of us must know this feeling of outsidership deep within us. As human beings and social animals, we are conditioned to never be the ones who are cast out because, as much as we have collectively progressed, we are still hard-wired to form group norms and expectations and to adhere to these. This verse is an invitation to remember the unbearable feeling of exclusion and transform it by being part of building a community without insiders and outsiders and to know that we have the power to do so in our everyday life.

Yahrtzeits

Margie Freeman remembers her mother Regina Freeman on Saturday April 13th.

Mel Zwillenberg remembers his wife Susan Zwillenberg on Sunday April 14th.

Shari Mevorah remembers her brother Joel Leigh Kirstein on Monday April 15th.

Ron Weiss remembers his father Alfred Weiss on Thursday April 18th.