''*Tazri'a-Metzora*: The enigma of biblical leprosy''

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

This year, calendrical considerations require us to read the double sidrah of Tazriah-Metzorah (Lev. 12:1 – 15:33) on a single Shabbat. This is not an arbitrary linking of two sidrot with disparate subject-matters. Quite the contrary. Other than the opening eight verses of Tazriah, which deal with purification after childbirth, the rest of that sidrah shares with Metzorah the identical theme of the diagnosis of various skin eruptions, inflammations and discolorations, the spread of plague to fabrics and even walls of houses, and the determination by the priest of whether or not the lesion and colour irregularity presented denoted the occurrence of the dreaded *tzara'at* disease, referred to no less than 55 times in the *TaNaCh*. That being the case, one may wonder why the two sidrot did not originally constitute a single sidrah!

Let us first provide an authoritative definition of leprosy, as provided by the World Health Organisation:

> Leprosy is an infectious disease caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*, an acid-fast, rod-shaped bacillus. The disease mainly affects the skin, the peripheral nerves, mucosa of the upper respiratory tract, and the eyes.

Now, some modern scholars have cast doubt on whether the biblical *tzara'at* was indeed what we know as leprosy. Hence, the commentary of *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford University Press, JPS, 1985) states:

> 'Tzara'at has sometimes been translated as ''leprosy'' (or ''leprous affection''), but the disease today called leprosy (Hanson's disease) was not known in biblical times, and the description given in the Bible is not consistent with it' (p.234 n.)

Well, as on all matters relating to medicine (and many other fields!), I am privileged to be able to consult my mechutan, Michael Baum, Professor Emeritus of Surgery and visiting Professor of Medical Humanities in University College London (UCL). I did expect him

to concur with the previous conclusion, but was quite pleased that he in fact supported the 'traditional' translation, as well as with his accompanying remark:

> I've read that Sidrah again and then read around the subject of leprosy. I think leprosy is still the best bet because it is the oldest recorded chronic condition known in medicine.
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> In fact, reading my medical books alongside Leviticus was a remarkable experience for me. The description of leprosy and the advice on quarantine was 2,000 years ahead of its time when Hansen (1873) first described it… Thank you for drawing my attention to this brilliant example of the wisdom of the Torah!

The Talmud states that - מצורע חשוב כמת – 'one afflicted with *tzara'at* is accounted as dead,' but, as leprosy was not, in fact, a life-threatening condition, it must be assumed that it was to the imposed isolation in leper colonies, divorced from normal life and the joys of human contact and family interaction, to which their comment refers. There must also have been many variaties of leprous skin eruptions, and the term *tzara'at* should probably be viewed as the generic term. What we may conclude is that, for the Torah to have devoted two sidrot to it, it must have been not only a fairly common condition but also one that was perceived – rightly or wrongly – as highly contagious.

It should, not surprise us that the Torah took such precautions, given that, in the realms of both personal life and diet, purity and impurity, healthy and contaminated, were paramount considerations. Hence, to avoid any potential transmission of disease, the Israelites were given the strict instruction to ensure that their camp 'shall remain pure' (Deut. 23:15) – that is, clean and healthy. Significantly, the latter verse is preceded by the instruction that everyone shall be in possession of a spade for the specific purpose of burying deeply into the ground any human excrement. The prohibition of consuming blood is, of course, a classical exemplification.

Perplexingly, we are not even sure of the precise etymology of the core term, *tzara'at*, with lexicons relating its three-letter root to its occurrence in other Semitic languages in the sense of 'to throw down low; prostrate or humble oneself.'' We may speculate that its use in our sidrah's context denotes the deep penetration of the bacteria into the skin.

But it goes much further, for some of our most illustrious commentators raised issues with its identification as a purely medical condition, to the extent that Maimonides, making specific reference to its mystifying spread to houses and fabrics, states that science cannot account for that in any way, 'since it defies – *minhago shel olam* – the natural order!' (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot tum'at tzara'at* 16:10). This view was also articulated by Nachmanides (See *Peirush HaRamBaN al HaTorah* on Lev. 13:47) and Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi (Kuzari II, 62).

Interestingly, when Halevi portrays the Khazar king as demanding of the rabbi a rational explanation of the Torah's laws and ritual practices, he asks specifically regarding the matter of *tzara'at*. Halevi's response articulates the impossibility of providing a logical explanations, since 'the workings of our mind in no way correspond with the divine order.' This philosophical approach – that faith is independent of reason, and that intellectual pursuit cannot serve as the foundation of religious belief - is referred to as 'fideism' (See Ehud Krinis, *Judah Halevi's Fideistic Scepticism in the Kuzari*, ch. 2), and its origin is to be found in the ancient Greek sceptical movement. Krinis actually credits Judah Halevi with having introduced the fideist tendency into Jewish thought (*Op. cit*., p. 21).

Nachmanides makes a brave attempt to explain how, according to the Torah, *tzara'at* could possibly spread to affect both fabric and houses, and his approach seems to be an attempt at a synthesis of both the rationalistic and the fideist approaches. He states:

> *And if there shall be a tzara'at affliction in a garment*… (Lev. 13:47). This does not conform at all to natural law or to anything that we have ever observed. Neither is that the case with plagues attaching to houses! However, to the extent that Israel is whole-hearted with God, the Spirit of God will rest permanently on them to the extent that their bodies, clothes and houses would appear in good state; but if any of them succumbed to sin, their body, clothing and housing would take on an unappealing appearance. That was because [the spirit of] God had departed from it. This is why the verse states, ***And I shall place*** *the plague of tzara'at upon a house in the land of your possession* (Lev 14:34) – for it is a divinely-directed plague.

One thinks instinctively of the way Moses' face shone with a unique radiance, suffused and sustained by the divine light, spirit and grace, on his return from receiving the Ten Commandments. Even then, however, its effect did not extend to any physical object around him. So, it remains difficult to support Nachmanides' analogy and imagine that the state of 'whole-heartedness with God' would, of itself, be sufficient to effect such a comprehensive and dramatic physical transformation, both positively and negatively.

Maimonides, the great rationalist, was also baffled by our *tzara'at* issue, and found himself with no alternative but to fall back on the standard rabbinic perception that this particular plague is to be attributed to the moral, rather than natural, order, and that it was a heaven-sent punishment for the sin of slander and tale-bearing. This notion was inspired by the fact that, when Miriam drew Aaron into an unworthy and critical denunciation of their brother, Moses, for 'having married a Cushite woman', she was immediately struck down with the plague of *tzara'at* (Nu. 12:1-16). The sages found confirmation of this cause and effect association through their understanding of the word *metzora* ('victim of *tzara'at*') as an acronym for ***m**o**tz**i' shem **ra***, 'one who speaks slanderously'.

Leaving aside this 'popular etymology,' if *tzara'at* is indeed a generic term, to include various serious and infectious skin conditions and varieties of leprosy, then it might also refer to moulds, a term by which some translators render *tzara'at.* Apparently one such highly toxic mould (*Stachybotrys sp.*) has been discovered, and – wait for it – it also contaminates fabrics and buildings!

Shabbat shalom,

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