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YOU HAVE LEPROSY

The Torah portion *Thazrya* (Leviticus 12:1-13:59) deals with the subject of ritual purity and impurity, a very difficult spiritual concept for our modern minds to fully comprehend. Following the opening verses concerning the birth of a baby boy or girl and the mother's subsequent period of purification, which concludes with the bringing of an offering to the Temple, the Torah focuses exclusively on the even more obscure issue of *tzara'at*, a particular type of affliction that causes the appearance of lesions upon one's flesh, discoloration in one's garments, or a mold-like discoloration of the stones of one's house. What are we to make of this?

That *tzara'at* was a psychosomatic or spiritual-somatic ailment is made clear by the Torah's assigning of the *kohanim* (priests), rather than a physician, to both diagnose and prescribe the ritual cure for the outbreak of the malady. The cure involved confession, repentance, immersion in pure, *mayim chayim* ("living waters"), and the bringing of an offering to the Temple once the symptoms had disappeared, after which the individual was again permitted to reenter fellowship with the community in a state of purity.

While certain aspects of scriptural purity are still relevant to a modern believer's lifestyle, the majority of the *tzara'at* commandments are not currently physically applicable because the Temple is not standing. Naturally, being deprived of the actual physical application of these laws of purity for two thousand years has made them much more foreign to our modern sensibilities and much more difficult to grasp intellectually and spiritually.

So, what does the Torah mean by the terms *taharah* (purity) and *tum'ah* (impurity)? Note that Torah never employs the equivalent of our modern qualifier "ritual" in discussing purity. The modern use of the word "ritual" in this context is merely an admission of a lack of true understanding. With a true Torah mindset, *taharah* and *tum'ah* are two spiritual but very real and necessary realities unto themselves.

To put it simply, to be *tahor* (in a state of *taharah*) is to be rightly connected to the life-giving force of the Creator. To be *ta'mei* (in a state of *tum'ah*) is to be defiled and disconnected from Elohim's life-giving energy. The Temple in Jerusalem is the place on earth that YHWH has decreed to be of the highest level of purity. It is there where Elohim's Presence, known as *Shekanyah*, resides. It is the physical nexus between this world and the heavens, between YHWH and His people. That is why no one can physically enter the inner Temple courtyards unless they have repented and have been sprinkled by the waters of the ashes of the red heifer, which render them cleansed of any impurity contracted through contact with death.

It is commonly believed that the plague of *tzara'at*, in scripture, is the same as modern-day leprosy and known as Hansen's disease. It is not. There are many differences. Hansen's disease is a wasting disease that eats away at flesh. *Tzara'at* is somewhat more topical. Also, Hansen's disease only affects humans, whereas *tzara'at* can also affect fabrics, hides, and even dwellings. These days, *tzara'at*, as a physical malady, is only found in the pages of scripture, and it is no longer known to be extant in the world. The ancient Jewish sages speculate that this is because YHWH has, in His mercy, suspended the physical effects of this malady until such time that the Temple is once again rebuilt and functioning: with no Temple, there can be no inspection of an infected person by a *kohein* (priest) and, hence, no return to the community for those cured of the disease. This would be a very harsh and, for now, irreparable punishment. So, it is thought that, for a time, YHWH has temporarily suspended the disease from the world. It is easy to believe this is true, for there is not a trace of the disease left anywhere on our planet, even though it was once widespread, highly contagious, and incurable.

However, while the physical effects of *tzara'at* may have been temporarily suspended, its essential cause, *Lashon Hara* (Evil Speech), is not.

Lashon Hara is speaking negatively of others and being careless, insensitive, and hurtful in how we speak of our fellows, either to their faces or behind their backs, regardless of whether such speech is true or not. To speak ill of someone, the Torah tells us, is a form of murder by diction – character assassination. In Temple times, the speaker of *Lashon Hara* would immediately come down with a case of *tzara'at*. His use of evil speech would be exposed, and, shameful as that was, he or she would be afforded a path back to purity and rehabilitation. Today, it is much easier to get away with speaking ill of others, as there is no immediate outward penalty for it. However, with a proper understanding of the scriptural precepts of *Shemirath Halashon* (Guarding the Tongue), this archaic, ancient, and physically extinct affliction known as *tzara'at* can seem much less obscure and dubious. In fact, it should hopefully become obvious and horrendous before our eyes. With Spirit-led learning and application of its precepts, the practice of *Shemirath Halashon* should make apparent the power of language, the need to keep our sharp tongues sheathed, and to henceforth speak only life-affirming words of positivity, blessing, learning, and loveliness whenever possible.

Consider these examples from scripture:

In *Parshath Sh'moth* (Exodus 1:1-6:1), Moshe spoke evil of the people of Yisrael by telling YHWH:

“But behold, they will not believe me nor hearken unto my voice, for they will say, ‘YHWH hath not appeared unto thee.’”

In response, YHWH told Moshe:

“Put now thy hand into thy bosom.”

Then, when Moshe took his hand back out,

“Behold, his hand was leprous, as white as snow.”

Again, in *Parshath Beha'alotka* (Numbers 8:1-12:16), Miriam spoke out against Moshe's choice of a *Kushi* (African) woman for a wife. As punishment, YHWH reproved her on Moshe's behalf:

“Behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow.”

She was then:

“shut up without the camp for seven days.”

In this and several other instances in scripture, the cause of *tzara'at* was always *Lashon Hara* against one's fellow.

This terrible sin is rampant in the world now, among the people of YHWH. And, while the physical blemishes caused by it are no longer evident at this time, it still undoubtably leaves a horrible spiritual blemish behind it with every foul word spoken. Even worse than the physical and spiritual blemishes incurred by *Lashon Hara* is the judgment upon a person who is convicted of it:

“He shall dwell alone. Outside the community is his dwelling.”

This is similar to the sentence of *karet* (to be “cut off”), and there can be no punishment that is ultimately worse than such excision from the community. *Karet* is a complete and indefinite exclusion of one from the people of Yisrael. The reason for such harsh judgment is because of the seriousness of the crime and its effects. *Lashon Hara* ruins or can even kill another person. In scripture, it is equated with murder. It spreads contagiously like a disease, and the only remedy for it is to put those who are unrepentantly infected with it “out of the camp.”

Consider this: if the people who constitute the greater *Commonwealth of Yisrael* are the only people included in both the Old and New covenants and therefore eligible for everlasting life in the kingdom of YHWH, and if the punishment for *Lashon Hara* is *tzara'at* and excision from the community of Yisrael, then what is it worth to you to learn how to remove this sin from your life? This is one of the most abominable transgressions one can commit against another person, and so it is absolutely vital that you do. But if you don't believe my words and reasoning on this subject, then consider instead the many words of Shaul of Tarsus and the rest of Yehoshua's *talmidim* (taught ones/disciples) on the subject of sins of the tongue. Go read and see for

yourself how many times and in how many ways they speak out against improper use of the tongue and its terrible effects. Read and see how over and over they warned of and denounced this vile and wicked practice – this *disease*.

Consider also that Yehoshua himself exhorted his followers to “*love thy neighbor as thyself*” and said this was the second greatest command in all of Torah. *Lashon Hara* is an act of pure hate, not of love. Think: each time you gossip or speak evil words about your fellow, the command of YHWH according to the Torah is that you should cover your mouth as a leper and follow those words with a cry of “*Tamei! Tamei!*” (“Unclean! Unclean!”), and at that moment, that is exactly how you look in His eyes.