



# Shabbat Table Talk Page

## Overview

- **Parashah: Metzora (מִצְרָע, "leper")**
- **Chapters: Leviticus 14:1-15:33**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

## Synopsis

Recall from last week's Torah portion that if someone was diagnosed with *tzara'at*, they were forced to leave the community and live in a state of exile. The afflicted person (called a *metzora*) had to tear his clothes like a mourner, put a shroud over his face (descending to his upper lip) and remain alone. If anyone came near, the person was required to cry out: "Unclean! Stay away! Do not become impure because of me!" While so isolated, the person would have opportunity to perform *teshuvah* (repentance) and to reexamine his relationship with God.

If the one suffering from *tzara'at* eventually was healed, he would first call for the priest to be reexamined. If the priest saw no sign of *tumah* (uncleanness), a second examination was scheduled seven days later, and if it was evident that the person was now free from the disease, the process of *tahora* (purification) would begin.

The purification process symbolized "rebirth" through sacrifice, somewhat similar to the Yom Kippur and Red Heifer rituals. The priest ordered that *one* of two birds should be slaughtered over the earthen vessel filled with fresh spring water, with its blood mixing with the water. The living bird, along with a piece of cedar, and a hyssop branch were then tied together using scarlet thread, and the entire bundle was dipped into the earthen vessel. The blood and water mixture was then sprinkled seven times on the healed *metzora*, and the other bird was then set free.

After this, the *metzora* washed his clothes, shaved off all his hair, and was immersed in a mikveh (ritual pool for cleansing). A further week of separation followed (similar to *niddah*) but on the eighth day the person would offer sacrifices. The blood from the *asham* (guilt) offering was applied to his earlobe, thumb and foot, similar to the blood applied to the priests during their ordination. Oil from a meal offering was sprinkled seven times in the direction of the Sanctuary. In this way the priest "made atonement" for him and he was purified. His life of uncleanness would be over, and he would be like a soul brought back from the dead to newness of life.

The portion concludes with laws regarding *tzara'at* detected in a house (and its purification or demolition, as determined by the priests), and laws regarding "bodily discharges" (*zuvim*) which required purification through immersion in a mikveh and the offering of sacrifices for atonement. "Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my Tabernacle that is in their midst."



## Basic Questions

1. What is “tzara’at”? <sup>1</sup>
2. What were two sure signs of tzara’at in a person? <sup>2</sup>
3. Who was able to diagnose tzara’at? <sup>3</sup>
4. According to the rabbis, tzara’at was caused primarily by evil speech (lashon hara). Why do they come to this conclusion? <sup>4</sup>
5. What happened to a person diagnosed with tzara’at? <sup>5</sup>
6. What is a person seeking purification from tzara’at called? <sup>6</sup>
7. What must a person healed of tzara’at bring to the priest for purification to begin? <sup>7</sup>
8. What was done with the two birds during the purification ritual? <sup>8</sup>
9. What does the *me’taher* do after the bird is sent away? <sup>9</sup>
10. What must be done if someone suspects tzara’at might be in his house? <sup>10</sup>
11. If a priest detects a spot in a house, what is the procedure? <sup>11</sup>
12. How long is the normal period of *niddah* for women? <sup>12</sup>
13. What is a *mikveh*? <sup>13</sup>



<sup>1</sup> A spiritual condition that rendered people or things impure and unclean. A person so afflicted is called a metzora.

<sup>2</sup> If the plague appeared deeper than the skin of the flesh and if there were white hairs in the plague (Lev. 13:3).

<sup>3</sup> Only a priest could diagnose and decide whether the condition was present.

<sup>4</sup> Because Miriam was afflicted with tzara’at after she spoke evil about Moses (Num. 12:1-10).

<sup>5</sup> He was forced to live in a state of exile, to tear his clothes like a mourner, and to shroud his face (descending to his upper lip), and to remain alone. If anyone came near, he was required to cry out: “Unclean! Stay away!”

<sup>6</sup> A *me’taher* (מִטְהַר), “the one cleansing himself,” from *taher* (טָהַר), “to be clean.”

<sup>7</sup> Two “clean” birds, a piece of cedar wood, a scrap of crimson fabric, and some twigs (*ezov*) of hyssop. According to Jewish tradition, birds were selected for sacrifice because they “chirp” all day, like one who engages in gossip.

<sup>8</sup> One was slaughtered over spring water caught in a vessel, and the other was tied to the hyssop bundle and dipped into the vessel and then released.

<sup>9</sup> He shaves off all his hair, washes his clothes, and immerses himself in a mikveh. He then must wait seven more days in separation before being a guilt offering, the blood of which is applied to right ear, thumb, and big toe. Everything in the house must be removed and the priests called to perform an inspection.

<sup>10</sup> The priest closes the house for a week to see if the spot spreads. If it does, the spot may be broken out and the section rebuilt. If the spot returns, the house must be demolished. If the spot disappears, a purification procedure (similar to that of the metzora) is performed on behalf of the house. Applies only to the land of Israel...

<sup>12</sup> Seven days. A menstruant woman is a *niddah*; a woman who has a discharge of blood at a time other than her regular period is a *zavah*. Both the *niddah* and *zavah* are purified through immersion in a mikveh. A man who has a discharge is called a *zav* and likewise must undergo immersion in a mikveh after a period of uncleanness.

<sup>13</sup> A “collection” (of water). A pool used for ritual cleansing comprised of two adjoining pools. Accumulated rainwater is kept in one pool and an adjacent immersion pool is drained and refilled regularly with tap water. In this way, the pool always contains “living water.” Modern-day mikveh pools are equipped with water-purification systems. Immersion in the mikveh represented regaining purity ever since the creation of man. The Midrash says that after being banished from Eden, Adam sat in a river that flowed from the orchard in *teshuvah* (repentance).



## Discussion Topics

1. Tzara'at is associated with the sin of "lashon hara," which is traditionally defined as saying something bad about another person *even if it happens to be true*. In other words, "evil speech" involves spreading evil (even if true) reports, or expressing a negative or critical spirit about others. According to midrash, the first person to get tzara'at was Moses himself. When God told Moses that he wanted to rescue Israel from bondage in Egypt, Moses told God, "they won't believe that You have sent me!" The LORD then told Moses to put his out his hand and it turned white with *tzara'at* -- for speaking evil about the Jews! Later Moses' sister Miriam was afflicted with tzara'at when she criticized her brother's treatment of his spouse (Num. 12).

Yeshua told us that "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34), and further warned us about the unthinking use of our words: "But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall account for in the day of judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, and by you words you shall be condemned" (Matt. 12:36-37). Discuss the phrase, "Death and life are in the tongue" (Prov. 18:21). Since words are the result of our thinking, discuss how negative thinking can create sickness and tsuris in your own life...

2. Lashon hara is regarded such a serious sin because it *desecrates* the image of God in man, which is the use of reason and the ability to speak. The power of speech expresses the image of God more than any other faculty, since it reveals the inner thoughts and intentions of the heart. Words are a result of thoughts and attitudes that give rise to them. Using words to inflict pain therefore perverts the image of God, since God created man to use language to "build up" others in love. This is part of the reason the metzora was regarded as "dead" because of this sin. Discuss the importance of speaking the truth in love....
3. Just as a body can become sick with illness, so can a soul: "I said, 'O LORD, be gracious to me; *heal my soul* (רַפְּאֵה נַפְשִׁי), for I have sinned against you!" (Psalm 41:4). Likewise we understand that fear profoundly affects the way the brain processes images and messages. Fear colors the way we see and hear things. And since the mind and body are intricately interconnected, fear is often the root cause of many physiological problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, clinical depression, and other ailments. Left unchecked, fear can be *deadly*. Discuss the connection between fear, lashon hara, and sickness...
4. A person healed of tzara'at was required to bring a guilt offering (*asham*) – the same sacrifice that was required for robbery, fraud, and other serious crimes. Because of this, the sages liken lashon hara to be a type of violence, since it harms the slanderer, the hearer, and the one who was slandered. Indeed, some of the sages regarded it as form of murder, since the face of the person slandered was reddened by shame. Discuss.
5. Part of the purification ritual for a metzora paralleled the consecration of the priests. Immersion into "living water" is required. Oil and blood were placed on the ear, thumb, and toes, etc. Discuss how the restoration of the impure pictures the idea of a "wounded healer." How do you see Yeshua in this image? Yourself?



6. The purification process for the metzora corresponded with other rituals revealed in the Torah. The sprinkling of the hyssop by the priest recalled the blood of Passover; the offering made of the two birds - one which was sacrificed and the other set free - recalled the scapegoat of the Yom Kippur ritual. The washing of garments, the shaving of all hair, and the immersion in a mikveh recalled the birth of the Jewish people at the Sea of Reeds. The blood of the guilt offering applied to the earlobe, thumb and foot, recalled the dedication of Aaron and his sons as the priests of Israel (Lev. 14:14). In other words, the individual purification process mirrored the purification of the community of Israel, and healing ultimately meant being re-identified as a redeemed child of God. Discuss how the “cleansing of the leper” is a picture of your own salvation given in the Messiah.
7. Throughout the Scriptures, both water and blood are used as purifying agents. Sacrificed blood is applied to the altar to make atonement for sin (Lev. 17:11; Eph. 2:3; Heb. 9:14) and water is used for cleansing from tumah (e.g., Exod. 30:19–20; Lev. 14:51; Num. 19:18; Heb. 10:22). The prophet Ezekiel foretells the time when God will sprinkle “pure water” on ethnic Israel to cleanse them from all their uncleanness (Ezek. 36:25). Water likewise signifies spiritual rebirth. According to Sefer HaChinuch, immersion in water (mikveh) represents that the unclean person is “recreated,” since the world was covered with water during its creation.  
  
Yeshua taught that we need a spiritual rebirth in order to see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3). Discuss how the purification process of the metzora foreshadowed spiritual “rebirth” by water and by the blood (John 3:5; 19:34; Heb. 9:19).
8. For centuries people’s attitudes toward leprosy was formed from the portions of Tazria and Metzora, even though it is clear that tzara’at is not to be equated with Hansen’s Disease. Discuss how misinterpreting the Scriptures often causes suffering in the lives of others.

שַׁבָּת שְׁלֹמֶה

*S h a b b a t S h a l o m !*

### For Next Week:

- Read parashat **Acharei Mot** (i.e., Leviticus 16:1-18:30)
- Read the Haftarah (Ezekiel 22:1-22:19)
- Read the New Testament (Hebrews 9:11-28)





## Addendum: Cleansing of the Leper

Although the priest needed to go “outside the camp” to examine a *metzora* (i.e., “leper”), the person still needed to “be brought” to the priest to meet him there (Lev. 14:2-3). In other words, the afflicted one was required to meet the priest “half-way.” *Hashivenu* (הָשִׁיבֵנוּ): “Return us to You, LORD, and we shall return” (Lam. 5:21). Like the prodigal son who returns home, God waits for us at the “edge” of the camp to meet us half-way...

The case of the *metzora* reveals that God sometimes disciplines his child with “exile” in order to awaken *teshuvah* (repentance) within the heart. God imparted the spiritual disease of *tzara’at* to “remind” us of our sin and need for atonement, and the purification ritual was meant to illustrate our need for spiritual rebirth.... The gracious aim of affliction, then, is to “wake us from our slumbers” in order to reveal the way of life... As C.S. Lewis once said, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

A student once asked his rebbe: “Do we get punished for our sins in this world?” His succinct response was, “Only if we are made fortunate...” Paradoxically, punishment from God may be a blessing in disguise, since there is no worse state in this life than to be untouched by need, suffering and testing; there is nothing more dreadful than to be forgotten or overlooked by God (Rom. 1:28). Being afflicted with “*tzara’at*” is a blessed state, since it reveals the nature of our lethal disease - and leads us back to the “edge of the camp” where God gives us healing....

As I have mentioned before, Jewish tradition links *tzara’at* with the sin of *lashon hara*, suggesting that the word *metzora* itself is a “play” on the Hebrew phrase, *motzi ra*: “one who brings forth [speaks] evil.” *Mavet v’chaim b’yad lashon* - “Death and life and in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18:21). Because we are made in the image and likeness of God, our words matter -- and they wield power. Indeed, the Hebrew word for “word” (דָּבָר) also means “thing.” When we bless others, we are invoking grace and good will to be manifest in the world, but when we curse others, the opposite effect is intended... There is a connection here with the case of the *metzora*, whose fate rested upon a single word spoken by the priest: “unclean” (*tamei*) or “clean” (*tahor*).

There really are no “careless” words. Yeshua said, “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account (ἀποδίδωμι) for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36-37). Every word we utter reaches up to the highest places of heaven and echoes there. The sages say, “my words - not a soul knows.” But the Holy One, blessed be He, says, “I am sending an angel who will stand near you and record every word you say about your neighbor.” Every word we speak is recorded in the “heavenly scrolls” (Rev. 20:12). Therefore David admonishes us, “Who desires life and loves many days that bring forth good? Guard your tongue from evil and keep your lips from using deceptive speech. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:13-14). Notice the connection between our words and our deeds here, which again suggests the connection between “words” and “things” (i.e., *devarim*: דְּבָרִים). It is very sobering to realize that our thoughts are essentially prayers being offered up to God... As David also said (Psalm 35:13): “May what I prayed for happen to me!” (literally, *tefillati al-cheiki tashuv* - “may it return upon my own breast”).



Because the metzora was put into *exile* because of his sinful thinking (i.e., words), so he came back to the “edge of the camp” only with words... This first step back was crucial, as the prophet later said, “Return to the LORD and repent! Say to him: ‘Completely forgive our iniquity; accept our penitential prayer, that we may offer the praise of our lips as sacrificial bulls’” (Hos. 14:2). When we sincerely return to the LORD, He will take care of the problem of our impurity, uncleanness, and sin. That’s the message of the Cross of Yeshua, too. We can add nothing to His finished work but simply accept it as performed on our behalf through faith...

The love of God is so great that He reached out and touched us - becoming a “leper” for us - and even chose to die “in exile” upon the cross to eternally purify us from our sins... In that sense, Yeshua surely meets us more than “half-way,” since He “emptied Himself” (κεναω) of His heavenly glory and power in order to willingly bear our sickness, shame, and even death itself on our behalf... “But [He] made himself nothing (εκενωσεν), taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men; and being found in human form, he brought himself low by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:7-8).

*May His Name forever be praised!*