

Parashah Eighty-Three

Leviticus 12:1–13:28; Isaiah 66:7–13; Jude 1:17–23

notes by Tim Hegg

The Laws of Skin Disease

One of the unfortunate results of translation has been the overwhelming confusion on the topic of “leprosy.” Driven, perhaps, by the need to find a metaphorical connection between leprosy and sin in general, the Christian church has followed the ninth century Arab physician John of Damascus who referred to leprosy by the Greek *lepra* and his mistake persists until today.

The Hebrew term employed throughout our Torah section is תַּרְעָתָהּ, *tzara‘at*. The Lxx regularly translates it with λέπρα, *lepra*, not with the Greek word that identifies what we know as leprosy (Hansen’s disease, ἀλφός, *alphos*). Indeed, when the Apostolic writings refer to “leprosy,” the Greek word is always *lepra*, which was (until the 9th century) described as a “skin disease which looks like scales.” Milgrom (*Anchor Bible Comm.*, p. 816) asserts that the disease known today as leprosy (Hansen’s disease) did not exist in the Ancient Near East until it was brought there from India by the armies of Alexander the Great. So unfortunately when we read “leprosy” in our English Bibles, we should most likely understand it rather to mean “psoriasis” or “fungal infection.”

Hippocrates (5th century BCE) uses *lepra* as a generic term for multiple skin diseases. His descriptions correspond, primarily, to psoriasis and fungal infections. Others, such as Galen (2nd century CE), Oribasius (4th century CE) and Paulus of Aegina (7th century CE) conform to the Hippocratic diagnosis (cf. Milgrom, p. 816-17).

But to identify תַּרְעָתָהּ is also difficult. Modern medicine cannot match the descriptions in our portion with any known diseases of modern times, primarily because skin disorders known today cannot be identified or quarantined in the short period of time prescribed in Leviticus (7 days, 2 weeks, etc.). Furthermore, the skin disorders which might fit are never found on woven material, leather, or other non-living substances. Many have concluded that the diseases described here were either peculiar to the ancient world, or have grown into strains which have different properties. Perhaps the Hebrew term simply describes anything that appears as a growth, including mold or mildew on cloth, leather, and walls.

What is more, the skin diseases referred to by the Hebrew תַּרְעָתָהּ *tzara‘at* do not seem to be necessarily contagious (though they could be). Na’aman led his army, returned to his family, and even entered the temple of his god. Surely had he been an Israelite he would have been banished like Miriam (Num 12:14-16), the four outcasts (2 Kgs 7:3-10), and Uzziah (2Kgs 15:5). But this may be a result of ritual impurity, not a sense of a contaminating disease. Indeed, furniture taken out of the house before the priest arrives to inspect it cannot be declared impure (14:36). What is more, a person entirely covered with *tzara‘at* is considered clean, not contaminated (13:12ff)! If quarantine was prescribed because the disease was considered so contagious, one would think the person entirely engulfed with the disease would be most surely separated!

The Sages likewise fail to treat תַּרְעָתָהּ as contagious since they do not consider the laws pertaining to it applicable to non-Jews and their homes in the Land (m.Neg. 3:1) nor to any house outside of the Land (m.Neg 12:1). Had they considered it contagious they would have most likely quarantined someone who manifested the disease, regardless of whether they were Jew or non-Jew.

So it is important that we not try to draw analogies between what this passage describes and the

characteristics of sin so often associated with the picture of leprosy. Whether or not the disease we are accustomed to calling leprosy (where the extremities of the body are eaten away) ever actually existed in the Ancient Near East, it seems highly unlikely that what is described in our passage is, in fact, “leprosy” as we have come to know it.

What lessons are we to learn, then, from this passage of detailed laws relating to birth (ch. 12) and skin disease (ch. 13)?

First, we may relate the order of these sections to the creation account. Animals were created before mankind, and so rules relating to animal impurities (ch. 11) precede the rules of human impurities (chs. 12-13). It may further be that the order of impurities related to humans follows the length of time one is impure, beginning with the longest and proceeding to the shortest: birth (40 - 80 days), scale disease (8 days), discharges of the male (8 days, 1 day), discharges of the female (7 days, 8 days). Also curious is the fact that the instructions and laws regarding impurity by birth are given to Moses with Aaron apparently absent. Yet, the instructions regarding skin diseases are once again given to both Moses and Aaron.

Impurity through Birth

Our opening chapter (12) gives us the laws relating to impurities contracted by a woman through the process of giving birth. V. 2 speaks of a woman who has “conceived” and birthed a male child. The Hebrew translated “conceived” is תִּזְרֶינָהּ, the hifil of זָרַע, “to sow seed.” The hifil, in this case, may indicate the completion of an action (cf. Milgrom, p. 743) and be translated “when a woman comes to term and delivers.”

A woman is ritually impure for 7 days (on the same level as if she were a *niddah*, [menstruate]) for a male, and 14 days for a female. After the initial period of uncleanness, the new mother remains separated (from entering *sanctum*) for 33 days (male child) or 66 days (female child) and then she is clean. Nothing is said about her need for bathing (*mikveh*) at the end of the prescribed period, but the Sages, on the basis of *kal v'chomer* (light and heavy) argue that if a man who is unclean for only 1 day as a result of a discharge must bathe, surely one who is unclean for 7 or 14 days would also need to end that period of uncleanness with the *mikveh*.

Is the child also unclean through contact with the mother? Nothing is said, nor is a period of purification for the child prescribed. Some have suggested that the 8th day ritual of circumcision moves the male child from the status of unclean to clean, but the text itself makes no hint of such a thing. Indeed, if such were the case, what is to be done for the female child? It appears, then, that the new born is not considered ritually unclean.

A number of obvious questions can be raised from chapter 12. First, why is a woman rendered ritually unclean by the event of child-bearing? Does not the Torah emphasize the value of children, that they are God’s gift and blessing? And secondly, why a difference in length of purification time for a male as over against a female?

First, that the flow of blood which follows birth was viewed as a kind of “death,” similar to shedding of blood or the “little death” of menstruation seems clear. Vv. 4 and 5 both include the phrase “blood of her purification.” Thus, like contact with a corpse or menstruate, the flow of blood relates to death, and death always renders unclean.

As to the difference in the length of time for being unclean, it is entirely wrong to make the assumption that a longer period of uncleanness indicates an inferior status (as though a female has only half the value of a male). In fact, the opposite may be true. Consider this passage from the

Mishnah (m. *Yad*. 4:6):

The Sadducees say, we cry out against you, O you Pharisees, for you say, “the Holy Scriptures render the hands impure,” and “the writings of Hamiram (Homer?) do not render the hands impure.” R. Yohanan B. Zakkai said, Have we naught against the Pharisees save this!—For lo, they say, “the bones of an ass are pure, and the bones of Yohanan the high priest are impure.” They said to him, As is our love for them, so is their impurity—that no man make spoons of the bones of his father or mother. He said to them, Even so the Holy Scriptures: As is our love for them, so is their impurity; [whereas] the writings of Hamiram which are held in no account do not render the hands impure.

Thus, impurity may result from that which is held in highest esteem. Since the female child will presumably become a mother and therefore bring forth life through childbirth, she is considered worthy of a higher level of sanctity.

We may also speculate that, as ritual impurity usually finds some connection to the issue of death, so the female child is viewed as one who will have a monthly flow of blood, and who therefore is more closely tied to the ebb and flow of life and death. She will, in the course of time, also give birth to children, and thus in a mysterious way is tied not only with the giving of life, but also with the death that passes from generation to generation (cf. Romans 5:12f).

Such considerations regarding child birth and the status of the mother bring to mind the statement of Paul that the woman would be “saved in child-bearing” (1 Ti 2:15). Though Chavah (Eve) was used by Satan as a means of introducing sin into our world, her God-given ability to bear children would, in one way, prove her great value. Yet as Paul elsewhere teaches, children enter this world as sinners, having, as it were, the mark of death upon them. But for the grace of God, all would be doomed to eternal death. Thus, birth, with all of its attended joys and hopes, faces the stark reality that yet another person has entered upon the landscape of our world who has, in and of himself, only a bent to sin (cf. Rm 3:10-18). We are, in the end, left up to God’s loving grace and mercy to redeem the sinful soul and infuse faith in the Messiah; to give life where death prevails.

Paul was not the only one who held this view (though it was the minority view) on whether or not children were born sinners. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus apparently taught the same, being remembered in the Talmud for Ecc 7:20, a text he often taught to his disciples (cf. b. *Sanhedrin* 101a), which reads, “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and who never sins.” From this his disciples derived that all were sinners from their birth.

At first, it may seem less than kind to mention that a newborn enters life as a sinner. After all, the joy of a newborn should not be diminished! Yet in being mindful of the eternal nature of the soul and the sanctity of the precious life entrusted into the hands of parents, we are cast once again upon God’s mercy and grace. While we must diligently give ourselves to nurture and raise our children to know God, we must likewise recognize our utter dependence upon God and His mercies to bring them to Himself by granting them the gift of faith.

The new mother, after the period of time prescribed, brings an offering to the priest which is the same as the offering for the Nazirite (cf. Num 6:8-11). The burnt offering was an act of worship, symbolizing one’s entire devotion to HaShem. The sin offering dealt with the need of the mother to acknowledge the fallen world in which she lives, and to call upon God for cleansing and restoration of relationship with Him, Who is the source of life and not death. It also combined the idea of death and sin. In our fallen world we may come under the influence or feel the consequences of sin, even though it may not be of our own doing. We are therefore doubly indicted: not only

are we sinners in and of ourselves, but we are part of a race which is likewise sinful. We have no hope apart from God's atoning grace. But where sin abounds, God's grace abounds even more! All of our hopes, for ourselves and for our children, ultimately rest in the infinite realm of His goodness.

Laws pertaining to Skin Disease

Once again, like the flow of blood at birth (and especially the placenta) that reminds one of shedding of blood and thus symbolic of death, so skin diseases most likely produce impurity because they are viewed as bringing about death to certain parts of the body. The one who bears *tzara'at* is treated much like one who has been contaminated by a corpse. Indeed, Aaron prays on behalf of Miriam who contracted *tzara'at*, "Let her not be like a corpse" (Num 12:12). Similarly, unlike other impurities, both corpse and *tzara'at* impurities can be contracted by overhang, i.e., by being under the same roof (whereas other impurities are contracted only through actual touch). This is why the one who is diagnosed with *tzara'at* must "dwell apart" (13:46). He carries with him, as it were, death in or on his skin. Additionally, the purification rites of the corpse-contaminated person and the one afflicted with *tzara'at* are similar: both require shedding of animal blood that has come in contact with cedar, hyssop, and scarlet thread and been diluted in fresh water (cf. Lev 14:4-7; Num 19:1-13). Note as well Job 18:13, which apparently describes Job's skin disorder: "It devours patches of his skin; the first-born of death devours his limbs." Here the skin disease is directly linked to death. We know that Job was smitten with boils (שִׁחִין רַע, Jb 2:7), the same word used in 13:23 of our text, thus included in the broad category of *tzara'at*.

So all forms of *tzara'at* are considered as putting to death the area of the body affected—the living carry death with them when they come under this kind of disease.

If we are looking for spiritual lessons to derive from this *parashah*, here is at least one of them: God is the God of life, not of death, and therefore any admixture of the two cannot be tolerated. Once again, the lessons of life learned from the everyday *mitzvot* primarily reveal to us the nature or character of our God. Mankind is plunged into death from his birth. The moment he is born, death begins its "clock," ticking its way to the grave. What a morbid thought! How entirely insensitive to cloud the joy and glory of birth and life with the reminder that death is at hand. In fact, had God not taught us this reality, the overwhelming joy of a new infant would no doubt cause us never to consider the eternal aspects attached to that new life. Life in this world is but a brief moment, but life in the world to come is forever. Yet the death we carry is a death which reaches much further than this life—it extends to the world to come. Will the mortal put on immortality? Will the conveyor of death live forever?

Here is one question God asks us to ponder as we study this portion today—how can I have life if indeed I am destined to die—how can I turn my direction from death to life? The "fix" for this dilemma is clearly outside of mankind—it must come from the God of life. And if we are simply to ask what means God has given for bringing someone out of death to life, the required sacrifice gives us the answer: God will give life to those for whom atonement is made by the blood of the innocent, clean sacrifice (sin offering), and who therefore are enabled to offer worship to HaShem as one who no longer mingles death with life (the burnt offering). Thus God promised to Chavah that He would provide from her own offspring One who would overcome the evil—the death—introduced by the serpent Satan. He would bless all of the nations of the earth through the seed of

Abraham. Those destined to die could live through the sacrifice of the Innocent One, the Messiah.

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of G-d, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. Is 53:4-5

Indeed, the Sages teach us that one of the names of Messiah would be “the leprous one,” that is, the one who carries our *tzara ‘at*.

Members of the house of R. Yannai say, “His name is Yinnon, for it is written, ‘His name shall endure forever, before the sun was, his name is Yinnon’ (Ps 72:17). Members of the house of R. Haninah said, “It is Haninah, as it is said, ‘Where I will not give you Yaninah’ (Jer 16:13). Others say, “His name is Menahem, son of Hezekiah, for it is written, ‘Because Menahem that would relieve my soul, is far’ (Lam. 1:16) Rabbis said, “His name is ‘the leper of the school house,’ as it is written, ‘Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we did esteem him a leper, smitten of God and afflicted.’ (Is 53:4) [b.Sanhedrin 98b]

Indeed, He is the sacrifice, pure and holy, Who has taken our *tzara ‘at*, our death upon Himself, and rendered us clean, pure, uncontaminated in the sight of HaShem. All who receive Him as Master are granted life—life for this world, and life for the world to come. Paul speaks to this often. Consider Col 1:13:

“For He delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

If we consider the two themes of our passage, birth and sickness which is connected to death, we may contemplate yet again how God’s ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts. For the only remedy for death is death, and it is out of death that life comes. Yeshua, through death, has rendered death powerless and given to all who receive Him, life forever. He has transferred us from the domain of darkness (death) into the domain of life, the realm of light, i.e., the Son of HaShem’s love.

Here, then, we have the basis for the metaphorical language of being “born again.” Our natural birth brings us into life mixed with death, a death which will, inevitably overcome life: “it is appointed for man to die, and afterward comes the judgment” (Heb 9:27). Our being born again ushers us into a life that cannot be mixed with death—that is in every way opposed to death, and will inevitably overcome death, for this second birth procures eternal life. Yet this second birth is available only to those who, by faith, die to themselves and live unto God. Note John 12:24 — “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Thus, like the nation of Israel spoken of in our Haftarah passage, only God can birth a nation, and only God can bring about the miracle of life, and the second birth which overcomes death. Only God is the source of true life—all other “sources” are counterfeit. Only God is able to bring us to Himself, and infuse us with His life.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Yeshua HaMashiach Adoneinu, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24–25)