

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION  
NEW YORK SCHOOL

FINAL THESIS APPROVAL FORM

AUTHOR: BRIAN LEIKEN

TITLE: THE EVOLVED UNDERSTANDING OF TZARA'AT

Leonard S. Kravitz 6 FEB 07  
SIGNATURE OF ADVISOR(S) Date

Dina L. Kravitz 2/6/07  
SIGNATURE OF REGISTRAR Date

ALL SIGNATURES MUST BE OBTAINED BEFORE YOUR THESIS WILL BE  
CONSIDERED ACCEPTED.

PLEASE TYPE OR PRINT ALL INFORMATION ON THIS FORM.

07-0341

### **The Evolved Meaning of *Tzara'at* in the Jewish Corpus**

The thesis analyzes the evolved understanding of *Tzara'at* throughout the biblical, rabbinic and medieval periods of Jewish history. The thesis is divided into three chapters that cover each specific time period. Each chapter is further divided into four or five separate sections, which provide an overview of the specific texts of the period and the ways in which these texts deal with *Tzara'at*. The introduction to the thesis includes information on the possible historical reasons for the disease's inclusion in the biblical text and the eventual effects of the mistranslation of the Hebrew term in the Latin Vulgate. The conclusion includes a final overview of how the term evolved and how it can be understood today.

The thesis contributes an evolved understanding of the ancient term *Tzara'at*. The term originally referred to either punishment for certain sins committed by biblical characters or to a variety of skin ailments that made their victim impure. In the early rabbinic period, the term was still understood as a disease that resulted in ritual impurity. However, the early rabbis reduced the role of the priest in purifying the victim in an attempt to challenge their authority. Later rabbis connected the disease with the specific sin of slander in a possible attempt to deter informants. In the medieval era, commentators both repeated earlier rabbinic claims and offered alternative sins that resulted in the disease. The disease was not mentioned in the majority of medieval law codes as it was not a practical reality. Maimonides was the only medieval Jewish thinker to include the disease in both his law code and his philosophical work.

The thesis uses the *Tanakh*, the *Mishnah*, both *Talmuds*, a variety of *midrashim*, commentaries from the *Mikraot Gedolot*, Maimonides' *Mishnah Torah*, and the *Guide for the Perplexed*. The thesis also uses secondary articles and books on Jewish power, the history of *L'shon Ha-rah*, medical understandings of *Tzara'at* and biographical material on certain individuals.

**The Evolved Meaning of *Tzara'at*  
In the Jewish Corpus**

**Brian D. Leiken**

**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
Ordination**

**Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
Graduate Rabbinical Program  
New York, New York**

**February 6, 2007  
Dr. Leonard Kravitz**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

To my dear wife Shara, who has walked by my side for five years, supported me and allowed me to see the world as truly holy.

To my son Kaleb, who makes every day of my life meaningful.

To my parents, who have taught me, raised me, and allowed me to find my own path.

To my teacher and friend, Dr. Leonard Kravitz, for walking me through this process and for ensuring that I learn a great deal from it.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4-7</b>
<b>Chapter One: The Biblical View of <i>Tzara'at</i>.....</b>	<b>8-28</b>
<b>Chapter Two: The Rabbinic View of <i>Tzara'at</i>.....</b>	<b>29-47</b>
<b>Chapter Three: The Medieval View of <i>Tzara'at</i>.....</b>	<b>48-63</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>64-68</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>69-70</b>

## INTRODUCTION

The term *Tzara'at*, often mistranslated as leprosy, refers to a set of skin diseases found throughout Jewish literature. In the Bible, *Tzara'at* either renders its victim ritually impure or is the result of some kind of sin. According to Marcus Jastrow, the term itself derives from the Hebrew root *tzadik-resh-ayin* meaning to strike or to smash.<sup>1</sup> Most likely, the term was mistranslated as leprosy because of its Greek translation as *Lepra* (an ancient Greek term also referring to a set of skin diseases) in the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Bible. This Greek translation of *Tzara'at* was then phonetically spelled out in the Latin translation of the Bible, the *Vulgate*, and eventually became associated with modern-day Leprosy (known today as Hansen's disease) in the medieval period. This mistranslation of a Hebrew term led to the historic shunning of many true Leprosy victims, as their disease was linked with the ancient biblical *Tzara'at* and all of the incendiary interpretations of it.

What is so intriguing about *Tzara'at* is not only its mistranslation but also the number of times it is referred to throughout the *Tanakh*. Indeed, out of all the diseases mentioned throughout the biblical text, *Tzara'at* is the one most consistently cited by the biblical authors. This special designation for a skin disease is probably derived from a general interest in diseases of the skin in the Ancient Near East. For example, in the epilogue to the ancient law code of Hammurabi, a curse reads,

“May Ninkarram the daughter of Anum, my advocate in Ekurm inflict upon his body, a grievous malady, an evil disease, a serious wound that never heals whose

---

<sup>1</sup> Marcus Jastrow, *Sefer Milim on Tzara'at*

nature no physician knows, which he cannot allay with bandages, which like a deadly bite cannot be rooted out."<sup>2</sup>

As this curse from the epilogue of the Law Code demonstrates, skin diseases of the biblical time-period were recognized by other cultures as ailments brought on by Gods, and were thought nearly impossible to cure by human physicians. Skin diseases were a particularly powerful representation of the power of the Gods to physically intervene in the world below and were thus used as curses against enemies. This example of the power associated with skin disease is one reason it is so consistently mentioned throughout the biblical text.

Another reason for a skin disease to be singled out within the biblical text is the fact that it can be seen. While the ancient observer may never have noticed certain other diseases that do not appear on the victim's outer body, the skin disease renders its victim unsightly and is hence easily labeled. This specific point is expressed in the Miriam narrative, as her brother Aaron is horrified by her appearance and refers to her "like one who is dead".<sup>3</sup> The skin disease has a visual presence and is therefore used by the biblical author as a powerful representation of all human ailments.

Within the biblical text, *Tzara'at* is the subject of both biblical narrative and biblical law. The biblical narratives are the stories of the *Tanakh*, in which the biblical characters act out human dramas. In contrast, biblical law is the Israelite legal system, which is not centered on

---

<sup>2</sup> Ancient Law Code of Hammurabi  
<sup>3</sup> *Be-Midbar* 12:12

human drama, but rather on the various laws and rituals traditionally understood as having been handed down to the Israelites through their prophet Moses at the Sinai revelation. This system designates the *Cohanim*, the descendants of Moses' brother Aaron, as the principle figures to act out legal ritual.

*Tzara'at* takes on different meanings within the narrative and legal genres of the *Tanakh*. While the narrative texts focus on the actions of the biblical characters before the onset of *Tzara'at*, the legal texts describe the ways in which the disease can be detected and then ritually purified. The narratives are interested in the question of why the victim has got the disease, and therefore focus on the sins of the victims. In contrast, the laws are interested in first separating the impure victim from what is considered sacred, and then performing a process of purification.

The distinction between *Tzara'at* as punishment for specific moral offenses and *Tzara'at* as ritual impurity leading to separation from the sacred is a major subject of concern in biblical narrative and law, rabbinic literature and medieval commentary. As will be demonstrated, all of these texts deal with the disease in either one or both contexts, depending on the times in which their authors lived and the basic belief systems in which they inherited.

As the ancient disease known as *Tzara'at* became a relic of the past, Jewish scholars were still forced to make meaning of it. Whereas the Bible was focused on *Tzara'at* as disease, later Jewish authorities began to use *Tzara'at* as a political tool, or attempted to explain the disease when it was absent from contemporary life. The following thesis will offer an



account of the evolved meaning of *Tzara'at* in texts from different historical periods of Jewish literature. The thesis will analyze certain biblical, rabbinic and medieval views of *Tzara'at*.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Biblical View of *Tzara'at*

The biblical authors explain disease in the Bible as the power of God to physically intervene in the world. The purpose of this intervention takes on different meanings in the case of different ailments. For example, the Bible deals with old age, barrenness and mental anguish as ways of ensuring the survival of the covenant made with Abraham through what it considers divinely appointed individuals. These particular ailments insure that the covenant is continued through the necessary individual. The conditions either force their victim to leave the future of the promised people to certain progeny or result in the actual birth of certain progeny. They are inherently connected with the role of God in ensuring that future generations of communities will survive through a divinely appointed progenitor.

For example, in many cases, illness is the result of old age. Isaac in his old age is too frail and sick to recognize his own child. His frailty and sickness lead him to give Jacob instead of his other son Esau a special blessing. In a verse recalling God's earlier promise to Abraham, Isaac states, "Cursed be they who curse you, Blessed they who bless you".<sup>4</sup> Isaac's frailty in old age is thus a necessary component of ensuring that a particular progenitor (namely Jacob) will inherit the covenant. Similarly, King David's old age at first precludes him from choosing a successor. With the assistance of both his wife Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan, David's illness is utilized as a way of influencing him. As Bathsheba consults David regarding the choice of a successor (with the Prophet Nathan acting as the human voice of God telling her what to say) the text keeps reminding the reader of David's

---

<sup>4</sup> *Bereishit 27:15 (Compare to Bereishit 11:27)*

old age and frailty. As Bathsheba enters to speak with the King the text states, "So Bathsheba went to the king in his chamber. -- The king was very old".<sup>5</sup> The text clearly utilizes David's frailty to ensure that Solomon will take his place. Thus, in both the case of Isaac and David, the illness brought on by old age is used as a method of ensuring that certain progeny will inherit the right to succeed their father.

This same insurance policy is carried out through the ailments of both barrenness and mental anguish. Sarah's barrenness is at first considered a physical impairment, which will leave her childless. As Gunther Plaut notes in his commentary on *B'reishit*, "The Bible relates several states of barrenness, induced, and then eliminated by God's will"<sup>6</sup>. By becoming pregnant with Isaac, the text confirms that Sarah's new child is the choice of God to succeed his father<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, King Saul's case of madness is certainly a component of David's succession. The narrative states that, "Whenever the *evil* spirit of God came upon Saul, David would take the lyre and play it; Saul would find relief and feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him".<sup>8</sup> David's ability to temporarily heal Saul of his madness allows him entry into the palace, and eventually allows him to take over as King. Although there are certainly other explanations for David's eventual kingship, Saul's emotional disease, and David's role in comforting him, plays a decisive role in David's succession.

While these ailments result in the birth of a successor (in some cases the actual birth of a successor), *Tzara'at* is a disease, which usually deals with or represents the reality of death.

---

<sup>5</sup> 1 *Melachim* 1:15

<sup>6</sup> Gunther Plaut, *Commentary on Genesis*

<sup>7</sup> This is also the case with Rebecca and Hannah in later narratives.

<sup>8</sup> 1 *Shmuel* 16:14

After Aaron discovers that his sister Miriam is afflicted with the disease, he calls out to God, "Let her not be as one who is dead"<sup>9</sup>. Although the disease is never linked to actual fatality, it certainly renders its victim to look like a corpse, as proven by Aaron's statement. This allusion to death leads later rabbinic commentators and compilers of Jewish law to link the impurity of the disease to that of corpse impurity.

Throughout the biblical narratives, *Tzara'at* attacks its victims because they have rejected the basic relation that exists between God and the prophet. The prophet is a conduit for God in the physical world, without ever playing the actual role of God. He speaks God's words while making clear that God is the entity for whom he is speaking. The characters that are stricken with *Tzara'at* reject this basic power structure by desiring to speak and act out for God themselves, taking personal gifts for the success of God's powers, worshipping God in impermissible ways or simply by rejecting the basic power structure that exists.

Throughout the biblical legal texts, *Tzara'at* is spoken of as a source of impurity, which requires a Priest to diagnose it and to purify it. The idea of purity and impurity, which will be explored below, deal with the basic issue of protecting what the biblical authors consider sacred. As *Tzara'at* is a physical ailment, which makes its victim physically unsightly, it is labeled as impure and its victim is forced out of the community for an extended period of time. Elaborate rituals of purification enable the victim to eventually re-enter the community and come in closer contact with the physically sacred. These elaborate rituals are not used for the same condition in the biblical narratives and thus re-enforce the idea that the legal

---

<sup>9</sup> *Be-Midbar* 12:12

texts of the Bible come from a separate source than the narratives source. As will be illustrated, these texts have a different point of view on disease in general.

### **An Overview of Biblical *Tzara'at***

*Tzara'at* is first mentioned in the book of *Sh'mot*, when Moses complains that the Israelites will not believe his designation as their leader. God arms Moses with certain specific signs to perform to ensure that the Israelites will believe him. When Moses throws his staff on the ground, it instantly becomes a snake and only returns to its original form when Moses grabs it by its tail. In demonstrating for Moses the second sign, God tells Moses to hide his hand within his bosom and afterwards, to reveal it. When Moses brings out his hand, the text claims that it is *M'tzorat C'Sheleg*<sup>10</sup>. When Moses then returns his hand back within his bosom, it is instantly "returned like the rest of his body"<sup>11</sup>. Moses is told that, should the people not believe the first sign, they will believe the second.

The second mention of *Tzara'at* occurs when Moses' siblings Aaron and Miriam speak out against him. In what appears to be a fit of jealousy, the siblings first attack Moses' decision to marry a non-Israelite woman and then complain about Moses being the only person through whom God speaks. The siblings directly challenge Moses' role as sole mediator for God by asking, "Has he not spoken through us as well?"<sup>12</sup>. God's response is to call Aaron and Miriam outside of the tent of meeting, the traveling sanctuary used throughout the nomadic desert travails. As the cloud, which has represented God, leaves the tent, Miriam,

---

<sup>10</sup>*Sh'mot* 4:6

<sup>11</sup>*Sh'mot* 4:7

<sup>12</sup>*Be-Midbar* 12:2

like Moses before her, is suddenly revealed to be *M'tzorat c'Sheleg*.<sup>13</sup> Miriam is forced to leave her community for an extended period of time. God tells Moses, "Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted."<sup>14</sup>

The third mention of *Tzara'at* encompasses two full chapters of the book of *Va-Yikra*. The first chapter discusses the various ways in which *Tzara'at* is diagnosed by the priest and the laws regarding its purity status. The second chapter details the various purification rituals that both the victim and the priest must perform. Neither chapter makes mention of *Tzara'at* as any kind of divine punishment or proof of divine power. In his book *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism*, Jonathan Klawans notes that the idea that *Tzara'at* "can be a punishment for sin has nothing to do with ritual impurity at all"<sup>15</sup>. Instead, the focus of these chapters is simply on the ways to detect the skin disease, the various ritual limitations placed on the victim, and the methods of purification. These chapters also extend the ailment to houses and garments, reflecting the fact that *Tzara'at* is not simply a human disease, but also real physical matter that is found in both the animate and inanimate.

The fourth mention of *Tzara'at* takes place in the second book of *Melachim* in which Na'aman, a non-Jewish army commander from the nation of Aram, sends a letter to the King of Israel asking to be cured of *Tzara'at*. The prophet Elisha eventually tells Na'aman to bathe seven times in the Jordan River in order to be cleaned. After Na'aman is clean of the disease, he offers Elisha various gifts, which Elisha quickly rejects. When Elisha discovers

---

<sup>13</sup> *Be-Midbar* 12:10

<sup>14</sup> *Be-Midbar* 12:14

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Klawans, 98

that his servant Gehazi has taken these rejected gifts, he tells Gehazi that he will also be afflicted with the disease. Gehazi, like Miriam and Moses before him, is instantly *Metzora c'sheleg*.

The fifth mention of *Tzara'at* occurs when King Uzziah, after a fifty-two year reign, attempts to offer an incense sacrifice within the Temple confines, a responsibility designated to the Priests. The Prophet Ahaziah approaches Uzziah and states, "It is not for you, Uzziah to offer incense to the LORD, but for the Aaronite priests, who have been consecrated, to offer incense. Get out of the Sanctuary, for you have trespassed; there will be no glory in it for you from the LORD God."<sup>16</sup> As a result of his sin, Uzziah is *M'tzora B'mitkho* or leprous in his forehead.<sup>17</sup>

The sixth and final mention of *Tzara'at* in the biblical text concerns the story of four lepers who live outside the city gate. These lepers, who are certainly outside of the city limits because of their condition, are able to see that the inhabitants of an Aramean army camp have abandoned their posts. Hence, the lepers' placement outside of the city gives Israel a strategic military advantage and leads to the plundering of the Aramean camp.

---

<sup>16</sup> 2 Chronicles 26:18

<sup>17</sup> 2 Chronicles 26:19

## **I. *Metzorat/Metzora C'Sheleg*: The Cases of Moses, Miriam and Gehazi**

Two narratives in the biblical text describe their victims' ailments as *metzorat c'sheleg* (Moses and Miriam) while one narrative describes its victim as *metzora c'sheleg* (Gehazi). The term *c'sheleg*, which literally means "like snow", most likely reflects the whiteness of the ailment. Although white is connected with innocence throughout the *Tanakh*, it is used here to make the characters appear like a corpse. In each of these three instances, an ailment plagues the characters that makes their bodies appear death-like. *Tzara'at* is thus a way to demonstrate God's ability to bring death.

In the case of Moses, God provides two signs for ensuring that the Israelites will believe Moses' role as divine mediator. In an ironic twist, it is not the Israelites who require Moses to perform the signs, but the Egyptians. Moses performs the first sign in the Egyptian court by throwing his rod down and transforming it into a snake. In first explaining the signs that Moses should perform, God had stated that should they "not believe you or pay heed to the first sign, they will believe the second"<sup>18</sup>. It is not the Israelites who do not believe the first sign but the Egyptian magicians, who are able to re-create this sign with their own rods.

Although the second sign is not demonstrated for the Egyptians, the deaths of both the Egyptian firstborn and those who later die in the sea are most likely presaged by this sign. If we are to accept the notion that *c'sheleg* symbolizes the divine ability to kill, that the first sign involving the rod was ultimately meant for the Egyptians, and God's forecast that they

---

<sup>18</sup> *Sh'mot* 4:8



would not believe this sign was about the Egyptians, we must be willing to entertain the possibility that the second sign of *Metzarah c'sheleg* foretells the Egyptian deaths.

In contrast to Moses' *m'tzorat c'sheleg* which, as demonstrated above, could very well presage the perishing of the Egyptians, Miriam is afflicted with the same ailment for a reason related to a sin she and her brother have committed. At first, she and Aaron speak out against Moses because of the woman that he has married. Everett Fox notes in his commentary to this verse that the term Cushite might refer to "...an Ethiopian, which some interpretative traditions hold to, and which would clearly be a racial slur..."<sup>19</sup>.

Be it a racial slur or not, this opening complaint is not the true concern of Aaron and Miriam. They state this fact only once and never repeat the subject throughout the ensuing chapter. Hence, the reference to Moses' marriage is not meant to outlaw intermarriage or to draw attention to this specific act, but rather an attempt to belittle Moses and prove his inadequacy as the sole prophet for God. Miriam and Aaron begin with a subject outside the realm of their interests in order to damage Moses' political legitimacy, but have no particular interest in elaborating on this specific subject. Intermarriage is not their concern but a tool for their real political interest.<sup>20</sup>

After attempting to demonstrate a basic fault in Moses' character, Aaron and Miriam focus on their primary interest by questioning Moses' position as the sole mediator for God. They

---

<sup>19</sup> Fox, 718

<sup>20</sup> There is ample discussion amongst scholars that intermarriage was a problem and that this claim was a legitimate concern, and a powerful tool to use against Moses.

ask, "Has He not spoken through us as well?"<sup>21</sup> Clearly, both Aaron and Miriam are concerned with their political position within the community. Moses seems to be taking control of all divine communication, and they are left playing secondary roles. Aaron specifically is told what to do, but is not in direct communication with God about the details. It is this attempt to demean Moses in order to strengthen their position of power that results in Miriam's affliction.

The particulars of the sin are then made clear. First, in a manner of distinguishing Moses from his siblings, the text clarifies that Moses himself is not ego-driven. The text states that, "The man Moses *was* very meek, above all the men which *were* upon the face of the earth"<sup>22</sup> Everett Fox notes that the term *anav* means, "And not power hungry"<sup>23</sup>. The drive for power is Miriam and Aarons' basic sin. In their quest to unseat Moses of his sole position as divine mediator, they reveal that they are in an unwarranted pursuit of power.

The sin of seeking undeserved power and the punishment of this sin is a constant narrative theme throughout the Bible. Adam and Eve eat from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and bad in order to be as powerful as God and are hence exiled. Aaron's sons Nadav and Abihu offer sacrifices in an attempt to prove their own power and are consumed by flames. These characters, just like Aaron and Miriam, are driven to pursue undeserved power and are hence punished. In contrast, the prophet Moses is humble and willing to give

---

<sup>21</sup> *Be-midbar* 12:2

<sup>22</sup> *Be-Midbar* 12:2

<sup>23</sup> Fox, 719

God proper authority. Humble Moses, as opposed to his siblings, is thus the perfect candidate to act as a divine conduit.

Although Miriam bears the physical ailment of *m'tzorat c'sheleg*, Aaron is certainly affected by it. In fact, Miriam never speaks about her condition or the ways in which she is affected. While she is certainly punished through physical ailment, it is Aaron and not Miriam who voices distress about the disfigurement. He instantly cries out to Moses, "O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly."<sup>24</sup> As he watches his sister literally become a walking corpse before his eyes, Aaron acknowledges Moses' role and now speaks to him instead of God. In a verse, which later becomes the rabbinic basis for the similarity between corpse and *Tzara'at* impurity, Aaron then states "Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away."<sup>25</sup> Of note, Aaron does not use the feminine suffix in relation to the mother's womb, but the male suffix, implying that this ailment is affecting both he and his sister. Indeed, both Aaron and Miriam are punished for the sin of power greed – Miriam through the actual physical disfigurement and Aaron through his reaction to his sister's ailment.

The story of Gehazi first involves the affliction of the non-Israelite Aramean army general Na'aman with *metzora*, or what the Jewish Publication Society translator refers to as leprosy. The term *metzora* is certainly related to both *tzara'at* and *metzorat* but the JPS translator chooses to distinguish Na'aman's particular disease from those that have affected the Israelites. This translation is most likely due to the later rabbinic inference that only Jews

---

<sup>24</sup> *Be-midbar* 12:11

<sup>25</sup> *Be-midbar* 12:12

can be afflicted with the physical ailment of actual *Tzara'at*. The sins that are committed to deserve *Tzara'at* are very much the same types of sins committed by Aaron and Miriam. Hence, the ailment is most likely the very same.

After complaining of his condition, Na'aman is urged by a captured Israelite attendant to seek out a Prophet in Samaria in order to be cured of the disease. Na'aman begins by sending a letter to his own King, who promptly writes to the King of Israel. At first, the King of Israel is deeply distressed by the letter, wondering whether he is "God, to deal death or give life, that this fellow writes to me to cure a man of leprosy? Just see for yourselves that he is seeking a pretext against me!"<sup>26</sup>. As Robert Cohn writes, "Intimidated by what he understands to be a challenge to him to cure the leper, the King of Israel explodes in anger against 'this guy' *zeh*, the King of Aram, and he rips his clothes at the blasphemous suggestion that he has healing powers."<sup>27</sup> It is only with the assurance of the prophet Elisha that curing Na'aman will prove to the Arameans that "there is a prophet in Israel"<sup>28</sup> that the King relents. From Elisha's vantage point, Na'aman's request is an opportunity to prove the existence of the Israelite power structure to a foreign entity.

Na'aman comes to Elisha with horses and chariots and Elisha replies not by revealing himself but, instead, by sending a messenger. By sending this messenger, Elisha makes it clear that he, through his connection to God, is more powerful than any mighty army general with steeds. Further, instead of supplying some kind of fancy ritual, Elisha's messenger

---

<sup>26</sup> 2 *Melachim* 5:7

<sup>27</sup> Robert L. Cohn, *Commentary on 2 Kings* 36-37

<sup>28</sup> 2 *Melachim* 5:8

simply tells Na'aman to bathe seven times in the Jordan River. Na'aman, confounded by the message, replies that;

"he would surely come out to me, and would stand and invoke the LORD his God by name, and would wave his hand toward the spot, and cure the affected part. <sup>12</sup>

Are not the Amanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? I could bathe in them and be clean!" And he stalked off in a rage".<sup>29</sup>

Na'aman, described by the text as a mighty warrior, cannot believe that a Prophet would not address him directly nor provide him with, what he deems, a worthy healing ritual. It is only after Na'aman's servants suggest that he attempt the cure, and after he is cured, that he comes to recognize the basic Israelite power structure between God and prophet. In a moment of clarity, Na'aman realizes that, although he may have horses and chariots and be considered a great warrior amongst his own people, he is no more powerful than the one true God through whom the prophet speaks. He exclaims, "Now I know that there is no God in the whole world except in Israel!"<sup>30</sup>

As a sign of his gratitude, Na'aman offers gifts to Elisha, who instantly rejects them and invokes God's name as a way of demonstrating that God is the authority figure through whom Elisha speaks. The humility of Moses is thus reiterated. Those who can be closest to God are those who recognize the limits of their own powers. Elisha

---

<sup>29</sup> IBID

<sup>30</sup> 2 Melachim 5:15

recognizes that it was not his powers, which enabled Na'aman to be healed. It was the power of God. If Elisha accepts gifts, it would defer power to himself. In fact, when Gehazi goes back to Na'aman and asks for gifts, he is rebuked by Elisha... Elisha tells him that, "Surely, the leprosy of Na'aman shall cling to you and to your descendants forever."<sup>31</sup> Gehazi seeks undeserved reward for God's healing of Na'aman.

While *Tzara'at* is used as a narrative tool to prove God's control over the Egypt story in the case of Moses, it is used as punishment for not recognizing God's power in the cases of Miriam and Gehazi. Hence, *Tzara'at* in the biblical narratives is used as a method of demonstrating the power structure that exists between the community, the humble prophet, the all-powerful God and those who will later speak in the name of that God. By punishing those who aggressively pursue too much power, the biblical author attempts to make clear that God is the ultimate authority whose spokesperson is the prophet. Importantly, *Tzara'at* does not kill its victim. Instead, it transforms its victim into a walking corpse that will survive to tell its tale and ensure that the power structure is not again transgressed.

## **II. *Tzara'at* in *Vayikra***

### **The Issue of Purity and Impurity**

The book of *Va-yikra* is largely focused on law. Many who have looked for religious inspiration from the Bible have long disregarded it. *Vayikra* or Leviticus, is viewed as somewhat obsolete for non-traditional Jews. It focuses on ceremonies, rituals and laws,

---

<sup>31</sup> IBID

which, for many non-traditional Jews, seem outdated and meaningless. In truth, *Vayikra* is filled with many of the same themes found throughout the rest of the Bible. These themes are woven into the detailed laws and rituals and are largely represented by symbols and metaphors. In dealing with the specifics of *Tzara'at*, the book is dealing with the grim reality of death and the issue of proximity to God.

*Tzara'at* is dealt with from the perspective of the laws of purity. From the biblical perspective, purity and impurity are two states of being, which enable or disable a person from approaching that, which is considered holy. The subject of purity was the focus of Anthropologist Mary Douglas' 1966 book *Purity and Danger*. In this book, Douglas argues that human religions have always created categories of impurity in order to give order to a seemingly chaotic world. Douglas argues that a world without purity and defilement is an intolerable world for humans because it is ambiguous. For Douglas, humans have an inability to comprehend the ambiguous and therefore seek ways to prevent it. In her Preface to the Routledge Classics edition of her book, she writes, "Ambiguous things can seem very threatening."<sup>32</sup> For Douglas, classifying something as impure leads to the existence of its opposite, something that is pure and sacred. Hence, ideas such as God, which are largely ambiguous to the human mind, become real when compared with very physical entities such as skin disease or fungus that grows on clothing and houses.

---

<sup>32</sup> Mary Douglas, Preface to *Purity and Danger*

In *Vayikra*, there are three separate areas of permitted entry surrounding the *Mishkan*, the holy Tabernacle built as a traveling sanctuary for God. These three areas include an area for the general population, an area for the Priests and an area for God. The innermost area of the *Mishkan* is reserved for the indwelling of God on earth, and is thus protected from any impurity whatsoever. As it is the place on earth in which God physically resides, it cannot be desecrated by what the biblical author deems to be physically impure. The laws of purity are therefore a way to ensure that nothing with any sign of impurity will come close to this area.

In order to make evident the sanctity of the *Mishkan*, *Vayikra* includes a list of ailments and conditions, which preclude a person from proximity to it. In many cases, these conditions lead to elaborate rituals of purification and extended periods of forced exile from the general community. If a human being is not entirely pure in specific ways, *Vayikra* ensures that they are separated not only from the *Mishkan*, but from the population as well. It is only after a certain period of purification that they may be admitted again.

*Tzara'at* is just one of the variety of ailments which leads to the need for a purification ritual. It is placed amongst other physical ailments that render a victim impure. These other ailments deal with or are specifically related to sexuality. One ailment deals with the physical impurity of a woman following the period after birth. Another ailment deals with the impurity caused by discharges from male genitalia. The reader is left in a quandary as to why *Tzara'at*, a skin condition, is included amongst two conditions related to birth and



sexuality. In fact, why are these three conditions chosen from amongst the many possible medical conditions that could affect human beings? Each of these conditions contains an element of death and life. This dialectic between life and death makes its victim impure. Life and death are not parts of the sacred but the reality of life on earth.

In the case of post-pregnancy impurity, it is not the newborn baby who is impure but the mother herself. One must imagine giving birth in the period that the author writes, and the dangers that are inherently part of that procedure. The possibility of death in birthing was incredibly real for the biblical female. At the same time, birth, which is the result of the process, is the ultimate representation of life. Hence, the mother who has survived birth has been directly engaged with the physical realities of both life and death. She is hence, impure.

The individual who has suffered from some kind of genital discharge bears the same impurity as the birthing mother. In this case, a discharge may represent some form of disease, such as Gonorrhea, which could very well have killed its victim. At the same time, the male genitalia and the seminal discharge are the ways in which males, along with their female partners, create life. Here, as in the case of the birthing mother, there is a confrontation between the realities of both life and death. The victim of genital discharge is thus impure.

*Tzara'at* is also a confrontation between both life and death. For example, although the victim appears like a corpse, the term *parach*, defined as an eruptive symptom of the

disease in Leviticus, is used elsewhere throughout the *Tanakh* as an example of fertile budding.<sup>33</sup> Hence, a term used to describe a symptom of the disease is used elsewhere to refer to the birth of flowers. Another reason that the victim of *Tzara'at* faces both death and life is that he lives. Despite a disease that transforms him into a walking corpse, there is never a case of *Tzara'at* in the text of *Vayikra* that tells of a fatality. It is as if the victim has stood on the brink of death and lived through it. As the victim has faced death and life, he is impure.

Life and death are matters of the earthly world and those who have confronted them through disease are labeled as impure by the author of *Vayikra*. By separating these individuals from both the community and the sanctified *Mishkan*, the author clarifies that the earthly world must be kept separate in order to create the possibility of the sacred world. This is the true meaning of *Vayikra's* reaction to disease. It uses disease as an example of the world in which it hopes to escape, a world of chaos and disorder, a world in which disease is random. By labeling disease, and in particular, diseases that confront life and death as impure, the author is able to protect and provide order to the universe.

To further protect this order, the *Vayikra* author creates an elaborate ritual of purification for the victim of *Tzara'at*. Of particular interest is the similarity between this ritual and that of the priestly ordination. At first glance, the intention of these ceremonies seems completely different. In one case, a victim of a disease is being purified for the purpose of being back with the community. In the other case, individuals are being given an

---

<sup>33</sup> See 1 *Melachim* 7:26, Isaiah 18:5, Isaiah 35:2 and Ezekiel II

office, which allows them to intercede between the world outside of the *Mishkan* and the world inside of and in proximity to the *Mishkan*. What seems at first to be different becomes similar after noting the true intention of the author. Both the purified victim of *Tzara'at* and the newly ordained priest seek to enter the proximity of the sacred. Although the reasons for their entry might differ, they must undergo similar rituals in order to be allowed access.

The *Vayikra* text does not deal with *Tzara'at* from the perspective of sin. Although a sin offering is a part of the purification process, it is unlikely that this has anything to do with a sin actually being the cause of the disease itself. The fact that the sin offering is also a component of the priestly ordination suffices for proof. Instead, as has been noted above, the interest of the author is in creating a ritual, which can deal with the chaotic reality of disease and separate it from that which is considered sacred.

### **III. *Tzara'at* in other texts**

#### **The Case of Uzziah and the Four Lepers**

The other two cases of *Tzara'at* in the Tanakh include the case of Uzziah and the case of the Four Lepers. Uzziah is the only character stricken with the disease in his forehead. This has led some modern day commentators to argue that Uzziah suffers from actual Leprosy, since that disease is known to affect that area of the body. This is again highly unlikely since there is no other symptom described of the disease. The fact that the disease attacks Uzziah's forehead may be related to the idea that the forehead was where Aaron, the high priest, wore

a "frontlet of pure gold"<sup>34</sup> for the purposes of taking away the sins of the people. As the text states, "it shall be on his forehead at all times, to win acceptance for them before the LORD"<sup>35</sup> Uzziah's affliction is hence ironic, in that he attempts to be like the high priest and is thus afflicted on the part of his body in which the priest wears a headdress meant to atone for Israel's sins. Uzziah threatens the role of the priest by performing the priest's duties and is therefore punished. He commits the very same sin that Miriam, Aaron and Gehazi commit. He attempts to break down the relationship between God and, in this case, the human counterpart who carries out ritual practices.

The case of the Four Lepers seems to have nothing to say regarding the disease of *Tzara'at*. Instead, the text seems to use the characters position outside of the community as a literary tool. Because they are outside of the community, they are able to see that their enemies are able to play strategic military roles. Here, the text uses the disease to explain the ways in which the Israeli King is able to plunder his enemies supplies. Later commentators will search for ways to integrate this text with other examples of the disease.

### **The Meaning of Biblical *Tzara'at***

Within the *Tanakh*, *Tzara'at* is a disease that is related to both the notion of divine punishments for sin and disease as impurity, which leads to separation from the sacred. In the case of divine punishment, biblical characters sin, not through slander (which becomes a later biblical inference) but rather through the rejection of the basic power structure that exists between either God and Prophet or God and Priest. There is a political system of

---

<sup>34</sup> *Sh'mot* 39:30

<sup>35</sup> *Shm'ot* 28:38

power, which is the basis of the divine-human relationship, and this relationship must not be transgressed.

Interestingly, other examples of characters that have rejected this system fare far worse punishment for their sins. For instance, Aaron's sons and the nameless man who transgresses Shabbat are killed for their sins. What is different about our characters that merit the lighter nature of their punishment? Certainly, some of them are cured of the disease while others, such as Gehazi and Uzziah, are plagued to have the disease forever. Still, none of the characters are killed for their crime. Perhaps this is simply a statement on the many human diseases, which cause pain and grief, but not death. *Tzara'at* is not fatal but worthy of explanation nonetheless.

The diagnosis and purification of *Tzara'at* that is the interest of the *Vayikra* text is a way to explain that humans have the ability both to deal with disease and to protect the order and sanctity of the world around them. Interestingly, the victim of *Tzara'at* is not declared impure until the Priest has diagnosed the individual. It is the Priest's role to determine the purity status and not any random decision of nature. Human beings, through an organized system of law, thus control that status *Tzara'at*. Similarly, the purity ritual allows human intervention in bringing the individual back to the community.

The Bible deals with the disease of *Tzara'at* as it thus deals with many other issues that seem to challenge the notion of an organized and meaningful world. It explains the disease as a punishment for challenging this order and creates a specific system for human intervention in

dealing with the disease. Later texts will expand these two methods of dealing with this disease and the broader diseases it represents.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Rabbinic View of *Tzara'at*

The rabbinic period in Judaism lasted from the years just before and after the destruction of the second Temple until the medieval period. During this time, the *Mishnah*, two *Talmuds* and a plethora of other texts were compiled which included the debates, discussions and legends of the rabbinic figures of the times. Although myths abound as to who compiled these texts, history has never proven authoritatively who collected and organized them. The texts are certainly marked by the historical circumstances in which they were compiled, and therefore represent an ever-evolving attitude towards the many different issues affecting the rabbinic authorities throughout this specific period of history. From dealing with the loss of an Israelite cult following the destruction of the Temple, to the ever-increasing role of Hellenism in daily life, to the birth of philosophic thought and rationalism, these texts reveal that the rabbis were constantly responding to their times, and finding ways to remain unique amongst a society which increasingly demanded sameness.

The attitude towards disease evolved in this period as much as it had in biblical times. Certainly, the authors of the rabbinic texts continued to think of disease as punishment for sin, and the early rabbis continued to link it with impurity. However, as rationality and science developed in the Greek world, new concepts of disease emerged, which saw human vulnerability as caused by the elements or bodily imperfections. For the first time, rational explanations were sought for the many diseases affecting mankind, and a new focus on science became evident in rabbinic thought. Still, although rational medical explanations are evident throughout rabbinic texts, the rabbinic establishment never discarded irrational

understandings of disease that were borrowed both from neighbors and earlier Jewish legend and lore.

Examples of what we would deem irrational thought that was borrowed from neighbors in rabbinical texts include belief in demon infestations and astrology. In commenting on demonology, Samuel J. Kotték writes, "In Palestine as well as in Babylonia, popular beliefs in demons remained strongly alive through the seven centuries that represent the period of the elaboration of the Talmud."<sup>36</sup> The Bible certainly sought to reject the idea that disease was caused by demonic infestation or astrological forces. However, during rabbinic times, as Kotték notes, "these beliefs were then widely circulated in the common popular medical lore."<sup>37</sup> The rabbis borrowed these beliefs in their own literature and gave them unique Jewish contexts.

Examples of what we would deem rational reactions to disease in rabbinical texts include defining disease as caused by changes to the blood, the bile, the climate, body temperature and secretions. For example, in the Talmud Bavli, it states, "He used to say: everything comes from the wind."<sup>38</sup> In the Talmud Yerushalmi, it states, "Rabbi Eleazar said, 99 die from the bile and only one from heaven."<sup>39</sup> Similar to other understandings of disease, these new concepts were most likely borrowed from the general new science-based-culture in which the rabbis were living.

---

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Kotték, 12

<sup>37</sup> Kotték, 15

<sup>38</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia* 107b

<sup>39</sup> *Talmud Yerushalmi, Shabbat* 14b



The scientific understanding of disease was never completely divorced from the traditions, which linked disease with sin or corruption. In *Leviticus Rabbah*, an early compendium of rabbinic *midrash*, both moral and rational explanations for *Tzara'at* are actually intertwined.

A midrash states that,

“...man's weight might be evaluated as half water, half blood. If he is righteous, water and blood are in equivalent amounts. If he has sinned, at times the water becomes superfluous and he becomes dropsical; at times the blood is in excess and he becomes leprous.”<sup>40</sup>

According to this early midrash, the sinner effects the natural balance between blood and water in the body while the righteous person equalizes this balance. While obviously an over simplification of the scientific rationale behind skin disease to our modern minds, this midrash represents an attempt by early rabbinical figures to both rationally and morally explain *Tzara'at*.

Throughout rabbinic literature, as in biblical literature, *Tzara'at* is dealt with as a disease caused by sin and resulting, especially in early literature, in bodily impurity. The later rabbis add specific sins to the outbreak of *Tzara'at* and include additional biblical characters that have contracted the disease. In regards to impurity, the early rabbis of the Mishnah elaborate on the laws of *Vayikra* and reduce the role of the priest in diagnosing and ritually purifying the disease. For the later rabbis, the disease is used as a way to punish perceived improper behavior and is thus reflective of what the rabbis deemed to

---

<sup>40</sup> *Vayikra Rabbah*, 15,2

be immoral. As early science and medicine developed, the rabbis borrowed scientific concepts and intertwined them with their own explanations for the disease.

### **An Overview of Rabbinic *Tzara'at***

The Mishnah, which presumably covers rabbinic debate before and after the destruction of the second Temple until its compilation in 200 C.E., includes an entire tractate called *Nega'im* that covers the laws of *Tzara'at* from *Vayikra*. This tractate is part of the mishnaic order known as *Tohorot*, which deals with the concept of purity. This order, which has no accompanying commentary in either Talmud, certainly reflects the times in which it was written. As the early *Tannaitic* rabbis dealt with the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, they needed to codify the systems of purity in which they inherited. These purification systems largely dealt with the autonomy of the priests, who were the direct officiates of detecting impurity and performing purification rituals. Throughout tractate *Nega'im*, there is ample evidence of the rabbis attempting to take away this priestly duty by relegating the ability to other deemed capable men. By the time of the Talmud, the entire order of *Tohorot* is simply abandoned, in a possible attempt to remove the priests from daily religious functions.

Rabbinic texts connect *Tzara'at* with the rabbinic concept of *L'shon Ha-rah*. In fact, the rabbis claim that the term *M'tzora* is an acronym for *Motzi Shem Ra*, literally translated as "one who brings out an evil name", and meaning that one is spreading evil through language. In *Leviticus Rabbah*, it is written, "For this reason did Moses warn Israel, 'This is the law of

the leper' metzora--*motzi shem ra*"<sup>41</sup> *L'shon Ha-rah*, which is certainly not a biblical concept, is purportedly derived from the biblical passage Leviticus 19:6, which states that, "you shall not go up and down as a talebearer amongst your people." The term specifically means "evil tongue" and refers to gossip, which is spread by an individual. Importantly, gossip, according to rabbinic law, does not need to be false in order to be deemed a sin. For the rabbis, spreading truth is as evil as spreading falsehoods. The entire subject of *Lashon Ha-Rah* is dealt with thoroughly throughout rabbinic texts and is the main content of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century halachic works *Chafetz Chayim* and *Shmirat HaLashon* by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan.

The biblical characters that the rabbis claim to have had *Tzara'at* include Cain, the daughter of Pharaoh, David, Goliath and Queen Vashti. In giving these characters the disease, the rabbis seek to mete out punishments, which they feel missing from the biblical text. Through the power of *midrashic* discourse, the rabbis are able to define certain sins, by punishing certain characters with the notorious skin disease. In this same venture, the rabbis also explain the particular sins that gave *Tzara'at* to the various biblical characters that actually have the disease in the biblical text. The most cited example of this is the case of Miriam, whose quest for power in the biblical text is interpreted by the rabbis as the sin of slander.

Rabbinic texts extend and define the types of sins that result in *Tzara'at*. This desire most likely stems from the fact that the ancient biblical disease was not a reality in rabbinic times, but now a threat that the rabbis could use to pursue their moral agenda. In other words, in

---

<sup>41</sup> *Vayikra Rabbah*, 17:3

rabbinic times, people were not being diagnosed as *Metzora*. Thus, *Tzara'at* was now used to teach moral lessons, and not to create ritual procedures to deal with its outbreak. As time moved forward, the rabbis became less concerned with the purity status of the *Tzara'at* victim and more interested in the moral lessons it could teach.

The early rabbis still derive basic laws of ritual from *Tzara'at*. In the Mishnah, the rabbis use the disease as a way of clarifying the laws of corpse impurity. As Aaron declares his sister to be like "one who is dead" in *Vayikra*<sup>42</sup>, the rabbis suggest that both the corpse and the victim of *Tzara'at* share common features of impurity. As Hyam Maccoby writes, "In both cases, the presence of the source of impurity within an enclosed space causes the contents of the space to become unclean even when untouched by the source of impurity."<sup>43</sup> Hence, the rabbis use *Tzara'at* impurity as a measuring device to describe the laws of corpse impurity. In the Talmud, the victims are referred to as the living dead.<sup>44</sup>

For the rabbis, *Tzara'at* is an instrument used to further an evolving rabbinic agenda. As it is a disease that receives numerous citations from the biblical text, the rabbis use it to develop their own ideas on moral, ritual and basic theological issues. It is uncertain whether or not the disease was ever actually real during rabbinic times. According to I. Katzenelson, the rabbis "in an attempt to minimize the dislocation and inconvenience caused by the strict application of the biblical laws....limited the laws of leprosy to one disease, *vitiligo* or *leuce*, which was of rare occurrence, and in addition they superseded the priests as the determiners

---

<sup>42</sup> *Vayikra* 12:12

<sup>43</sup> Hyam Maccoby, *Corpse and Leper*, 1

<sup>44</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 64a

of the incidence of the disease."<sup>45</sup> Even if the disease were a reality of the times, the rabbis certainly took little interest in its healing. Instead, the disease becomes yet another example of the rabbis utilizing biblical sources for their own specific agenda.

## I. *Tzara'at* in the Mishnah

As noted earlier, tractate *Negai'im* of the Mishnah in the order *Tohorot* deals specifically with the laws of *Tzara'at* from chapters thirteen and fourteen of *Vayikra*. In his commentary on the tractate, Jacob Neusner writes, "Nearly all of its laws are evidently based upon nothing more than a close exegesis of Scripture"<sup>46</sup> While the chapter is a thorough explication of the laws from those two chapters, there are still striking differences between the two sources. First, while the biblical source dedicates an entire chapter to the laws of purification, the Mishnah postpones purification until its final chapter. Second, the primary signs of the disease in the Mishnah are different from those mentioned in the Bible. For example, while the Bible uses such physical signs such as *se'et* and *sapphat*, the Mishnah only mentions *se'et* once and never mentions *sapphat*. Finally, the priest, who is the primary judge of impurity in the Bible, is given a reduced role in the Mishnah.

The rabbis seek to reduce the power of the Priest, and therefore empower others in diagnosing and treating impurity. While seeking to reduce the role of the Priest and replace the Temple (discussed below) through their exegesis, the rabbis of the Mishnah do not connect *Tzara'at* with sin. As Jonathan Klawans states, "One cannot find in the entire Mishnah tractate *Negaim* a single clear allusion to the biblical narrative traditions that view

---

<sup>45</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica on I. Katzenelson's interpretation of Rabbinic Leprosy

<sup>46</sup> Jacob Neusner Commentary on Tractate Negaim, I of Introduction

such ailments as punishments for slander...any Jewish person could be afflicted, even learned students of Torah and righteous people."<sup>47</sup>

Before undergoing an investigation of *Negai'im*, it is necessary to examine the meaning of the entire order of *Tohorot*. The order receives no commentary in either Talmud. It certainly represents an extension of the Israelite cult, which was focused on practices of purification. However, although both Talmuds imagine a world with the Temple in existence, this specific order is still abandoned. This most likely reflects discomfort with priestly authority and second-Temple practices but its absence in either Talmud has been the crux of much debate. *Tohorot* includes twelve tractates, which deal with issues ranging from vessels susceptible to impurity, corpse impurity, issues dealing with the red heifer, food impurity, pools for ritual immersion, rules for menstruation and the lengthy rules for *Tzara'at*.

The majority of Tractate *Negai'im* describes the physical dimensions of the skin disease, and the states in which it is impure. The tractate is divided into 14 separate chapters. As stated above, the first chapter describes the various colors of *Tzara'at* and the various challenges regarding its inspection. The second chapter deals with the problems associated with different skin tones (specifically mentioning different ethnicities), the times of day in which *Tzara'at* can be distinguished, and the laws regarding who can examine the victim. The third chapter deals with who can contract the disease, the ways to distinguish the three main

---

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Klawans, 99

signs of *Tzara'at* and the laws regarding the identification of *Tzara'at* in both garments and houses.

The fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and ninth chapters of *Negai'im* deal with how to determine which of the three signs of *Tzara'at* can be used to determine the purity status of the victim. The eighth chapter is an exposition of Leviticus 13:13, in which the victim of *Tzara'at* is declared ritually pure when he has turned all white. The tenth chapter deals with scalls, a skin disease separate from *Tzara'at*. The eleventh chapter deals again with *Tzara'at* in fabrics and garments while the twelfth and thirteenth chapters deal with *Tzara'at* in houses. The final chapter of Tractate *Negai'im*, as mentioned earlier, deals with the purification process of the victim.

*Nega'im* begins by analyzing the various colors that are apparent in *Tzara'at*. Colors, as was discussed in the preceding chapter, are biblical and rabbinic metaphors for life, death, innocence, guilt, purity and impurity. Of particular interest to the rabbis, is *Vayikra* verse 13:13, which claims that, "if the priest sees that the eruption has covered the whole body -- he shall pronounce the affected person clean; he is clean, for he has turned all white." Although the disease has seemingly covered the person's entire body, the fact that he is all white makes him clean and pure. This specific passage is dealt with in detail, as mentioned above, in the eighth chapter of the Tractate.

According to Boris Ostrer, mishnah *Negai'im* 1:1 and mishnah *Middot* 3:4 "form a composite *midrash* which complies with the inner logic of the verse LV 13:13"<sup>48</sup> In *Nega'im* 1:1, the color of *Tzara'at* is compared to "the lime of the Temple"<sup>49</sup>, meaning that the color of the Temple's walls were lime-like. According to Ostrer, this mishnah is directly correlated with mishnah *Middoth* 3:4 which explains that the temple is whitewashed at certain periods of the year "because of the blood"<sup>50</sup>. Ostrer notes that the description of "the lime of the Temple" in mishnah *Negai'im* directs the reader to mishnah *Middoth* 3:4. He writes that, "...the word temple in *Negaiim* 1:1 was put in with the intention to create a parallel to *Middoth* 3.4" in order to "create a composite...based on the identification of the human body and the altar."<sup>51</sup>

While *Vayikra* 13:13 claims that pure whiteness makes one pure, mishnah *Nega'im* 1:1 connects this whiteness with that of the Temple, and mishnah *Middoth* 3:4 states that the color which pollutes the Temple's whiteness is red. While mishnah *Negai'im* connects the *Tzara'at* victim with the temple, mishnah *Middoth* 3:4 explains why whiteness makes the Temple, and thus the *Tzara'at* victim, pure. The victim who is all white is pure because he is not tainted by the redness that pollutes the Temple.

Accordingly, for the rabbis, the human body is the symbol of the sacred altar. As Ostrer notes in regard to Leviticus 13:13 and its mishnaic parallels, "the source of purity, the most pure and sacred place in the entire world, is identified with the body...."<sup>52</sup> The human body

---

<sup>48</sup> Boris Osterer, 19

<sup>49</sup> *Mishnah Negai'im* 1:1

<sup>i</sup> *Mishnah Middoth* 3:7

<sup>i</sup> Osterer, 24

<sup>1</sup> IBID, 25



is thus for the rabbis a replacement for the Temple. By linking the *Tzara'at* victim with the Temple through this composite midrash on *Vayikra* 13:13, the rabbis effectively produce a replacement to the Temple by declaring that the human body is the new source of purity.

Just as the rabbis seek to replace the Temple, they also seek to reduce the role of the primary Temple officiants. The priest represents a threat to rabbinic authority, in that he plays an important role in both determining impurity and in performing purification rituals. The reduction of the priestly role in the laws of *Negai'im* is done quite tactfully through a variety of means. First, the text simply does not mention the priest very often. Instead, it focuses on the physical signs of *Tzara'at* and the ways in which it should be diagnosed as clean or unclean. By removing mentions of the priest, the rabbis thus reduce his primary role.

The text also gives opportunities for individuals beyond the priest to investigate the disease and for victims to actually remove signs of the disease before priestly inspection. While the text still gives the priest final say over declaring impurity, this increase in the number of people involved in the diagnosis process and the empowerment of the victim to remove the signs serves to reduce the power of the priest. Finally, the text places the purification process at the end of the Tractate. Instead of elaborating on the laws of purification that solely involves the priest, the text deliberately places the laws for the process at the end of the Tractate and reduces its importance.

Mishnah 2:3 of *Negai'im* claims that a blind priest may not diagnose an individual and mishnah 2:5 claims that anyone can inspect an individual for signs of *Tzara'at*. While

mishnah 3:1 maintains that the priest is the only person who can declare an individual impure, the preceding mishnayot give powers to non-priests that are not evident in the biblical text. Further, mishnah 2:3 admits that a priest can be prevented from inspecting the condition of an individual based on his own physical limitations. In *Va-yikra*, the priest is the sole representative who can determine the purity or impurity of an individual, without any limits. Tractate *Negai'im* takes clear steps to reduce this power.

While *Tzara'at* is mentioned elsewhere in the Mishnah, it is primarily dealt with in Tractate *Negai'im*. As mentioned earlier, it is unknown whether or not the condition was still prevalent during this period of history. What is clear is that the Mishnah is a product of both its times and its authors. In many ways, the Mishnah does not simply disregard the culture in which it was written. It is still dealing with a population that has lost both its Temple and the priests who performed the rituals that took place there. However, the Mishnah is a political document in that it offers specific alternatives to earlier religious practices. In regards to *Tzara'at*, the Mishnah seeks to replace the Temple with the human body and reduce the role of the Priest.

## II. *Tzara'at* and *L'shon Ha-rah*

The sin most commonly associated with *Tzara'at* throughout rabbinical texts is the sin of slander, known in rabbinic terms as *L'shon Ha-Rah*. As explained in the last chapter, this sin is certainly not related to those sins committed by the biblical characters that contract *Tzara'at* in the biblical text. As was demonstrated in that chapter, those characters took steps to challenge the basic power structure that existed between God, prophet and the Israelites.

When used as moral punishment in the Bible, *Tzara'at* was thus a disease that protected the basic system of power advocated by the biblical authors. When used as moral punishment for the rabbis, *Tzara'at* is used to deal with the moral offenses they deem most important.

Certainly, the spoken word is a powerful instrument in the biblical text. In discussing Isaac's blessing of Esau, M. Kichelmacher and I. Migli write, "Once uttered it has established a reality; and this reality is unalterable."<sup>53</sup> They go on to argue that this is the reason Esau cannot be blessed once Jacob has been blessed. This power of the spoken word is also the case in the first creation account from *B'reishit* in which God utters words, and the elements of the world come into existence. God later grants Adam the ability to name the creatures of the world in claiming that, "...whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name."<sup>54</sup> These examples demonstrate that the spoken word is a powerful instrument in the biblical text. However, it is not deemed the

While the power of the spoken word is certainly a component of the biblical text, there is no evidence that slander is a major sin in the Bible. It is certainly not a sin worthy of death, as is the breaking of the Sabbath. In truth, while the rabbis derive their moral position from *Vayikra*'s ban on tale bearing, the text of the Bible does not take much concern in slander. For instance, the notion that the cause of Miriam's *Tzara'at* was slander is not at all apparent in the text. Although both Miriam and Aaron begin their challenge by claiming that Moses has chosen a non-Israelite wife, they do so because they desire power and the ability to be like their brother. They attempt to weaken Moses by defaming him. However, God does not

---

<sup>53</sup> M. Kichelmacher and I. Migli, 141

<sup>54</sup> *Bereishit*, 2:19

punish Miriam for slandering her brother, but rather, for seeking power that she is not entitled to. As the last chapter demonstrated, this sin of desiring illegitimate power is proven by the sins of the other characters that are stricken with the disease.

If slander is not the concern of the biblical text, it makes sense to ask why the rabbis would take such concern and link the sin with the onset of *Tzara'at*. Certainly, the contagion factor adds power to the metaphor in that slander and gossiping spread like disease. However, there is no evidence that this disease is contagious. The ritual separation in *Vayikra* has to do with purity and not contagion. It is more likely that the rabbis considered the disease to be the result of slander because they feared that particular sin and wanted to create a deterrent.

In rabbinic times, there was much concern about informants who would denounce the Israelites to their foreign rulers or make specific claims against them. Even before the destruction of the second Temple, this concern is evident. As Ellis Rivkin notes in his classic book *What Crucified Jesus*, "Judea was under the control of Rome. The emperor, the high priest, and the high priest's privy council all were tied together by two interests: the preservation of imperial power in the face of any challenge and the smooth collection of tribute for the enrichment of Rome."<sup>55</sup> Under these conditions, there were certainly some willing to take revolutionary actions. Yet, this was also a time in which gossiping could easily lead to death and the destruction of the Israelite people-hood. The historian Josephus

---

<sup>55</sup> Ellis Rivkin, 21

tells us that Romans rewarded informants<sup>56</sup>. The rabbis needed to respond to deter this action.

The Talmud tells us that the destruction of the second Temple forced Rabban Gamliel to add a prayer to the *Amidah* called *Birkat Ha-Minim*.<sup>57</sup> According to Encyclopedia Judaica, this prayer is "an anathema uttered against informers"<sup>58</sup>. Informers threatened Jewish autonomy and safety in a Roman-controlled world. The *Birkat Ha-Minim* was one instrument used to deter Israelites from informing on their community. Although it is not accounted for in historical texts, it is possible that the rabbinic focus on the sin of *L'shon Ha-rah*, and *Tzara'at* as its punishment, was simply another method of deterring informants.

### III. Extending *Tzara'at* in Rabbinic Texts

As *Tzara'at* was a disease associated with sin in the Bible, the rabbis, in an attempt to define certain sins, attribute it to biblical characters whom they viewed were never stricken with the disease in the biblical text. In this same effort, the rabbis also extend the number and types of sins that lead to the disease. While the biblical text is never explicit in which sin causes the disease (although I have argued that it was a rejection of the basic system of power), the rabbis are explicit in explaining the types of sins that lead to the disease. As was the case in ascribing *L'shon Ha-rah* as a precursor to the disease, this is a way for the rabbis to further their moral agenda, with specific reasons to outlaw each specific activity and to use *Tzara'at* as deterrence.

---

<sup>56</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* Book 19, Chapter One

<sup>57</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Berachot* 28B

<sup>58</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica on Informers

One character that the rabbis afflict with the disease is Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, who is responsible for killing his brother Abel. In the biblical text, Cain is exiled and forced to wander aimlessly for his sin. Although he is certainly punished for his sin, he is granted immunity against being killed by other wanderers. This troubles the rabbis and in commenting on the biblical verse "and the Lord put a sign on Cain"<sup>59</sup>. Rabbi Nehemiah states, "He caused *Tzara'at* to break out on him"<sup>60</sup>. R. Nehemiah bases this midrash on the fact that the term *oht* (sign) in the Cain narrative is *Aleph-Vuv-Tav*, the same Hebrew term used for God's affliction of Moses in Exodus. As both narratives use this specific Hebrew word, Nehemiah assumes Cain suffers the same disease that Moses later suffers.

Another character that the rabbis afflict with the disease is Aaron, whose sister Miriam is afflicted with the disease in *B'Midbar*. From the rabbis' perspective, Aaron does not pay the same price as his sister for the sin of slander. According to Shabbat 97A in the Talmud Bavli, Aaron was afflicted with the disease and was only cured of it when he turned (*va-yifen*) towards Miriam. In this same passage, the rabbis define the sin that leads to both Aaron and Miriam's *Tzara'at*; "He who entertains a suspicion against innocent men is bodily afflicted"<sup>61</sup>

The rabbis also extend the number of sins that lead to *Tzara'at*. In a passage that forbids speaking in praise of one's neighbor (in the possibility that the praise will turn against that

---

<sup>59</sup> *Bereishit* 4:15

<sup>60</sup> *Bereishit Rabbah* 2

<sup>61</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 97a

neighbor), the *Talmud Bavli* states that other sins leading to *Tzara'at* include "the shedding of blood, incest, taking oaths in vain, incest, arrogance, robbery and envy"<sup>62</sup>. After offering proof-texts for each of these sins, the Talmud returns to the sin of slander, which the rabbinic tradition considers the main cause of *Tzara'at*. In referring to the offering of living birds in the purification process, the Talmud states "He did the work of a babbler, therefore let him offer a babbler as a sacrifice."<sup>63</sup> Hence, even though the rabbis seek to extend the sins beyond slander, they are still vested in that particular sin as the ultimate cause of the disease.

### **The Meaning of Rabbinic *Tzara'at***

The idea of *Tzara'at* evolved throughout the rabbinical period. At first, the rabbis were forced to deal with both the existence and the destruction of the Temple. Early rabbinic works such as Tractate *Negai'im* in the Mishnah therefore focus on explaining the detailed laws of *Tzara'at*. As was demonstrated, these early rabbis sought to include their agenda in explaining these laws by reducing the role of the Priest, who was the main challenge to rabbinic authority. Later rabbis were less interested in the details of the laws from *Vayikra* and used the disease to further their agenda by ascribing it to other biblical characters and extending the types of sins that lead to it.

Although the understanding of the disease certainly evolved during rabbinic times, the disease was consistently used by the rabbis as a political tool. In the Mishnah, the rabbis attempted to compete with or replace the priests as the dominant force in Israelite life. In the Talmud, the rabbis labeled those sins, which was a challenge of their authority by using

---

<sup>62</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Arachin* 16A

<sup>63</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Arachin* 16B

*Tzara'at* as deterrence. Both Mishnaic and Talmudic sources use the disease to further their specific agenda and to strengthen their position within their communities.

In the Bible, *Tzara'at* was both a disease that affected ritual purity and a disease that was used to protect the power structure that existed between God and prophet. As was explained earlier, this system enabled the biblical author to explain disease (by labeling it as a basic moral offense) and to create ways for humans to actually deal with disease (by creating elaborate rituals for purification). For the rabbis, explaining and dealing with disease is not a concern. Because *Tzara'at* was most likely not a reality during this span of time, it became an effective political tool to reduce priestly authority or deter certain challenges to rabbinic authority.

The rabbis were deeply interested in giving legitimacy to their rule and constantly sought to connect themselves with the earlier monarchs. As David Biale notes, "By attributing royal characteristics to themselves, the rabbis...cemented their ties to both the monarchs of the past and the monarchy of the future."<sup>64</sup> Biale goes on to note that "the legitimacy of the political authority of kings and priests in the First and Second Temple periods was based on divine revelation. The rabbinical claims were attempts to appropriate this old political theory."<sup>65</sup>

The biblical author did not have to deal with the same challenges to authority that the rabbis faced. Therefore, in dealing with *Tzara'at*, the biblical author could attempt to explain its

---

<sup>64</sup> David Biale, 43

<sup>65</sup> IBID, 45



outbreak in general terms and offer a way for humans to be involved in some form of healing/ritual process. The rabbis did not deal directly with disease and were therefore not interested in it as a disease. Instead, they used it as would any figure attempting to use the past to his advantage. *Tzara'at* was for the rabbis one of the many ways to maintain communal safety (by connecting the disease with *L'shon Ha-rah*), to increase their political legitimacy (by reducing the role of the priest in the ritual process), to explain law (by using the disease as a measuring tool for such laws as corpse impurity) and to eventually become the driving force behind Jewish tradition and practice that they are today.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Medieval View of *Tzara'at*

The medieval era found Jews living under both Christian and Muslim rule. Jews found safety under Muslim rule due to the fact that medieval Muslim authorities considered Jews *dhimmis* or protected minorities. Although more of a tax status than a true sign of political protection, this label still gave Jews certain rights under the medieval Muslim political structure. Under Christian rule, Jews were commonly faced with persecution and oppression because of their rejection of Christ and the emergence of conspiracies against them. Under both religions, medieval Jews were afforded certain protections, which allowed them to maintain Jewish communities. They were a protected minority in Muslim lands and, although persecuted in Christian lands, Jews were still allowed to stay organized as "living proof of the veracity of the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah"<sup>66</sup>.

Under both Muslim and Christian rule, an entire corpus of Jewish texts and commentaries was spread throughout the Middle East and Europe. These texts include commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud, rabbinic responses to specific *halachic* queries, philosophic works and the emergence of legal codes that attempted to collect, organize, codify and explain the laws of past. The ability of these texts to flourish was the result of what historian David Biale calls the "period after the Jews ceased to have a political center in the Land of Israel but still enjoyed political autonomy."<sup>67</sup> The eventual creation of the printing press allowed certain texts to become authoritative for lasting generations.

---

<sup>66</sup> Biale, 61

<sup>67</sup> Biale, 59

By this time in Jewish history, Jewish scholars no longer considered *Tzara'at* a contemporary medical disease. This does not mean that the disease was no longer relevant. As *Tzara'at* was mentioned numerous throughout the bible, was the subject of an entire tractate in the *Mishnah* and was repeatedly mentioned throughout rabbinic texts, medieval scholars were forced to make meaning of it. *Tzara'at* was a major component of past Jewish writings and could not simply be ignored. Moreover, although the disease was not a part of daily life, it could still be used as a threat and was therefore used as a deterrent against certain sins.

### **An Overview of Medieval *Tzara'at***

The prime concern of Jewish scholars in this time period was protecting and explaining the Jewish texts of the past. Indeed, the diminishment of Jewish threats to political authority and the continued dilution of Jewish populations due to migration made codification of Jewish texts and beliefs a priority. The medieval scholars of Jewish communities were vitally interested in creating and maintaining certain Jewish standards. They needed to ensure that the ideas of the past remained relevant to the disparate Jewish populations they lived in. As *Tzara'at* was not a Jewish idea embedded in medieval daily Jewish practice, it was not a priority for most medieval Jewish scholars. However, as it was a central issue in past discourse, it did receive attention in the commentaries and certain philosophical and legal works.

The most comprehensive medieval commentaries were those on the Bible, the *Mishnah* and the Talmud. The medieval scholars attempted to make sense of these compilations,

sometimes employing the method of *p'shat* (finding the plain meaning of text) and other times employing the methods of *drash* (inserting or extrapolating meaning from the text). For those commentators vested in *p'shat*, *Tzara'at* presented a particular challenge, best exemplified by commentary from Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, known as the Rashbam. In commenting on *Tzara'at*, Rashbam writes that he "must abandon his project of *peshat* exegesis in favor of the midrashic when explicating this subject"<sup>68</sup> since the disease mentioned in the biblical text does not correspond to any diseases of that day. As *Rashbam's* commentary exemplifies, many of the medieval commentaries on *Tzara'at* are written through the lens of the preceding rabbis who employed *drash* in analyzing the disease.

Unlike the commentaries on the Bible, few medieval law codes dealt with the issue of *Tzara'at*. The emergence of medieval law codes represented a need to organize, in a practical manner, the amorphous discussions and debates of rabbinic and biblical texts. *Tzara'at* was not a practical legal matter since it received little attention in later rabbinic texts and was no longer considered a disease of the time. In fact, the only major medieval law code to devote an entire chapter to the laws of *Tzara'at* was Maimonides' *Mishnah Torah* (also known as the *Yad Hazakah*), which attempted to organize the laws from the *Mishnah*. As the *Mishnah* included an entire chapter on *Tzara'at*, Maimonides' work also included a chapter on the laws of the ancient disease.

---

<sup>68</sup> James A Diamont, 95

Medieval Jewish philosophy was largely developed in Muslim controlled lands. As Menahem Mansoor notes, the Islamic period "was a revival in Jewish philosophy which here sought to harmonize Judaic beliefs with Islamic principles of reason as well as to defend Judaism against contemporary external heresies."<sup>69</sup> The philosophy of Maimonides was largely an extension of this rationalism, and was the cause of bitter controversies amongst Jews who preferred less rational thought. Maimonides' major philosophic work was titled *The Guide for the Perplexed* and was one of the few philosophic works to include a philosophy of *Tzara'at*.

By the medieval era, Judaism was becoming institutionalized in an effort to ensure its survival. The texts of this period demonstrate that Jewish scholars were attempting to systematically make sense of their past tradition, and in many cases, combine it with contemporary thought. *Tzara'at* was largely a relic of the past. It deserved attention because it was so often mentioned by the tradition, but it was not a practical matter for Jews to deal with on a daily basis. Hence, while some medieval Jewish scholars simply re-iterated rabbinic thoughts of the past in explaining it, others sought to understand it as a metaphor for something much more important. The disease needed to be understood within its time, and Jewish scholars of the time sought either to connect it to the times in which they lived or to protect it as a piece of their past.

---

<sup>69</sup> Menahem Mansoor, 198

## I. *Tzara'at* in the Medieval Commentaries on the Bible

The rabbinic notion that *Tzara'at* was connected with the sin of slander remained prevalent in the medieval period. Relying on earlier texts, many of the commentators simply restated the idea from their rabbinic predecessors that spreading gossip is the cause of the disease. In fact, a good portion of medieval commentary on this subject consists of exact re-phrasings of earlier rabbinic texts that connected *Tzara'at* with slander. The motivation behind keeping this association relevant was most likely connected with the desire to codify rabbinic ideas. However, in some medieval locales, Jews who spied on their own communities for the ruling government remained a constant concern. As historian Robert Chazan notes of some medieval Ashkenazic communities, "Individual Jews well connected with the non-Jewish authorities might abuse those links in order to further their own affairs, at the expense of individual fellow-Jews or of the Jewish community as a whole."<sup>70</sup> Thus, keeping the association between *Tzara'at* and slander did serve a political purpose for some communities while simply codifying rabbinic thought for others.

Disagreement amongst the commentators over this issue certainly reflects a changing understanding of the meaning of the disease. While many commentators repeated the connection between *Tzara'at* and slander, other commentators understood the disease in new ways. For some commentators, it was proof of God's power. For other commentators, the disease was punishment for different kinds of sins. This changing understanding of the disease reflects the medieval desire to make sense of what seemed irrelevant.

---

<sup>70</sup> Robert Chazan, 77

Rabbi Solomon Yitzhaki, known as Rashi, was born in France in the year 1040, and was the author of commentaries on both the Bible and the Talmud. In commenting on *Tzara'at*, Rashi almost always restates the idea that the disease is punishment for slander. For example, in explaining the reason for Moses' affliction after complaining that the Israelites will not believe his authority, Rashi restates a midrash from *Sh'mot Rabbah*, and writes that "...he had spoken ill"<sup>71</sup>. For Rashi, Moses became afflicted because he spoke out against the Israelites' faith. This is clarified when Rashi writes, "they will believe the voice of the last sign. When you tell them 'Because of you I was stricken' because I spoke ill of you"<sup>72</sup>.

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, born in Spain in 1087, disagrees with Rashi and concludes that *Tzara'at* is not the result of slander in this particular case. In commenting on Moses' affliction, Ibn Ezra writes that it is a "message to Israel, which was originally free and then was afflicted by God with Egyptian slavery, that it would now be healed and returned to freedom."<sup>73</sup> In this instance, Ibn Ezra argues that *Tzara'at* is not an affliction of Moses but a tool for Moses to prove to the Israelites their eventual redemption. By seeing a diseased hand healed in front of their eyes, the Israelites will know that they will eventually be redeemed. Although Moses never performs this particular sign for the Israelites, Ibn Ezra argues that it was ultimately meant to physically demonstrate for them their future.

In later commentaries, arguments ensue between generations of medieval commentators over the meaning of *Tzara'at*. In *Devarim* 24:8-9, the Israelites are warned to watch out for

---

<sup>71</sup> Rashi on *Shmot* 4:6

<sup>72</sup> IBID

<sup>73</sup> Ibn Ezra on *Shm'ot* 4:6

*Tzara'at* and to remember what happened to Miriam. As these verses are part of a list of the laws between humans, they seem misplaced. The onset of *Tzara'at* is not a law between humans. In commenting on 24:9, Rashi writes, "'If one wants to be careful not to contract *Tzara'at* at all - then don't speak *lashon ha-ra*".<sup>74</sup> For Rashi, the reference to Miriam in *Devarim* 24:9 explains the meaning of the preceding verse. *Tzara'at* is placed within the context of the laws between humans to remind the Israelites that slander is an offense between humans that results in the affliction. Just as Miriam was afflicted for her slander against Moses, so too will the Israelites be afflicted if they slander others.

In this case, Ibn Ezra agrees with Rashi's assessment. In commenting on *Devarim* 24:8, he writes, "'From here we find support for the midrash: don't read 'MeTZo'RA' - rather 'MoTZi shem RA'" <sup>75</sup>. Ibn Ezra supports the notion that the sin of Miriam is slander, by referring back to the earlier rabbinic idea that *Metzora* is merely an acronym for *Motzi Shem Ra*. Like Rashi, he views the inclusion of *Tzara'at* in *Devarim* as deterring the specific sin of slander. Unlike his earlier position on Moses, Ibn Ezra relies here on rabbinic precedent linking the disease to the *L'shon Ha'rah*.

Still others take issue with this interpretation. Rashi's own grandson, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir writes,

"...even with regard to like King Uzziah - do not honor him. Instead, send him outside the camp... for remember what happened to Miriam: Even though she was a

---

<sup>74</sup> Rashi on *Devarim* 24:9

<sup>75</sup> Ibn Ezra on *Devarim* 24:9



prophetess and Moses' sister, they did not honor her; instead, they sent her outside the camp..."<sup>76</sup>

According to this commentary, the purpose of the *Tzara'at* inclusion is for the Israelites to never honor those who do not deserve honor. He compares Miriam to Uzziah, an eventual King, who oversteps his bounds by offering a sacrifice within the confines of the Temple. For Rashbam, the purpose of the inclusion of *Tzara'at* in the *Devarim* text is to remind the Israelites that they should never honor those who have overstepped their roles. It is not slander, but undue honor that is the focus of the connection to *Tzara'at* in *Devarim* 20.

Other commentators accept the notion that *Tzara'at* is the result of *l'shon ha-rah*, but take little interest in elaborating the association. Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, known as the Ramban, was born in 1194 in Spain. In his commentary on *Vayikra* 14:4, Ramban agrees with Rashi that the use of birds in the purification ritual for victims of *Tzara'at* is due to their chirping sound, which signifies that *Tzara'at* is punishment for slander and even gives credit to Rashi by writing, "This is Rashi's language".<sup>77</sup> Ramban accepts the rabbinic association with slander without offering any of his own interpretation.

In fact, after reiterating Rashi's language, Ramban takes no interest in the subject of slander. Although he agrees with Rashi's assessment about the ultimate meaning of the disease, he is much more interested in the types of birds allowed to be used for purification. In a long discussion of the different types of birds available, Ramban discusses issues related to birds that are not kosher to eat, the difference between birds that live in houses and outdoors, and

---

<sup>76</sup> Rashbam on *Devarim* 24:9

<sup>77</sup> Ramban on *Vayikra* 14:14

the meaning of the term *tziporim*. Although he ultimately agrees with past traditional associations, Ramban uses the biblical text to discuss issues that are more relevant for him.

Although the connection between slander and *Tzara'at* remained prevalent in the medieval commentaries on the Bible, commentators were not always wedded to further discussion of this link. As was demonstrated, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra chose to link other reasons to the inclusion of the disease in biblical text. Other commentators, such as Ramban, chose to explain issues not related to slander, while still retaining the traditional reason for its onset. Ultimately, the rabbinic link between slander and *Tzara'at* remained a priority for the commentators on the Bible. However, in many instances, they are interested in deterring other behavior or explaining issues beyond *Tzara'at*. The past tradition is important to them, but they are willing to abandon it in order to explain the purpose of the disease within the biblical text or to comment on other issues they deem important.

## II. Maimonides and *Tzara'at*

Perhaps the best-known Jewish medical expert during this period was Moses ben Maimon, referred to as both Rambam and Maimonides. As the chief physician to both Sultan Saladin and the Sultan's chief Vizier during what is now considered the Golden Age of Spain, Maimonides was a medical leader of his time, authoring some of the most comprehensive medical textbooks ever written. His continuing legacy as a renowned physician is proven by the respect he still receives by the modern medical establishment in the United States. At medical schools across the country, incoming students of all religious persuasions begin their

first day of orientation with a recitation of both the Hippocratic Oath and a prayer written by Maimonides for the practicing physician.

Maimonides' *Mishnah Torah* is an attempt to organize the laws of the *Mishnah*. Instead of using the *Talmud* as his base text, Maimonides uses the *Mishnah*, which he deems to be the most authoritative text of practical laws after the Bible. Hence, as the *Mishnah* includes an entire Tractate on the laws of *Tzara'at*, so too does the *Mishnah Torah*. However, whereas the *Mishnah* is still vested in the world of the Temple, Maimonides is able to alter the laws in order to clarify them for his generation. For instance, he writes, "...if a man uttered slander the walls of his house would suffer a change."<sup>78</sup> He then notes that should the man repent but continue his sin, his clothes will change. Finally, if the man still repents but continues to sin, his skin will suddenly become *metzora*. From the *Mishneh Torah*'s point of view, *Tzara'at* is different than the changes that take place in the house and in clothes. As a physician, Maimonides knows that diseases that affect humans are different than changes that affect clothes and houses. He therefore labels the changes in both houses and clothes as something wholly different than *Tzara'at*.

In addition, he writes that the punishment for slander is progressive in that it first affects the house, then the clothes and finally results in a disease that affects the skin. This progression is nowhere evident in the text of the Bible or the *Mishnah*. From the perspective of those texts, *Tzara'at* is a disease that can affect houses, clothes or skin. As a rational scientist, Maimonides attempts to make sense of this by creating a system of sequence. Slander

---

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Tzara'at* 16:10

creates a progression of punishments, beginning with physical changes in one's house and clothes and finally afflicting one's skin with a particular disease. This is clearly an attempt to clarify what Maimonides deems to be a confusing text for the general population.

Whereas the *Mishnah Torah* is written in *Mishnaic Hebrew* and meant to be a law code for the general population, Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* is written in Arabic and meant for a certain elite that can handle ideas. In his introduction to the work, he writes, "The object of this treatise is to enlighten a religious man who has been trained to believe in the truth of our holy law, who conscientiously fulfills his moral and religious duties, and at the same time has been successful in his philosophical studies"<sup>79</sup> For Maimonides, only a person capable of understanding the complex truths of philosophy could grasp the concepts elucidated throughout the *Guide*.

One cannot make sense of Maimonides' two texts and the contradictions inherent in studying both without realizing that they were written for two different audiences. Whereas the *Mishneh Torah* was a law code aimed at codifying and clarifying the ambiguous laws of the *Mishnah*, the *Guide* was Maimonides' attempt to explain his true philosophy, built upon that of the Islamic culture in which he was surrounded. Maimonides' philosophy views the law as a necessary component for society, but not the ultimate truth.

*Tzara'at* is written about from these two vantage points in both texts. As was demonstrated above, the *Mishneh Torah* attempts to explain *Tzara'at* as the end result of a progressive

---

Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Introduction

punishment, first affecting the house, then the clothes and then the skin. The *Mishneh Torah* makes sense of what is a confusing set of laws for the medieval general Jewish population. The text changes the laws in order to make them sensible. It first uses the rabbinic inference that slander deserves punishment. It then lays out that punishment in a systematic form. In contrast, when the Guide speaks about *Tzara'at*, it does not seek to simplify earlier laws, and make them easily understood. Instead, it places the disease within the context of a specific philosophic system.

In commenting on *Tzara'at* in the Guide, Maimonides argues, "the effect of this belief is evident. Leprosy is besides a contagious disease, and people almost naturally abhor it, and keep away from it."<sup>80</sup> Maimonides believes that fear serves to keep people from crossing certain boundaries. In fact, while he agrees that slander is a vice, he argues that the true purpose of the laws of *Tzara'at* is to create a separation between the sacred and profane. He writes,

"When a person visits a place, its impact on his soul diminishes, and he gradually is less awed by it...since the objective was to maintain this sense of awe, the Almighty cautioned those who are unclean against entering the sanctuary, by stipulating many sorts of uncleanness."<sup>81</sup>

Much like Mary Douglas (whose theory of separation was discussed in the introduction) Maimonides argues that keeping certain people from entering a certain domain ensures the sacredness of that domain. By making certain people unclean, one ensures that they believe there is sacredness, which Maimonides deems a "necessary belief".

---

<sup>80</sup> IBID

<sup>81</sup> IBID 3:30

Finally, Maimonides takes great concern with Miriam's rejection of Moses' leadership. In this case, it is not the sin of slander that concerns Maimonides but the special position that he assigns to Moses. As he explains in the Guide, "It must, however, be noticed that the people did not understand the voice in the same degree as Moses did..."<sup>82</sup> For Maimonides, Moses is not simply a prophet but a philosopher. He is able to realize actual truth and explains to the Israelites the laws only as a way for their society to function. Moses is the recipient of the ultimate truth, and Miriam's slander is a way of de-legitimizing him. By giving her a disease, the text clarifies that Moses alone is the one with whom God can deliver truth. Giving Miriam *Tzara'at* is thus a necessary narrative tool to ensure Moses' position as the ultimate truth bearer.

Maimonides ultimately views *Tzara'at* as a device to control the general Jewish population and as representative of the special position of Moses. His *Mishneh Torah* explains the laws of *Tzara'at* as a progressive set of punishments, which afflict those who do not change their behavior. The Guide explains *Tzara'at* as a necessary means of making people unable to enter the sacred area and as a way to protect the sacred. Finally, the punishment of Miriam enables Moses' position as the ultimate truth bearer to be protected. Thus, Maimonides' two-fold concern of maintaining Jewish society and explaining who can receive ultimate truth are explained through his positions on *Tzara'at*.

---

<sup>1</sup> IBID 2:35

### III. *Tzara'at* in Christian and Muslim Medieval Society

As medieval Jews struggled to make sense of *Tzara'at*, medieval Christians labeled the disease as leprosy, a medical reality in that time. As was explained in the introduction, the Greek translation of *Tzara'at* is *Lepra* in the *Septuagint* (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible). This Greek term is transliterated in the *Vulgate* (the Latin translation of the *Septuagint*). Although the Greek term *Lepra* is a fairly concise translation of the original Hebrew term *Tzara'at* (meaning variety of skin ailments), its phonetic similarity to the word leprosy encouraged physicians and church officials to designate leprosy as the ancient biblical disease. Medieval Christian authorities viewed the ancient biblical disease as the terribly disfiguring disease known today as Hansen's disease.

The social implications of being diagnosed as a leper in medieval Europe were based on misinterpretations of Hebrew scripture. For instance, while the original Hebrew term *tamei* dealt with the issue of ritual impurity in the Hebrew book of *Vayikra*, the term was translated in Latin and English as "unclean". The victim of leprosy in Christian medieval society was thus considered to be unhygienic and dirty. Further, the general idea that the disease was the result of sin was now associated with those who suffered from leprosy. From the Church's vantage point, a victim of leprosy was an unclean sinner. Although leprosy had nothing to do with biblical *Tzara'at*, the Christian Church suddenly vilified its victims.

In the medieval Muslim world, leprosy never reached the level of concern it had reached in its Christian counterpart. This does not necessarily mean that the disease was not prevalent in that society. It simply means that the religious institutions of the times did not link the

disease to any religious tradition. In fact, the Koran, the most holy text of the Islamic faith, never mentions the disease by name. When retelling the narrative of Moses becoming afflicted with *Tzara'at* in the Hebrew book of *Shm'ot*, the Koran merely states, "And he drew out his hand, and lo! it was white to the beholders."<sup>83</sup> Moses' whiteness is not considered a disease but a sign to perform for Pharaoh to prove God's ultimate power.

The absence of any connections between leprosy and *Tzara'at* in Muslim society meant that Jews could define and interpret the ancient disease without any interference from their ruling authority. Surprisingly, the Christian connection of *Tzara'at* with leprosy had little effect on Jewish understandings of the ancient biblical disease amongst those Jews living in Medieval Christian Europe. This reality simply strengthens Biale's earlier point that Jews had a certain amount of autonomy under both Muslim and Christian rule. Although they were constantly persecuted by Christians, and did not receive full protection in Muslim controlled lands, they were not forced to accept the religious beliefs of their rulers. In the case of *Tzara'at*, this is proven by the Christian interpretation having no effect on medieval Jews living in Christian Europe.

### **The Medieval Meaning of *Tzara'at***

The medieval era was a time for Jews to begin dealing with the effects of living great distances from each other. Without a central location, Jews needed to write texts, which would organize their past and explain it to their contemporaries. In many instances, they sought to codify the past and ensure its survival. *Tzara'at* was a relic of the past that needed

---

<sup>83</sup> Koran, Sura 26



explanation in the commentaries. Although it did not necessarily affect the every day life of medieval Jews, it needed to be understood since it had received so much attention in the past.

For Jews, *Tzara'at* retained its identity as a disease that was brought about by slander.

However, the disease was not limited by this understanding. Although some commentators chose to connect every biblical occurrence with this theme, other commentators understood *Tzara'at* as playing different roles in different areas of the Bible. This variety of responses represents an attempt by the commentators to understand a disease that was no longer a reality, and explaining its importance within scripture. At times, they simply relied on their past tradition. At other times, they sought to make new meaning, which could better explain the text to their contemporaries.

As was explained, *Tzara'at* received little attention in the law codes and philosophic works of the time period. Only Maimonides, who based his *Mishnah Torah* on the laws of the *Mishnah* and attempted to explain the real truth behind the seemingly irrelevant laws in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, could deal with *Tzara'at* in a systematic way – by explaining it logically to the general population and explaining its true purpose to the minority who could read and understand the *Guide*.

As medieval Jewish scholars dedicated their lives to keeping Judaism and its past relevant for their communities, *Tzara'at* presented a real challenge. It was not considered a contemporary disease and was thus probably not understood by most Jews. As the Bible and rabbinic literature were now understood as codified works, *Tzara'at* could not be ignored. It

was a major component of scripture, and received due attention by rabbinic texts. *Tzara'at* was thus dealt with by many medieval Jews in their commentaries and by Maimonides in particular through his legal and philosophic work.

## CONCLUSION

Disease has confused the minds of humans since the beginning of time. As the body decays or becomes vulnerable to outside elements, humans have long questioned why. In many instances, humans viewed disease as punishment for a specific sin. This view of disease led to countless attempts to define the sins that led to disease and to ensure that people would not engage in deleterious behavior. Disease has also led to the constant ostracizing of victims, as populations have feared contagion, death and the protection of the sacred. The creation of rituals to protect the sacred and to give humans control over disease came into existence. Finally, with the advent of medicine, humans began to search for ways to cure disease and to heal its victim.

As noted in the introduction, there has been particular emphasis found in Ancient Near Eastern texts on the skin disease, which plagued its victim in noticeable ways and made them unsightly. In many instances, the skin disease was used as either a threat or a curse by Ancient Near Eastern sources. It was not an internal deterioration of the body that simply resulted in death, but an external physical disease that made its victim look as if on he were on the doorsteps of death. For the biblical author, the skin disease had such a physical presence, that it led the author of the Book of *B'Midbar* to label Miriam as "one who is like dead"<sup>84</sup>. The rabbis of the Mishnah later compared the purity status of *Tzara'at* to that of the corpse.

---

<sup>84</sup> *Vayikra* 12:12

Soon, the laws of *Tzara'at* and the various narratives of its victims became obsolete.

Without a priestly ritual system, the need to diagnose individuals with the disease was no longer relevant. In fact, it is probable that *Tzara'at* was no longer prevalent by the time of the destruction of the second temple. As *Tzara'at* was no longer a medical condition, the rabbis of the Mishnah, the Talmud and later medieval commentators struggled to make meaning of it. Although it was no longer in existence, there were so many references to it throughout the biblical text. It was the main disease of the biblical text, commented on as both a punishment for sin and as part of the ritual ceremonies of the priest. The disease could not simply disappear from Jewish discourse because of its frequent mention by the Bible. Therefore, as time progressed, *Tzara'at* was not abandoned but rather became a tool for the changing political or philosophic agendas of Jewish communities.

Within the Bible itself, the disease was regarded as either punishment for sin or as ritual impurity. As argued earlier, the sin most commonly associated with the disease was an undeserved desire for power, which resulted in the victim's challenge of the Israelite power structure. In each narrative, the victim is punished for this behavior through the affliction of *Tzara'at*. In contrast, the priestly narrative of *Tazria-Metzorah* does not make mention of sin, but offers a way for Israelites to deal with the disease, not by curing it, but by purifying the victim. Thus, the Bible explains the disease by offering the reason for its onset and the ways in which it should be dealt with.

The rabbis were still interested in the reason for the onset of the disease, but less interested in the ways in which it made its victim impure. Although the early rabbis certainly dealt with

the laws of purity, they sought to limit the power of the priests. Later rabbis completely abandoned systems of purity and focused on the disease as a punishment for the sin of slander. As was demonstrated, this was most likely a political tool to dissuade informants from speaking out against their communities. Thus, the rabbinic generation uses *Tzara'at* as a tool to limit the power of their main challenge and as a political deterrent to dissuade improper behavior.

The medieval Jewish scholars needed to explain the past and make it relevant for their own generation. Although they were permitted a certain level of autonomy in the areas in which they lived, they were still forced to make meaning of the past in order for the Jewish tradition to survive. *Tzara'at* was completely foreign to them as it was not a contemporary disease or an issue that was dealt with by their communities. They therefore chose to explain the disease through the lens of their predecessors, by explaining its occurrence in new meaningful ways, or, as in the case of Maimonides, by connecting the ancient disease with emerging rational philosophies that attempted to explain the ultimate truth behind the universe.

*Tzara'at* evolved throughout Jewish history, from a variety of skin ailments, into a political tool to deter certain activities, to a relic of the past that demanded explanation. Today, *Tzara'at* continues to evolve. As Rabbis and laypeople read about *Tzara'at* from the book of *Vayikra*, they attempt to make meaning of a text that seems foreign and overly detailed. In many cases, they interpret the disease of *Tzara'at* through the lens of the rabbis, and merely claim that it speaks about the ills of slander. In recent years, anthropologists have begun to

study the ancient disease as a component of a broad system of purity and impurity, which protected the sacred and made it real. Dermatologists have even attempted to study the symptoms and come up with a possible modern name for the ancient disease. Today, *Tzara'at* is understood as a multi-dimensional Jewish idea that has much to teach us about disease, politics and religious survival.

The evolution of *Tzara'at* has much to reveal about the evolution of Judaism. Ancient ideas that were created in contexts far removed from our own continue to demand our explanation. Instead of simply ignoring these relics of our past, we have continued to make sense of them and to try and understand their role in our lives. We see our past through the lens of those who preceded us. Therefore, we understand *Tzara'at* as a disease in the Bible, as a political tool for the rabbis, and as an important metaphor for the medieval scholars to convey an important message. It is up to us to decide what it means today.

## WORKS CITED

- Biale, David. Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History. New York: Schocken, 1986.
- Cohen, Robert. Berit Olam: 2 Kings. Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2000.
- Diamond, James Arthur. "Maimonides on leprosy : illness as contemplative metaphor." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96,1 (2006) 95-122.
- Douglas, Mary. Leviticus as Literature. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Douglas, Mary. Purity and Danger. London: Routledge Classics, 196
- Fox, Everett. The Five Books of Moses. New York: Random House, 1997.
- Jastrow, Marcus. A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature. New York: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006.
- Josephus, Flavius. The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged. New York: Hendrickson Publishers, 1980.
- Kichelmacher, M. "A brief anthropological analysis of connections between "impurity", "zara'at" and slander in Jewish culture." *Koroth* 9,1-2 (1985) 136-143.
- Kottek, Samuel. "Proceedings of the first International Symposium on Medicine in the Bible, August 1981": *Koroth* 8,5-6 (1982)
- Klawans, Jonathan. Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Maccoby, Hyam. "Corpse and leper." *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49,2 (1998) 280-285.
- Mansoor, Menahem. Jewish History and Thought: An Introduction. New Jersey:
- Neusner, Jacob. History of the Mishnaic Law of Purities. Part Seven: Negaim. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978.
- Ostrer, Boris S. "Leviticus 13:13 and its Mishnaic Parallel", *Journal of Jewish Studies* 53,1 (2002) 18-26.
- Plaut, Gunther. Torah, A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition. New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005.
- Rivkin, Ellis. What Crucified Christ. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984.

Roberts, Matis. Mishnah Tohoros 4b Negaim: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources

Selections from "*Mikraot Gedolot*"

Selections from "*Talmud Bavli*-Schottenstein Edition"

Selections from "*Talmud Yersushalmi*-Schottenstein Edition"

Selections from "*Vayikra Rabbah*"

"The Ancient Law Code of Hammurabi." Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplements. Ed. James B. Pritchard. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969.