



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Tazria 5768

By Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels

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In this week's *parshah*, *Tazria*, we read about the disease *tza'ra'at*, commonly translated as leprosy. What is peculiar about this skin disease is that it not only afflicts humans but also clothing¹ and houses.² It is not only people's bodies that are struck with *tza'ra'at*, but also their possessions. What is the significance of this peculiar feature of *tza'ra'at* and what does it tell us about our society?

The rabbis understood *tza'ra'at* to be a punishment from God for various transgressions, including, most famously, wicked speech (*lashon ha-ra*), but also pride, deceit, false witness, bloodshed, wicked thoughts, pretending to have knowledge of Torah, causing discord, miserliness, announcing but not giving charitable donations, defamation of character, idol worship, blasphemy and robbing the public.³ Together these many sins point to a society that is falling apart: one filled with selfishness, deceit, disharmony and violence. Indeed, the theme of deceit, predominant in the above list of evils, strikes at the very core of what is essential for a society to function—namely our trust in our fellow citizens, leaders and social institutions.

The Sfat Emet, a Polish Chassidic Rebbe, takes the theme of wicked speech even further, indicating that the plague of *tza'ra'at* results not only from evil things one has said, but also from things one should have said but didn't.⁴ That is, it is not only that acts of evil are being committed, but as importantly, acts of good are being omitted. In particular, it is the failure to protest and oppose evil rampant in society that leads to the plague.

Tza'ra'at strikes beyond the body, then, because its causes and their effects are more than personal. Rather, these sins and crimes are profoundly destructive for the entire society in which they take place. Societies filled with deceit, discord and violence end up suffering from "plagues" that strike houses, clothes and bodies—symbolic representations of shelter, sustenance and health care. An effective and moral society, one that speaks out against injustice, will be a society in which each of these necessities is attainable by all people.

Indeed, the *midrash* makes clear the consequences of social and national destruction in its reading of this *parshah*, where it interprets the story of a house plagued with *tza'ra'at* as referring to the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the people.⁵ The sins of *tza'ra'at*, then, lead not only to personal and societal suffering, but also to national calamity.

Tza'ra'at, or forms of this "plague," exist today. In both the developing world and our own communities, people lack the most basic necessities, not as a result of natural forces but as a result of our failure as local and global citizens to create the social conditions necessary for providing these resources. In our own society, a society of great wealth and abundance, we fail to provide adequate housing and clothing to all, though the resources to do so are plentiful.

¹ Vayikra 13:47

² Vayikra 14:33-57

³ Vayikra Rabbah 16:1, 5; 17:2, 3

⁴ Sfat Emet, Metzora, on Vayikra 14:4

⁵ Vayikra Rabbah 17:7

More strikingly, of course, is that many Americans lack access to adequate health care. In the developing world, the provision of these resources is even more difficult. Yet on a global level, with our help, providing these basic elements of life is not impossible.

Despite the destruction we see in the world, salvation is possible. The *midrash* cited above does not end with exile and destruction. Rather, it concludes by interpreting the explanation of the rebuilding of the infected house (“and they shall take other stones, and put them in the place of those stones”⁶) as referring to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple and the return of the exiles. So too, the Sfat Emet tells us that the reason *tza’ra’at* spreads to our houses and clothes is to indicate to us that not only can they be afflicted, but they can also be sanctified. We can sanctify our houses, clothes and bodies by making sure that shelter, clothing and health care are available to all. We can help create societies that not only lack the destructive values of selfishness, deceit, discord and violence, but that also know when and how to speak the words that need to be spoken, to stand up and take action. Together, then, we can help create a global society of compassion, harmony and truth.



Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels earned a Master’s Degree in Modern Jewish Studies in England at the University of Oxford. He then went on to four years of *yeshiva* study in Israel culminating in rabbinic ordination from R. Daniel Landes at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Jewish Studies specializing in Kabbalah and Hasidism at the University of Chicago, and teaching in a variety of settings in the U.S. and Israel on Judaism and Jewish mysticism. He hopes to integrate his study and practice and to help teach and live Judaism as a spiritual discipline. James can be reached at moshe@uchicago.edu.

⁶ Vayikra 14:42

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