

Metzora מְצֹרָע Infected One “The Evil Tongue”

Leviticus 14:1-15:33
2 Kings 7:3-20

In *Tazria* last week, I did not discuss the different aspects of leprosy that are detailed. Instead, I decided to focus on what Yeshua did in terms of following the Torah. In *Metzora*, being considered this week, the subject of leprosy is again up for review. So with the gentle prodding of the Ruach (Spirit), let us dig a little deeper into this issue. The instructions we encounter include what a cleansed leper was to do, in order to be restored to the community of Ancient Israel:

“The one to be cleansed shall then wash his clothes and shave off all his hair and bathe in water and be clean. Now afterward, he may enter the camp, but he shall stay outside his tent for seven days. It will be on the seventh day that he shall shave off all his hair: he shall shave his head and his beard and his eyebrows, even all his hair. He shall then wash his clothes and bathe his body in water and be clean” (Leviticus 14:8-9).

Generally, these Torah portions which deal with the various states of being unclean, are considered right before the season of Passover. In this time of cleaning the leaven out of our houses—and hopefully also the sin out of our lives—are there any unseen transgressions that inevitably fly undiscovered below the spiritual radar? Is it possible that the Lord might want you to personally deal with a matter that has a negative influence on your family life, the people at your congregation, or the greater Body of Messiah?

One subject that has been traditionally associated with *Metzora* has been contemplating a spiritual affliction known as *lashon ha'ra* (לְשׁוֹן הָרַע) or “the evil tongue.” The Jewish Rabbis have taught that the more profound issue which is being addressed in either *Tazria* or *Metzora* is not the physical condition of a skin affliction, but instead a spiritual affliction. Baruch A. Levine summarizes,

“Playing on the linguistic similarity of the Hebrew for ‘leper’ (*m'tzora*) and the Hebrew for ‘one who gossips’ (*motzi shem ra*), the sages considered leprosy to be a punishment for the sins of slander and malicious gossip (Lev. R. 16:11). They teach that gossip is like leprosy because it is highly contagious. One infected person can spread a malicious rumor to many others.”¹⁸

Lashon Ha'ra

In the chapters of *Tazria* and *Metzora* we encounter the Hebrew noun *tzara'at* (צָרָעַת) and verb *tzara* (צָרַע),¹⁹ which are difficult to translate into English. The medical term “leprosy” is used in most Bibles. As interpreters have searched for additional meaning of these terms, they inevitably went to the other times where they appear in the Torah,

¹⁸ Baruch A. Levine, “Leviticus,” in David L. Lieber, ed., *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 652.

¹⁹ *BDB*, pp 863, 864.

comparing them to how they are used in this *parashah*. There are two notable incidents considered.

The first time we see leprosy referred to regards the Ancient Israelites' deliverance from Egypt. The subject at hand concerns the results of speaking against someone, questioning one's motives and creating doubt, and/or holding suspicion toward someone:

"Then Moses said, 'What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, "The LORD has not appeared to you"... The LORD furthermore said to him, 'Now put your hand into your bosom.' So he put his hand into his bosom, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous [*tzara*] like snow" (Exodus 4:1, 6).

In the first instance we encounter, Moses questions whether the people of Israel will even believe him and follow his guidance, as the Lord has chosen him to lead them out of Egypt. Moses' reaction is to question Ancient Israel's ability to follow the explicit instructions of the Lord. So, the Lord gives him the sign of having his hand turn leprous. Leprosy, and the ability for it to appear and disappear, would be a sign that a spiritual condition of unbelief was plaguing the Israelites.

The second time we see leprosy referred to, and probably the most influential reference outside of *Tazria-Metzora*, is when Moses' sister Miriam speaks against him to Aaron. While it appears that both Miriam and Aaron are speaking against their brother, Miriam receives the judgment of becoming leprous:

"Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had married a Cushite woman)... But when the cloud had withdrawn from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, as *white as snow*. As Aaron turned toward Miriam, behold, she was leprous [*tzara*]" (Numbers 12:1, 10).

Only the pleas that Moses makes to God restore his sister to normalcy (Numbers 12:13ff). Seeing these usages of "leprosy," the Sages concluded that slander and malicious gossip were a major cause of leprosy. *Their opinion should be well taken*. Consider the connections that can be made by killing someone with words that emanate from your heart. Yeshua spoke of how a wickedness which generates death and destruction—comes forth from an evil mouth:

"The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his hear" (Luke 6:45).

Here, the connection is very obvious. When the human heart is filled with evil thoughts, the mouth and what ushers forth from it are simply verbal manifestations. God knows all about this common human problem, and the potentially devastating consequences of the spoken word—especially when the spoken word is used maliciously to *deliberately* harm someone.

We need to remember that at God's spoken command, the universe came into being (Genesis 1). He knows the power that words spoken can have. He omnisciently knew that the common schoolyard colloquialism used to defend oneself from verbal abuse was/is not at all accurate: "*Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me!*" **Words do hurt**, especially when they are designed by a wicked heart to deliberately insult and damage another person.

Here is what the Lord says about things He hates:

"There are six things which the LORD hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises

wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness *who* utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers” (Proverbs 6:16-19).

These seven things include:

1. haughty eyes
2. a lying tongue
3. hands that shed innocent blood
4. a heart that devises wicked plans
5. feet that run rapidly to evil
6. a false witness that utters lies
7. one who spreads strife among brothers

If you consider what these seven abominations actually are, you will note that three of them concern spoken utterances which originate with the tongue (#s 1, 6, 7). There might be a good case to include the evil heart that devises wicked plans (#4) with the tongue, because in order to execute evil plans, such thoughts have to be formulated. Almost half of the things which the Lord despises and considers abominable relate to an evil tongue, or to a wicked heart that causes the tongue to speak forth dark things. It should not be difficult for us to see why the Lord wants His people to be very careful about what they say with their mouths.

Is it possible that during the early years of the nation of Israel, as the people were wandering in the desert and preparing to enter into the Promised Land—that there were many skin eruptions that warned this community that various people were using their tongues to tear the fabric of the maturing society? When we read about the wilderness journeys of the Israelites, we often do not think of them as people enjoying themselves. There was complaining toward, suspicion of, and also distrust of both God and Moses on the part of many of the Ancient Israelites. There were people who spoke against the directives issued by Moses and the leaders he appointed.

The Lord knew that nothing could be more detrimental to a community than rumors, gossip, slander, and outright lies. Perhaps the opportunity for a person to be set outside of the camp for seven days, or even fourteen days, would cause perpetrators to reconsider their transgressions. Is it possible that as someone dealt with the guilt of using his or her tongue *to murder the character* of another person, that the offender might be healed and the leprous signs could have disappeared? On the other hand, if the evil heart and its intentions continued to dwell on wickedness, then would the result have been a life wandering around outside the camp—and when people saw you they would utter “Unclean, unclean!”?

Further Tongue Lashings

The problems associated with dark utterances from the tongue were by no means just confined to the early stages of Israel’s development. *Speaking slanderous or spiteful words is a common human problem, after all.* It is not at all surprising to see the Apostles addressing proper speech. We are all familiar with the Apostle Paul’s word, “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29), something that guided me since I was a young Believer.²⁰ This week, though, I was led to

²⁰ For further consideration, consult the exegesis paper on Ephesians 4:29, “How Are Messianics to Properly Communicate?” by J.K. McKee.

read through the Epistle of James, and see how James the Just handles the ability for the spoken word to have a catastrophic impact on the community of faith.

James comments extensively about the challenges of being in a position of teaching, and how the use of one's tongue can have a variety of consequences:

“Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many *ways*. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and *yet* it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the *very* world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison. With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way” (James 3:1-10).

In this passage, James admonishes the teachers of his day with how serious it is when they use their tongues. He declares that an evil tongue “pollutes our whole being; it keeps the wheel of our existence red-hot, and its flames are fed by hell” (NEB). This is how powerful an unbridled and undisciplined tongue can be, and it is something that we should be mindful to control by relinquishing its activity to the Holy Spirit. If you keep reading James' words you begin to understand some of the ways the enemy uses the human tongue to create division:

“What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; *so* you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; *so* you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask... Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge *of it*...Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door” (James 4:1-2, 11; 5:9).

Fighting, quarreling, speaking against one another, judging one another, complaining against one another—and the list goes on. Do these things sound like the works of the Spirit or works of the flesh (cf. Galatians 5:19-21)? **Well, the answer is simple and obvious to spiritual persons guided by the Lord.** In fact, in the midst of his warnings, James contrasts what inappropriate and appropriate wisdom are:

“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and *so* lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (James 3:13-18).

James compares the wise and understanding with those who are Earthly, natural, and demonic. *The contrast is obvious.* Just like the priests who could look at a skin affliction in the time of Moses and Joshua, in James' day it was readily apparent by behavioral actions who was living a life of the Spirit and who was living a life of jealousy and selfish ambition. And these things were not difficult to see: one can generally discern simply by listening to what is spoken from the various mouths whether one has godly or demonic wisdom. **These indicators have not changed in our generation, some two thousand years later.** We have the same responsibility to speak forth, and listen to, godly wisdom.

The Doers: Slow to Speak

Earlier in the instructional words of James, he makes it very simple for those who have the ears to hear:

"This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless" (James 1:19-26).

Here, James gets to the heart of the matter. He talks about the ability to control the tongue and the anger that bubbles up from the heart. He admonishes his readers to be quick to hear, but be slow to become angry and slow to speak. James knew that if people can just give their hearts and minds some time to catch up with their emotions—that may have been stirred by some fallacious lies, slander, gossip, or false witness—then they can willingly give the situations over to the Lord. Then, with a sound heart and mind, Believers will exhibit the reality that they are more than just hearers of God's Word, but most importantly, are doers of His Word.

Such admonitions are critical in our day and age, as we have *so many more ways* to do damage to people than just the spoken word. Now with the advances of technology, one can slander another person on video, DVD, cassette, CD, or with lightning speed to the world over via the increasingly ubiquitous Internet. Now with the simple click of a mouse on some personal blog, someone with a wicked heart can commit murder without any bloodletting. *People can find their character assassinated with little or no warning.* Bullets are no longer required...

Think again about how you are using your tongue as you enter into *Shabbat* this week and are probably preparing yourself for Passover. Is there any leaven in this area of your life that needs some confession and repentance? We know that He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins *if* we confess them. We know that He will cleanse us of all unrighteousness *if* we are truly repentant (1 John 1:9). But in order to receive the forgiveness God offers us, we must come before Him with a broken and contrite spirit, and humbly confess our errant ways. We must also confess with our mouths. **Consider it today.** We must learn to control our tongues:

“For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well” (James 3:2).

If we can acknowledge our faults, then we should be able to enter into the assembly of the redeemed, and speak edifying words that are able to build up people in the Lord. The words we speak should be evidence of God’s love inside of us (cf. 1 Peter 4:8), and should be used only to help others. If we speak anything negative, it should be only in the form of admonishing people from staying away from sin, and what takes them away from the salvation we possess in Messiah Yeshua. In so doing, we can hopefully accomplish James’ final admonition to his readers, and bring known sinners back from death and exile from God:

“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:19-20).

As you remember the blood of the Lamb that redeems us from eternal judgment, let that same love be extended to your brothers and sisters with an edifying word rather than an evil tongue!

Acharei Mot אַחֲרֵי מוֹת After the death “Blood Life”

Leviticus 16:1-18:30
Ezekiel 22:1-19 (A); 22:1-16 (S)

Just like the double Torah portions of *Tazria-Metzora* (Leviticus 12:1-15:33) that are separated for leap year readings, *Acharei Mot* is usually coupled with the following portion, *Kedoshim* (Leviticus 19:1-20:27). Our selection for this week starts out with describing the meticulous requirements the high priest is to perform on the Day of Atonement or *Yom Kippur* (יּוֹם כִּפּוּרִים).²¹ It is followed by general instruction about sacrificial offerings and blood,²² and various kinds of inappropriate sexual relations.²³

The instructions detailing *Yom Kippur* naturally get your attention in reading *Acharei Mot*. This observance is stated to be a permanent statute for God’s people, and a special High Sabbath, when people contemplate their humanity by humbling themselves:

“This shall be permanent statute [*chuqat olam*, חֻקַּת עוֹלָם] for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you; for it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you will be clean from all your sins before the LORD. It is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute” (Leviticus 16:29-31).

Once a year, the Lord really does want His people to think about their sins—both individual and corporate—and what it takes to provide restitution for them. While

²¹ Leviticus 16:1-34.

²² Leviticus 17:1-16.

²³ Leviticus 18:1-30.