



## **Around the Shabbat Table**

### **Shabbat Tazria - Shabbat Hachodesh 5765 April 2005**

תזריע

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**Shalom!**

#### **Introduction**

Like much of the book of Leviticus, this week's Torah portion, Tazria, discusses purity and impurity. The words *tahor* and *tamei*, which are often translated as "clean" and "unclean", have nothing to do with physical cleanliness, however. When a man or woman, becomes "unclean" it simply means that he or she cannot come in contact with things that are holy. This includes the sanctuary of the Temple and the holy objects within it.

Two kinds of impurity are spoken about in this portion: the impurity of a woman who has just given birth and the impurity of a person, or article of clothing, that has a disease called *tzara'at*.

A woman who has just given birth to a boy is "unclean" for one week. Before she is allowed to enter holy spaces again, she must also complete a purification period of thirty-three days. Both of these waiting periods are twice as long if the woman gives birth to a girl, although the text does not explain why this is so. At the end of the waiting period, a total of forty days after a boy is born and eighty days after a girl is born, the woman re-enters the holy space of the Temple to offer a sacrifice.

This parasha also briefly mentions the ritual of circumcision, which is done for a newborn boy when he is eight days old.

The next two sections of the parasha talk about the disease called *tzara'at*. While we don't know with certainty exactly what *tzara'at* was or what caused it, many rabbis saw the disease as God's punishment for something. *Tzara'at* mostly affected the skin, and could take the form of a rash, scales, an inflammation, a burn, scabs on the face or scalp, or loss of hair.

Anyone who had one of these symptoms went to the *kohen*, the priest, to be examined. The priest isolated the infected person for seven days. If the infection had spread, or changed in some other way, the priest announced that the person had *tzara'at* and was therefore “unclean.”

The text does not mention any treatment or cure for the disease, simply that the person had to be separated from the community until the disease went away. If the infected person had to come in contact with other people, or enter a public place, he or she had to do the following:

His clothes shall be rent, his hair shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he will call out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’

(Leviticus 13:45).

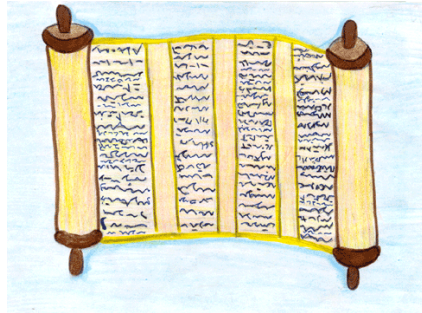
*Tzara'at* did not just affect human beings. Clothes could become infected as well. When a garment had a discoloration, it also had to be brought to the priest to be inspected. It was then washed and isolated for seven days. If it had faded, only the section that was still discolored needed to be torn out of the garment and burned. If the discoloration had not faded or worse, had spread, the entire garment had to be burned.



### **Questions for your Family's Discussion**

1. In what way would a woman really “unclean” after giving birth to a baby? Do you agree or disagree with that characterization? Why would a woman be separated from the community after the birth of a child?
2. The practice of circumcision can be traced all the way back to our ancestor, Abraham. In Genesis, God commands a ninety-nine-year-old Abraham to circumcise himself and his offspring, saying: “Every male among you shall be circumcised . . . and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you” (Genesis 17:10-12). The parasha of Tazria recognizes that boys and girls are different, but only boys are given the covenantal ceremony of *brit milah*, or circumcision. How do we welcome both newborn boys and newborn girls into our community?

3. Many of the rules about *tzara'at* are aimed at preventing the disease from spreading. How do we care for the members of our community when they are sick? When is it appropriate to “isolate” people who are ill and when is it necessary to interact with them?



### **Texts to Wrestle With**

Many commentators explain *tzara'at* as a punishment from G-d for certain behaviors. In Numbers 12, Miriam is infected with *tzara'at* after speaking negatively about her brother, Moses. Some rabbis suggest that *tzara'at* was a punishment for the Israelites who worshipped the Golden Calf. There are, according to the rabbis, thirteen behaviors that resulted in *tzara'at*:

- blasphemy
- unchastity
- murder
- false suspicion
- pride
- illegal appropriation of the rights of others
- slander
- theft
- perjury
- profanation of the Divine Name
- idolatry
- envy
- contempt of the Torah

(Ginsberg, Louis. *Legends of the Jews*. Vol 3, pp. 213)

- Can you think of a reason that these particular wrongdoings were considered so serious that they would result in immediate punishment? Are there similarities between them?

While there are many possible causes of *tzara'at*, the most popular explanation among rabbis was that the disease was a punishment for malicious gossip. Some rabbis even see the word *metzora*, one who is infected with *tzara'at*, as a wordplay of *motzi shem ra*, or slanderer (Plaut, Gunther. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. p. 1734).

1. It is easy to see why murder and theft are crimes that even God would want to punish people for, but why would God punish us for gossip? What harm do we cause by talking about other people? Is *tzara'at* an appropriate punishment?
2. Some rabbis viewed *tzara'at* as a divine punishment for infringing on the rights of others. Later in the parasha, however, we learn that garments can also have *tzara'at*. In the next parasha, we learn that houses can also be infected. How might the clothes we wear, or the houses we live in, infringe upon the rights of others? How can we prevent this from happening?

### **Towards an Action Agenda**

From biblical times, the Jewish people have been concerned with the health of the greater community. While *tzara'at* could not be cured, the Israelites had to take responsibility for preventing the disease from spreading. People who had *tzara'at* were isolated until they recovered; garments that had *tzara'at* were destroyed.

It is our obligation as Jews to join in the healing of others. You can learn more about the Jewish response to current health issues, such as HIV/AIDS, Women's Health, and Health Care at the Religious Action Center website:

#### Religious Action Center

Tay Sachs is a genetic disease that affects the Jewish community. Learn more about prevention of Tay Sachs here:

#### Tay Sachs Information

Yehoshua Ben Sirach, who lived and wrote in the 2nd century B.C.E., offers this praise for a physician:

*Give doctors the honor they deserve, for the Lord gave them their work to do. Their skill came from the Most High, and kings reward them for it. Their*

knowledge gives them a position of importance, and powerful people hold them in high regard.

The Lord created medicines from the earth, and a sensible person will not hesitate to use them . . . He gave medical knowledge to human beings, so that we would praise him for the miracles he performs. The druggist mixes these medicines, and the doctor will use them to cure diseases and ease pain. There is no end to the activities of the Lord, who gives health to the people of the world (Sirach 38: 1-8, Today's English Version).

As we enter this Shabbat, we take note of the recent passing of Pope John Paul II. We invite you to hear the remarks of David Harris of the American Jewish Committee in tribute: [David Harris on the Pope](#) and to read a more complete statement of American Jewish Committee, [AJC Statement](#)



**Shabbat Shalom!**

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to [RavADS@bjeny.org](mailto:RavADS@bjeny.org)

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