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The Reasons Behind Tzara'at and Other Forms of Tum'a

By Rav Elchanan Samet

(continued from last week's shiur on Tazria)

CHAZAL'S VIEW: PUNISHMENT

Throughout the Talmud and Midrashim, Chazal view tzara'at as a punishment for various transgressions involving interpersonal misconduct, particularly the sin of lashon ha-ra (slander/gossip).

Several passages to this effect appear in Masekhet Arakhin (15-16), after the mishna that outlines the laws of the motzi shem ra (slanderer). We cite here several passages relevant to our discussion:

"Rabbi Yossi Ben Zimra said: Whoever speaks lashon ha-ra - tzara'at infections come upon him..."

"Reish Lakish said: 'This shall be the ritual for a metzora' - this shall be the ritual for the 'motzi shem ra.'"

"Rav Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Tzara'at comes on account of seven things: 1) lashon ha-ra; 2) murder; 3) false oaths; 4) immorality; 5) arrogance; 6) theft; 7) stinginess."

The final passage continues by citing Scriptural proofs for each sin mentioned. Indeed, several events in Tanakh prove that tzara'at served as a divine punishment for various forms of wrongdoing. Miriam is stricken with tzara'at for speaking against Moshe ([Bemidbar 12](#)); Geichazi is punished for his greed and false oath to Elisha ([Melakhim II 5](#)); Uziyahu is punished with tzara'at for offering

incense in the Temple in defiance of the kohanim ([Divrei Ha-yamim II 26:16-21](#)).

Chazal's outlook on tzara'at as a punishment parallels their perspective on other forms of disaster that befall an individual or community as a punishment for a certain transgression or several transgressions. Let us take as an example the mishna in [Avot \(5:9\)](#):

"Wild animals come to the world on account of false oaths and desecration of the Name. Exile comes to the world on account of idol worshippers, immorality, murder and [failing to] let the land lie fallow."

We find many similar statements regarding the individual, as well.

This outlook, then, does not answer the question I posed in last week's shiur: what is the reason behind the laws of tum'a (impurity) of a metzora? As Rav David Zvi Hoffmann notes in his commentary on [Sefer Vaykira](#) (p. 220):

"In truth, if every affliction serves as a punishment for a sin, then why should the affliction of tzara'at not also come as a punishment for certain sins? However, just as, on the other hand, there are extraordinary cases where tragedies befall people without any possible way of seeing them as the result of sins, so too... instances of tzara'at can occur in extraordinary fashion. Indeed, our Sages taught ([Berakhot 5b](#)) that there are cases where tzara'at befalls a person as 'afflictions of love.' Moreover, it is difficult to understand why specifically tzara'at generates tum'a, whereas other diseases, which also generally come as a punishment for sins, do not generate tum'a."

Thus, Chazal's view of tzara'at - a disease like any other - as a punishment for certain sins does not explain the reason for the tum'a of tzara'at. However, the Rambam and later writers (Ramban, Seforno to 13:47) explain that the tzara'at of houses and clothing are not natural disasters, but rather deviations from the natural order, an overt miracle intended as a signal to the individual. According to this approach, we cannot isolate the question regarding tum'a at tzara'at

from the question concerning its very nature. One answer resolves both issues: the very appearance of tzara'at and all its regulations serves as a warning to a person to repent. Rambam writes:

"This discoloration mentioned with regard to clothing and homes, which the Torah called 'tzara'at,' a name that it shares [with the physical disease 'tzara'at'], is not a natural phenomenon; rather, it was a sign and wonder in Israel in order to warn them against lashon ha-ra, evil speech. One who spoke lashon ha-ra - the walls of his home became discolored. If he repented - the home became pure. If he continued his wrongdoing to the point where the home was dismantled, the leather linens in his home, on which he sits and lies, become discolored. If he repented - they became pure. If he continued his wrongdoing to the point where they were burned, the clothing he wears become discolored. If he repented - they became pure. If he continued his wrongdoing to the point where they were burned, his skin becomes discolored and he contracts tzara'at, and he is separated and publicly isolated, until he no longer engages in the sinful speech of frivolity and lashon ha-ra.

The Torah warns against all this and says ([Devarim 24:8-9](#)), 'In cases of skin affection, be most careful... Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the journey.' This means to say: contemplate what happened to Miriam the prophetess who spoke against her brother... and was punished with tzara'at; all the more so, then, [will this occur] to the wicked, foolish people who often speak high and lofty." (Hilkhot Tum'at Tzara'at 16:10)

A partial source for this description of the gradual progression of calamities that befalls the person is found in the Midrash ([Vayikra Rabba 17:4](#)). However, neither this midrash nor other sources dealing with the tzara'at of the home and garment provide any basis for the Rambam's view of these phenomena as supernatural, "a sign and wonder in Israel." It appears that Chazal made no distinction between bodily tzara'at and that which affected houses and clothing. All these forms of tzara'at are seen as natural calamities which serve to reprimand the individual for the sin of lashon ha-ra and other violations concerning interpersonal conduct.

Therefore, the sources in Chazal relevant to our question are specifically those which explain the laws of tum'a and the tahara (purification) process prescribed for the metzora, rather than the disease itself. Sure enough, several passages in Chazal explain the tum'a and tahara of a metzora, too, within the context of the sinner's punishment and process of teshuva. We bring here two adjacent passages from [Masekhet Arakhin \(16b\)](#):

"Why is the metzora different, that the Torah writes, 'He shall dwell in isolation; outside the camp shall be his residence'? He caused a separation between husband and wife, between a man and his fellow [Rashi: for tzara'at comes on account of lashon ha-ra], and the Torah therefore writes, 'He shall dwell in isolation...'"

"Why is the metzora different, that the Torah writes that he must bring two birds for his purification? The Almighty says: He committed an act of 'patit' [Rashi: a voice sounded quietly], and so the Torah says that he must bring a sacrifice of a 'patit' [Rashi: because birds chirp at all times]."

A passage similar to the second citation appears in the Midrash Tanchuma (Metzora, 3):

"Why is the metzora's offering different from other offerings? Since he spoke lashon ha-ra, the Torah therefore prescribes for him an offering of two birds, which produce ongoing sounds. 'And a cedar wood' - there is none higher than the cedar tree. Since he raised himself like a cedar, tzara'at befell him, as Rabbi Shimon Ben Elazar said: Tzara'at comes on account of arrogance... Why hyssop? There is no tree lower than the hyssop. Since he brought himself down, he is therefore cured through a hyssop.

Why does he slaughter one bird and send the other away? [Etz Yosef: Why does he not slaughter both? In every other instance where one brings two birds, both are slaughtered.] Because if he repents, he will not have a recurrence of tzara'at [just as the sent-away bird never returns]."

Among the later commentators, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his appendix to Parashat Tazria, adopts Chazal's approach and tries to explain on this basis the minute details of the laws found in both the Chumash and oral tradition.

Two points must be made concerning Chazal's approach to tzara'at and its laws.

1. Throughout the tzara'at section in Sefer Vayikra (chapters 13-14), the text of the Torah makes no mention of ethical background to the arrival of tzara'at or its cure. We find not even an allusion to any sin preceding the onset of tzara'at, nor do we read of any instruction that the metzora pray or repent during his period of isolation outside the camp. The Torah never hinges the cure from tzara'at on the patient's conduct or awareness.
2. In these passages, Chazal explain the special laws pertaining to a metzora both during his period of tum'a (which marks the only form of tum'a requiring solitary confinement) as well as over the course of his purification (only he, among all impure people seeking purification, must bring two birds, a cedar and a hyssop). Nevertheless, we cannot isolate the laws of tum'at tzara'at from all other laws of tum'a in the Torah. We need a general explanation for all these laws - those in Parshiyot Tazria-Metzora, those in Parashat Shemini (the tum'a of animal carcasses), and those in Parashat Chukkat (the tum'a of a deceased human being). Only on the basis of their common denominator can we proceed to explain the laws of the metzora - even those unique to this form of tum'a.

The ethical reason Chazal give for tum'at tzara'at does not provide an explanation for the vast majority of other tum'ot (with the exception, perhaps, of the tum'a of "zavim," who might indeed have contracted an illness as punishment). After all, one who touches the carcass of a rodent or the remains of a human being has committed no sin; likewise, a menstruating woman is not a sinner. Why, then, did the Torah decree a status of tum'a upon them? Conversely, why do we not find any status of tum'a decreed upon people suffering from any other illness besides tzara'at?

RAV HOFFMANN: EDUCATIONAL SYMBOLS

In his commentary to Sefer Vayikra (pp. 219-223), Rav David Zvi Hoffmann attempts to explain the reason behind all forms of tum'a as an integrated group. He makes a slight but critical change in Chazal's view:

"Tzara'at does not generate tum'a because it results from the sin [for this is not always the case; other illnesses also result from various sins but do not generate tum'a]. Rather, tzara'at generates tum'a because the outward appearance of the disease is the symbolic image of the sinner." (p. 220)

In other words, tzara'at and the laws of tum'a related to it are not a punishment, but rather a symbolic system. Tzara'at serves as a symbol of a certain type of wrongdoing. The tum'a is intended to establish the appropriate attitude towards these sins, whereas the tahara process symbolizes the process of ridding oneself of these spiritual ills.

Through this slight deviation, Rav Hoffmann transforms tzara'at and its laws from an ethical expression of reward and punishment to an educational, symbolic system expressing the proper attitude towards sin and repentance. This allows him to expand upon this theory and apply it to all types of tum'a:

"In general, every tum'a symbolizes sin. By distancing themselves from the symbol of sin and carefully ensuring its distance from the Temple and everything sacred, Israel remembers at all times its ultimate destiny. The observance of the laws of tahara brings one to purity of thought and action."

Now let us see how Rav Hoffmann applies this symbolic outlook to other forms of tum'a:

"When we consider the phenomena that serve as a source of tum'a, we find three categories of tum'a:

- a. the tum'a resulting from the death of human beings and animals - human corpses, animal carcasses;
- b. tum'ot resulting from bodily emissions, which we may perhaps refer to as 'sexual tum'ot': ba'al kerai, zav, zava (various forms of emissions), menstruation, and the childbearing woman;
- c. the tum'ot of negaim (i.e. forms of tzara'at).

All the teme'im (impure people) must leave certain regions. The first category of teme'im leave only the Temple grounds, meaning, the

'camp of the Shekhina.' Those in the second group leave even the second camp, meaning, the camp of the Levites 'who are near the Lord.'

Those in the third category are expelled even from the camp of Israel, meaning, from the camp of the nation of God.

If we also recall that the sin that causes the Shekhina's departure from among Israel is also referred to by the title 'tum'a,' and that the annual atonement ritual on Yom Ha-Kippurim serves to atone for the Temple, which 'dwells among the impurities of Benei Yisrael' ([Vayikra 16:16](#)), it will become clear to us that the various types of tum'a symbolize the various sins, which God despises to a lesser or greater extent, and that they must remain at a distance from the sacred territory.

We therefore cannot be mistaken if we list the three types of tum'a according to the three categories of transgressions:

1. transgressions against God;
2. transgressions against the individual himself;
3. transgressions against one's fellow or against society.

With regard to the first category of sins and tum'ot... a person is meant to serve God, to cling to Him, to love Him and obey His word. The punishment for betraying God is death... One who touches a corpse may not enter the camp of God that exists eternally, for he has become a symbol of the betrayal of God... And so the purity laws of the first category remind us of the mitzvot towards God, the fulfillment of which brings us closer to that which exists and lives forever...

With regard to the second category of sins and tum'ot... Am Yisrael... is obligated to be a 'sacred nation'... distant and apart from sensual desires and striving towards elevation... We may view the tum'ot of the second category as symbols reminding us of the opposite of this sanctity... One who descended to this level [of a life of desires and frivolity] must stay away not only from the camp of the Shekhina, but also from the camp

of 'those near to God,' who yearn to resemble Him...

Finally, regarding the third category of sins, which tum'at tzara'at parallels, ... the tzara'at infection symbolizes transgressions between man and his fellow... [Tzara'at] serves as an example of those sins which appear on the surface of the country that has been stricken with them and which gradually destroy its entire social structure... The person afflicted must therefore distance himself from societal life and dwell in isolation outside the camp... The appearance of nega'im reminiscent of sins might occur on garments and homes, as well. Clothing symbolizes the person's character, and the home symbolizes his possessions. Nega'im on a garment or home allude to and symbolize the corruption of one's character and the illegality of his possessions, requiring their removal from societal life."

Later, Rav Hoffmann explains the details of the tahara laws on the basis of this symbolic system. The shortcoming of this approach, however, is that this explanation does not flow at all from the verses anywhere throughout the Torah's discussion of tum'a and tahara. Not only are the details of his approach not to be found, but in addition, and primarily, the basic precept upon which his entire explanations stands - the perspective of these laws as part of a symbolic system - has no basis in the text. According to Rav Hoffmann, the laws of tum'a and the process of purification all constitute symbols within a single system. But what objective indication can we bring to this far-reaching approach?

Rav Hoffmann sensed this problem and tried to base his explanation on the comparison frequently made in Tanakh between sin and tum'a:

"We find clear proof to the fact that tum'a is but a symbol of sin from the use made by the prophets while speaking of the purification from sin of the same expressions employed by the Torah to express purification from tum'a: 'Wash yourselves clean' ([Yeshayahu 1:16](#)); 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your impurities' ([Yechezkel 36:25](#)); 'Purge me with hyssop until I am pure' ([Tehillim 51:9](#)). These expressions prove as clearly as possible that the

prophets viewed tum'a as symbolic of sin, and purification from tum'a as symbolic of purification from sin."

I believe this proof is far from clear. The verses cited by Rav Hoffmann (and other similar v) do not compare tum'a to sin (as Rav Hoffmann does), but rather compare sin to tum'a. Fsliving in the Biblical period, tum'a was not an abstract, theoretical concept difficult to comprehend, as it has become for modern commentators. Situations of tum'a and purification played an important role in day-to-day life. A person's life swayed constantly along the pendulum between tum'a and tahara. By contrast, sin and its contaminating effect on the person, and the need to repent, were less clear to the people of the time. The prophets and poets of Tanakh therefore likened the abstract, ethical-religious world of sin and repentance to the more tangible world of tum'a and tahara.

Obviously, this comparison is based on the properties shared by the two realms. Tum'a is a situation of distance from the Temple and its service, and thus translates into a concrete, practical dissociation between man and God. The prophets came along and taught that sin, too, cannot be reconciled with the Temple service, and it, too, detaches one from God. Tum'a requires a process of purification; similarly, sin requires a process of teshuva. Complete purification yields the restoration of the previous relationship between man and God - as does teshuva. None of these parallels, however, proves that tum'a serves as a symbol of sin. To the contrary, it requires no symbolic explanation.

RABBI YEHUDA HALEVI: DEATH AS THE SOURCE OF TUM'A

We find an attempt at a general approach to all forms of tum'a already in Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* (2:58-62). The rabbi who is talking to the king of the Khazars prides himself on God's closeness to, and constant providence over, Israel, as expressed, among other ways, through the appearance of tzara'at infections on their homes and bodies. The king then asks the rabbi for more convincing proof "which brings the matter closer to the mind." The rabbi replies:

"I have already told you that our intellects are not comparable to that of the Divinity, and it is proper not to make any attempt to find a reason for these lofty concepts or anything similar to them. But after I ask for forgiveness and disclaim that this is surely the reason, I will say that tzara'at and abnormal discharges are related to the spiritual

impurity related to death. Death is the absolute spiritual deficiency, and a limb afflicted with tzara'at is like a corpse in this respect.

Similarly, an abnormal discharge also represents death, in that the discharged material had a certain life-force, which gave it the ability to become an embryo that would eventually develop into a human being. The loss of this material, then, is in opposition to the property of life and the spirit of life.

Because this spiritual deficiency is very ethereal, it can be detected only by people with refined spirits and significant souls, who strive to attach themselves to Divinity... Most of us feel different when we come close to the dead or to a cemetery, and our spirits become confused for a while when we enter a house where a dead person has been. Only one whose nature is coarse will not be able to detect any of this."

To this the king responds:

"This suffices to explain that which was intellectually difficult to understand, why this excess bodily mass - namely, seminal discharges - can impart spiritual impurity, despite the fact that semen can create life, whereas urine and feces do not impart impurity, despite their disgusting odor and appearance and their more abundant amounts."

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi thus transforms the tum'a resulting from death into the central hinge around which all forms of tum'a revolve, to one extent or other. All situations which bring about tum'a somehow resemble death, and tum'a itself constitutes the halakhic manifestation of the impression made upon man by this encounter with death. The corpse and carcass bring tum'a upon the living person who encounters them, and this tum'a expresses the confusion and change experienced by a person as a result of this encounter. Bodily emissions and tzara'at are all forms of "partial death" - in large or small measure - within a person's body, and they therefore result in a partial encounter with death itself, expressed through tum'a.

There is room to expand on the notion of death as the source of tum'a and an explanation for all its manifestations. Here I will merely raise two points concerning Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's notion:

1. Regarding tzara'at, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi writes that "a limb afflicted with tzara'at is like a corpse." Chazal ([Nedarim 64b](#)) go even further, claiming that "a metzora is considered dead." In that same context, however, they say that the poor, the blind, and the childless are also considered as those who are dead - and these obviously do not contract tum'a. The question that has arisen several times in our discussion thus returns: why does no other disease, including terminal ones, generate tum'a?

The concept of tum'a as "partial death" is derived from Aharon's remarks after his sister Miriam was stricken with tzara'at: "Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away" ([Bemidbar 12:12](#)). It seems from this verse that it is not the threat of death posed by tzara'at (and it is doubtful that such a threat ever existed) that gives rise to this resemblance to death, but rather its external appearance, as though the victim's flesh is eaten. The tum'a of tzara'at thus evolves specifically from the visual association or aesthetic repulsiveness of this disease. The metzora appeared to both himself and those around him as a walking half-corpse.

2. Two forms of tum'a in the Torah appear to negate Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's theory: that of the childbearing woman, and the tum'a brought on by normal sexual relations (15:18). Both these contexts involve specifically the creation of new life - the direct opposite of the phenomenon which, according to Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, is responsible for the onset of tum'a in general.

It is clear that the two tum'ot just mentioned also lie along the axis between life and death. Apparently, only that which somehow connects to life and death generates tum'a: the corpse and half-corpse on the one hand, and the woman's blood and man's seed, on the other.

Perhaps the answer to this question is that, though indeed the processes of conception and childbirth create new life, nevertheless, the creators of this new life - the father who fertilizes the egg and the mother who gestates the child - are emptied of some of their life-force during the respective events of insemination and birth. This loss of life-force constitutes a form of partial death, which gives rise to a new, different life.

This is particularly evident in the case of childbirth. For nine months, new life develops within the mother, and now, at the moment of birth, she loses it. The baby begins an independent life, while the mother loses a life that had been part of her. Therefore, the mother becomes tamei as a result of childbirth, whereas the child, who has now received new, independent life, is tahor.

(Translated by David Silverberg.)

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