

Tzara'at

Introduction

A Mysterious Affliction

Vayikra 13-14 speaks at length about the various forms of *tzara'at*, the impurity caused by it, and the process by which the afflicted person is purified. Despite the many details, however, the malady remains very much in the realm of the unknown:



- **Nature of the condition** – What is *tzara'at*? Why does a person get afflicted? Is it a natural disease that anyone can contract, or is it a Divinely sent, supernatural phenomenon?
- **Forms of *tzara'at*** – How do *tzara'at* of the body, clothing, and house relate to each other? Are they all part of the same condition, or is one name given to a variety of distinct afflictions?
- **Impurity** – Finally, what about the condition causes its accompanying impurity? Does *tzara'at* have anything in common with any of the other conditions (such as a corpse, bodily discharges, or child bearing) which cause impurity?

Biblical Cases of Tzara'at

There are several narratives in Tanakh which speak of someone who is plagued by *tzara'at*. Examining these cases can help shed light on the nature of the ailment:

- Shemot 4 – When, at the Burning Bush, Moshe expresses concern that the nation will not believe that Hashem had appeared to him, Hashem gives him a sign in the form of his hand being stricken with *tzara'at*.
- Bemidbar 12 – After Miryam speaks against Moshe, Hashem punishes her with *tzara'at*.
- Shemuel II 3 – Following Yoav's extra-judicial dispatching of Avner without David's approval, David curses him that he should be plagued with *tzara'at*.
- Melakhim II 5 – Na'aman, the Aramean general, is cured from his *tzara'at* by bathing seven times in the Jordan, as per Elisha's instructions.
- Melakhim II 5 – After Geichazi speaks in Elisha's name without authorization, he is cursed that he will be afflicted with Na'aman's *tzara'at*.
- Melakhim II 7 – Four *metzoraim* living outside the city of Shomeron are the first to discover that the enemy army has fled and left behind enough food to save the Israelites from famine.
- Divrei HaYamim II 26 – After King Uzziyahu oversteps his bounds by bringing an incense offering, he is stricken with *tzara'at*.

In some of these cases, it is explicit that the malady arrives as a Divine punishment, but in others, the cause is unknown, and potentially a natural occurrence. What do these stories teach us about the malady and why someone might be plagued by it?

Diagnosis and Ramifications

Much of Vayikra 13 is devoted to a discussion of how to determine if the afflicted person is in fact impure, and how he should be treated once he is so designated. In addition to the many difficulties involved in understanding some of the technical details, several other aspects of the process raise questions as well:

- **Role of the priest** – The priest is assigned the task of determining the status of the afflicted individual, house, or clothing. Is this role a solely religious one, related to issues of purity, or does the priest play a medical role as well, actually diagnosing the disease?
- **Seven day intervals** – In several instances, there are seven day waiting periods in between inspections of the plague. What is the purpose of these intervals?
- **Who is impure** – Is there any logic to the symptoms that designate the impure state? For instance, why would a person who is completely covered by *tzara'at* be rendered pure (Vayikra 13:13), while smaller spots render him impure?
- **"בְּגָדָיו יִהְיוּ פָרְמִים וְרֵאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פָרוּעַ וְעַל שָׂפָם יַעֲטֶה"** – What is the purpose of these actions? The torn coat and unkempt hair are classically signs of mourning, but why should mourning be mandated? Moreover, why should the upper lip of the *metzora* be covered?
- **Isolation** – Why is the impure individual expelled from the camp and forced into isolation? Though all forms of impurity require a distancing from the Mikdash, this is the only state which requires leaving the Israelite camp. Is this a precaution against contagion or a punishment for sin?

The Purification Process

The details of the purification rituals are similarly difficult to comprehend:

- **"עֵץ אֲרֶז וְשָׁנִי תוֹלַעַת וְאַזְבֵּי"** – What is the significance of the cedar, hyssop branch and scarlet thread?
- **"שְׁתֵּי צִפְרִים"** – How is the ritual of the two birds, one of which is killed and the other let free, to be understood? This rite is reminiscent of the lottery on Yom HaKippurim which sets one goat to be slaughtered for God and one to be sent to the wilderness. What might be learned from this comparison?
- **"הַצִּפֹּר הַחַיָּה" / "מַיִם חַיִּים"** – What is the import of the repeated emphasis on the "live" bird and "living" waters?
- **Shaving** – Why is all of the individual's hair shorn off at the end of the process?
- **Sin offerings** – Finally, why must the cured individual bring sin-offerings? Does this imply that he had sinned?

Tzara'at

Exegetical Approaches

Overview

In attempting to understand the nature of *tzara'at*, commentators choose between two main approaches. Chazal, followed by most exegetes, suggest that the affliction is Divinely sent as punishment for sin. They point to Biblical cases of *tzara'at* where this is apparent, and they view the details of its restrictions and purification processes as reflecting sin and atonement. Ralbag, in contrast, views *tzara'at* as a natural disease which might plague any individual. According to him, the malady, like other forms of impurity, is unrelated to sin. Thus, many of the laws governing the condition are medicinal in nature and intended to prevent contagion, while others are simply standard rites of purification, found elsewhere as well.

Divine Punishment

Tzara'at is a malady sent by Hashem to warn or punish a person for sin.

SOURCES: Tosefta, Bavli, Vayikra Rabbah, Bemidbar Rabbah, Tanchuma, Rashi, Kuzari, Ibn Ezra, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Rambam, Ramban, Abarbanel, Sforno, R. S"R Hirsch

Natural or supernatural? The Kuzari, Rambam, Ramban, and R. Hirsch all suggest that the condition is completely supernatural in nature, while Ibn Ezra, R"Y Bechor Shor, Abarbanel, and Sforno all imply that, despite the Divine involvement, *tzara'at* of the body might nonetheless be a naturally occurring disease, or at least have some natural aspects.

For which sins? These sources disagree regarding which sins cause a person to be plagued with *tzara'at*, but most of them speak of slander and/or haughtiness. Several of the Midrashic sources include long lists of potential sins, mentioning theft, murder, selfishness, lying, desecration of God's name, overstepping boundaries, illicit sexual relations, and swearing falsely.

Biblical cases – This position is supported by the fact that most of the stories in Tanakh which mention a person being afflicted with *tzara'at*, explicitly speak of it as a punishment:

- Bemidbar 12 – Miryam is Divinely struck with *tzara'at* for speaking against Moshe.
- Shemuel II 3 – Yoav is cursed with *tzara'at* for killing Avner against David's wishes.
- Melakhim II 5 – Geichazi is plagued by *tzara'at* after he disobeys Elisha.
- Divrei HaYamim II 26 – King Uzziyahu is punished with *tzara'at* for his haughtiness in performing the incense rites.

From this list, it seems that the common denominator between the various sins is a rebellion against authority.

Comparison to *tzara'at* of the house and clothing – According to many of these sources, the afflictions brought on a person's clothing and house are meant to serve as warnings of sin which will lead the person to

repent before he is also bodily afflicted. Abarbanel adds that the obvious supernatural nature of the plague on the house comes to teach that *tzara'at* of the body and clothing are also Divine and providential.

"וְנִתְּתִי נֶגַע צָרַעַת" – Ramban points out that the language of "וְנִתְּתִי" suggests that Hashem is actively bringing the plague and that it cannot be attributed to natural causes. R. Hirsch adds that the word "נֶגַע" itself has the specific connotation of a plague brought by Divine decree, rather than an ordinary disease.

Why does *tzara'at* cause impurity? These sources might suggest that the impure state represents God's wrath at and rejection of the sinner.

Comparison to other forms of impurity – Most other conditions which cause impurity (bodily emissions, childbirth, and death) do not seem to be connected to sin and punishment, but are rather natural states. As such, this understanding of *tzara'at* would make it an exceptional form of impurity.

Role of the priest – The afflicted person is inspected by a priest, rather than a doctor, since this is a cultic issue of sin and impurity, rather than a natural disease. Sforno adds that the priest will both motivate the person to reflect on his deeds as well as pray for him.

Diagnosis and treatment of the defiled individual – These sources view the laws governing the diagnosis and behavior of the defiled person as related to his sin:

- **Seven day periods of confinement** – These intervals are opportunities for the individual to reflect and repent, so as to prevent the need for further punishment.
- **Isolation** – Rashi, following Bavli Arakhin, explains that this is a "measure for measure" punishment. Since the *metzora*, through his gossip, caused people to separate from one another, he, too, is separated from society. Alternatively, R. Hirsch suggests that the isolation serves to shame the person into self-reflection and correction of his negative social behavior.
- "**בְּגָדָיו יִהְיוּ פְּרָמִים וְרֵאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פְּרוּעַ**" – Rashi, Ibn Ezra, R"Y Bekhor Shor, and Abarbanel point out that these are all signs of mourning. Ibn Ezra and Abarbanel explain that the *metzora* must mourn his wayward ways that led to the affliction, while R"Y Bekhor Shor claims that he mourns his rejection by Hashem.

Aspects of the purification process – These sources similarly understand many aspects of the purification process as atonement or punishment for sin:

- **Sending away of birds** – Ramban compares the birds to the goat that is sent to Azazel as part of the Yom HaKippurim purification process, suggesting that each is intended to symbolize the carrying away of the people's sins. Bavli Arakhin explains that birds were chosen specifically because they chirp, thereby reminding the person of his sin of speaking about others.
- **Cedar and hyssop** – Rashi and R. Yosef Bekhor Shor suggest that these symbolize the fact that the person who had been haughty is now humbled and brought low.
- **Scarlet thread** – R"Y Bekhor Shor notes that the scarlet color represents sin, as Yeshayahu says, "אִם יִהְיוּ חֲטָאִיִּם כְּשָׁנִים כְּשֵׁלֶג יִלְבְּינוּ".
- **Sin offerings** – The sin and guilt offerings are brought as part of the process of atonement.

Arguments against a medical understanding – R. Hirsch argues forcefully against a medical understanding of the affliction, bringing numerous proofs from the laws relating to it. For example, he points out that if *tzara'at* covers the entire body it does not generate impurity. This would be counter-intuitive were

the process to be one of disease control. Similarly, with regards to *tzara'at* of the house, before the priest enters to declare it pure or impure, all items from the house are removed so as to maintain their purity. If the process was meant to prevent contagion or the like, this too would be illogical.



Natural Disease

Tzara'at is a natural disease which can strike a person regardless of whether they sinned or not.

SOURCES: R. Yochanan in Bavli Ketubot, Ralbag, Shadal, R. David Zvi Hoffmann

What disease? None of these sources attempt to identify *tzara'at* with a specific known disease, sufficing with the claim that it was a malady that could have affected anyone.

Tzara'at of the house and clothing – Ralbag attempts to give a natural explanation for these forms of *tzara'at*, as well, explaining that moisture or warmth can cause natural properties to be weakened, thereby causing rotting or discoloration.

Connection to other forms of impurity – As other cases of impurity (e.g. bodily emissions, corpses, and childbirth) result from natural processes and do not appear to be related to sin or punishment, it is logical to assume that *tzara'at* is no different.

Divine providence: plague without sin?

- Ralbag believes that not every individual merits Divine providence, and that it is possible that a person will suffer due to natural causes or "chance". As such, according to his theology, it is possible that a person could contract a debilitating disease such as *tzara'at* without it being considered a Divine punishment.
- R. D"Z Hoffmann posits that though most maladies come as punishment, there are always exceptional cases which cannot be explained in such a manner. Moreover, he questions why, if all diseases should be viewed as punishment for sin, it is only *tzara'at* that causes impurity. He therefore concludes that it cannot be sin which led to the impurity of the *metzora*.

Why does it cause impurity? These sources differ greatly in how they understand why this disease should cause impurity:

- **Decay** – According to Ralbag, most impurities relate to loss of life or potential life, when all that is left of man is his material being. This highlights that the physical ("material") aspect of man is not what is lofty, but rather only the spiritual ("form"). Thus, when certain bodily functions cause either an excess or decay of the physical material, they cause a defiling. *Tzara'at*, which is an especially severe form of bodily decay which stems from and spreads throughout man's material body, thus promotes a high level of impurity.
- **Promote belief in Divine providence** – Shadal suggests that, in ancient times, people erroneously assumed that the skin changes brought by *tzara'at* were a sign of God's wrath and concluded that the plagued individual must have sinned severely. As such, they would naturally avoid the person. Since this attitude, albeit mistaken, promoted belief in God's providence and the concepts of reward and punishment, the Torah allowed it to persist and established *tzara'at* as a form of impurity with all its accompanying laws.

- **Symbolic of sin** – R. Hoffmann suggests that all the various categories of impurity are meant to be symbolic of (but not a consequence of) sin. In reality, any condition could have been chosen, but these impurities were specified because they were outwardly better symbols. He suggests that the appearance of a person plagued by *tzara'at*, whose flesh was so disfigured, made people associate it with death, and thus with sin.

Biblical cases – The fact that most Biblical cases of *tzara'at* appear to be Divinely meted out as a punishment poses a difficulty for this approach. These sources might explain that Hashem simply used an otherwise natural disease as a punishment, just as elsewhere he afflicted people with blindness or a plague.

"וְנִתְּתִי נֹגַע צָרַעַת" – Ralbag explains that the language of "וְנִתְּתִי" need not imply that Hashem is actively bringing the plague. The affliction is simply attributed to Him since He is the first cause that drives everything in the world.

Role of priest – The priest is involved, not due to any need for atonement, but rather because the disease causes impurity, and the laws of ritual purity are in the priestly domain. Ralbag points out that the priest himself does not have to be the one to investigate and make the actual diagnosis, just to declare impurity.

An individual who is completely covered by *tzara'at* – R. Hirsch argues against this approach from the fact that an individual who is completely covered with *tzara'at* is considered pure, claiming that this would be counter-intuitive were the impurity to stem from disease and an attempt to prevent contagion. Ralbag, though, explains that such a state actually suggests that the person is close to recovery. According to him, the person's natural warmth has pushed the disease to the edges of the body and it is soon to disappear entirely.

Aspects of the defilement/purification process – Since Shadal sees the laws of *tzara'at* as aimed at reinforcing the people's (mistaken) belief that it was caused by sin, he reads many aspects of the process as symbolic of sin or atonement, just as the "Divine Punishment" approach does. Ralbag, in contrast, disassociates the process from one of atonement and instead views some aspects as medical in nature and others as educational. It is also possible that certain components of the ceremony are simply normal procedures found in many purification rites:

- **Isolation** – Ralbag maintains that the banishment from the camp is necessary to prevent contagion by others.
- **Seven day periods of confinement** – Ralbag suggests that this is the natural amount of time needed for a disease to progress and for certain symptoms to manifest themselves. Alternatively, one could view seven days as a typical formulaic period, similar to that found by other impurities.
- "**בְּגָדָיו יִהְיוּ פְּרָמִים וְרֵאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פְּרוּעַ וְעַל שִׁפְמֹם יֵעָטָה**" – Ralbag views this as related to the state of impurity created by *tzara'at* rather than to the disease itself. He suggests that these actions are meant to be signs of degradation which remind people of the lowliness of the material aspects of our being which caused this condition. Alternatively, this approach could explain, as does Ibn Ezra, that the covering of the mouth was meant to guard against infection.
- **Burning of clothing/ destruction of home** – These, too, might be explained as necessary precautions to prevent spread of the disease.
- **Scarlet thread, hyssop, and cedar** – Since the person is already cured at this point, these actions might have no medicinal purpose, but rather might simply be an intrinsic part of the purification rite. The

fact that the same threesome is found in the red heifer ceremony might support the possibility that this is simply a standard component of purification.

- **Sending away of bird** – This, too might be related to purification rather than health, as a similar rite is found in the sending away of the goats on Yom HaKippurim. See Rashbam who connects the two ceremonies, viewing both as rituals of purification. Alternatively, as Ibn Ezra suggests, the birds are expelled to unsettled territory to ensure that they do not spread the disease.
- **"Living" birds and water** – The emphasis on life might serve as a contrast to the death symbolized by the decaying flesh of the person plagued by *tzara'at*.
- **Shaving of hair** – Ralbag maintains that since the hair grew from diseased blood, it might still have marks of the disease on it and needs to be shaved.
- **Separation from sexual relations** – Ralbag explains that having sexual relations at this point might weaken the afflicted person and cause a relapse of the disease.
- **Sin offerings** – Several other forms of impurity require the bringing of sin-offerings despite the fact that no apparent crime has been committed. As such, it is possible that, in all of these cases, the offerings are unrelated to atonement.