

SOCIAL SINS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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The *parashat hashavua* (Torah portion of the week) Metzora deals with “leprosy” (Leviticus 14:1-32)—which invariably prompts several questions: Who were the “lepers”? What made them so? And how were they to be treated?

Our Torah reading begins: “And God spoke to Moses, saying: This is the teaching of the *metzora* [“leper”] on the day of his becoming pure; he shall be brought to the priest.” (Leviticus 14:1-2) When the priest has confirmed that the individual is “healed” (נרפא), he is to bring two living birds, pieces of cedar wood and scarlet wool, and hyssop, not as offerings, but for the ritual of purification. (Leviticus 14:4) After purification, the *metzora* is to wash his clothes, shave off all his body hair, and bathe in water. Then he may re-enter the camp, although he must remain outside of his own tent for seven days. (Leviticus 14:8) It is not until oil is poured on his head and the priest makes offerings that he is confirmed in the belief that his physical health depends on his moral and spiritual health, and that he may enter the Sanctuary again. (Leviticus 14: 18-20)

It’s clear the so-called lepers were not suffering from what we now know as Hansen’s disease. Whereas bacterial leprosy is a chronic communicable disease, the Torah’s *negah*—the “plague” suffered by the *metzora*, from the root נ-ג-ע, literally to be touched, in this instance by God—was understood *not* to be communicable. That fact is confirmed by the practice of postponing examination of suspicious *negah* symptoms in the case of a newly married bridegroom and during Yomim Tovim (religious holy days) and Shabbat. Similarly, if a *metzora* passed through a house, he made everything *tamei* (ritually impure—טמא) that was under the same roof at the time, regardless of physical proximity or actual contact. (Yevamot 103b) And in the case of a *metzora*’s garment, it would only be declared *tamei* if the symptoms were absolutely certain, but if they were not perfectly clear it would be declared *tahor* (ritually pure—טהור). (Nazir 65b)

Obviously, these practices would not make sense if the “disease” had been considered to be communicable; in fact, they would have been egregiously irresponsible. And, as we might well expect, since the practices were directed at ritual (i.e., spiritual) impurity, they did *not* apply to non-Jews. In contrast, the incurable Egyptian variety of actual

leprosy, *shachin mitzrayim* (שחין מצרים), would *not* cause ritual impurity (טומאה), except in cases in which the body was completely covered by the *negah* symptoms. So the *negah* was not a plague in the usual sense, but touched only the afflicted individual, and certainly it was not physically debilitating or life-threatening.

Under the circumstances associated with the *negah*, it would be less confusing if we did not refer to the individual afflicted as a “leper” or *metzora*, but as a *menugah* (מנוגע)—one who has been “touched.”

How, we might ask ourselves, was the priest to know the difference between communicable leprosy and the *negah*?

It’s reasonable to assume that the priest was sufficiently trained and experienced to know the difference between the symptoms of the two maladies, one medical and the other spiritual. Moreover, the priest would know directly or indirectly of the particular causes of the *negah* for any individual, having been informed of the offending misbehavior and symptoms by the sufferer himself or someone else who brought him to the priest.

What does the tradition understand about the source of these symptoms?

The cause was believed to be one’s *social* sins, which presumably had “displeased” God. And it has been noted that the word *metzora* (מצורע) is an acronym for two others words, *motzi* (מוציא) and *ra* (רע)—meaning one who emits or brings up evil (from his mouth). (Arachin 15b)

What kind of social sins?

Lashon hara (literally, evil tongue) or gossip is at the top of the list. Then there’s perjury, robbery, bloodshed, etc. Many of the specified sins—the list encompasses haughty pride, spreading lies, fomenting quarrels, and sexual immorality—undermine righteousness and justice in everyday social life, but given their characteristics they are not remediable by law enforcement, judicial, and legislative initiatives. (The Talmud lists examples in Berachot 5b and Arachin 16b, and more may be found in Proverbs 6:12-19.)

Similarly, in the case of a plague on a residential dwelling (נגע בבית) in Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel), which reflects the social misbehavior of the inhabitant, condemned as a sin is the attitude and resulting behavior that are characterized by the expression, “What’s mine is mine, what’s yours is

yours” (שלי שלי שלך שלך)—in effect, acting with unkind selfishness towards one’s neighbor, which reflects the archetypal immorality that condemned Sodom to destruction. And included on this list of social sins is the not uncommon failure to recognize that the right to pursue *tzedek* or justice must be balanced by *chesed* or kindness.

This variety of *tuma’ah* (טומאה) or ritual impurity, as it is understood in Jewish tradition, doesn’t originate in a bodily condition, but in immoral social behavior. The prototype is Miriam’s *lashon hara* against her own brother, Moses, and its consequences for her. (Numbers 12:1-16 and Deuteronomy 24:9) So, not surprisingly, the process of purification isn’t related to health or sanitary measures per se.

The tradition teaches us that these symptoms are God’s means of educating us about the gravity of our social sins by making us wear visible signs of them in public. Thus in this understanding the symptoms are not to be imagined as mystical or magical in any way, but simply a reminder and, hopefully, a deterrent to social misconduct and wrongdoing.

Withal, we may ask ourselves, is it possible that the Creator created humankind so that when we impose punishing emotional, psychological, or spiritual pressures on *ourselves* through our unjust treatment of others, one of the relatively common consequences for us is skin affliction?

Needless to say, such understandings initially seem to be at odds with modern science. To better understand them, however, it’s helpful to recognize that in the ancient world the misbehaviors that entailed the misnamed “plague of leprosy” (נגע צרעת) were understood to have grave consequences for others—and, consequently, for oneself as well.

This is not a far reach for contemporary psychosomatic medicine. We know from research and clinical data that stress and other psycho-emotional variables are associated with the outbreak and intensity of certain skin conditions. Particular types of stress can also influence the immune system, affecting the skin’s capacity to heal. And everyone, at some time, has had the experience of blushing from embarrassment or shame, the most common confirmation that our skin can reflect our thoughts and feelings. According to Dr. Ted A. Grossbart, a clinical psychologist and psychodermatologist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, patients with a skin condition often have a related psychological problem that can influence how they respond to medical treatment.

Regardless of what we finally conclude about the meaning of *negah tzera’at* (נגע צרעת) symptoms, we’re left questioning what’s to be done with

social miscreants who, for the most part, fall below the radar of criminal justice and social legislation.

In ancient Israel, once the symptoms had been confirmed by the *kohen* (priest), the *menugah* was sequestered, isolated from the social life of the community. The process of *hesgeir* (הסגיר), literally to close up or confine, served as a time of enforced introspection and self-appraisal. It also had the objective of encouraging self-improvement through reflection. But the ultimate goal was to enable the *menugah’s* re-entry into the community and successful re-integration into moral social life.

What were the conditions that had to be satisfied to achieve the right of re-entry?

First, there was a purification ritual by which one was committed to controlling his physical urges by exercising his moral free will. As we’ve said, all of his body hair, which symbolized isolation from and indifference to the external social world, was cut off—thereafter he no longer had the physical mark of living a life of insulated selfishness. Even though he became *tahor* (טהור) or ritually pure after bathing at the end of seven days, as already noted he was permitted only to re-enter the camp, but not his own tent. He was thus reminded of the cost of denying to others the peace of their homes, particularly if his *lashon hara* had caused the separation of others, disturbing their peace.

On the eighth day he made specified offerings, was reborn as a Jew by virtue of his understanding of and commitment to the welfare of others, and to living out God’s will as revealed in the Torah. His two offerings, the *chatat* (sin—חטאת) and the *olah* (elevating—עולה), cemented the *menugah’s* commitment to give up his past selfish life and in the future strive upwards to the ideals represented by the Altar, which was serviced by the priests as a kind of moral instruction guide to the people. The overall understanding, as taught to us by Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), was that “. . . he must give himself up to live an ordinary life in a priestly manner in his ‘mind’, his ‘deeds’, and his ‘efforts’ . . .” (Commentary on Leviticus 14:14)

What meaning and relevance to contemporary life does the *menugah*, including the definition and treatment of him as one who has committed social sins, have for us potentially, regardless of whether or not we accept or believe all the particulars of the tradition?

- That our physical health is dependent on our spiritual and moral health—hardly a surprise in the light of modern knowledge.
- That social justice rests on a foundation of moral spirituality—that is, without the disciplining of our animal nature for higher, godly

purposes, we have little or no foundation for establishing and sustaining social justice.

- That a society in which social justice is valued and pursued must have means of accountability, apart from formal law enforcement and judicial administration, to ensure just outcomes in the day-to-day lives of the people.

And, arguably, the evidence supporting these conclusions may be found in the pandemic moral spiritual breakdown of our own society, the lack of any compelling cultural or social restraints to contain and reverse it, and the resulting massive miscarriages of justice, which are not remedied by police, prosecutors, courts, and legislatures.

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