

# Torah Table Talk

## The Kohen: Healer or Physician?

### Parshat Metzorah

### Leviticus 14:1 – 15:33

The second half of Parshat Tazriah and Parshat Metzorah both deal with the subject of *Tzara'at*, a mysterious skin disease which afflicted people in Biblical times. While the word *Tzara'at* is often translated as leprosy, the condition described in the Torah has little in common with Hansen's disease.

*Tzara'at* is referred to in the Bible as a *Nega*, an affliction, implying that this disease is some type of divine punishment, yet the Bible does not make any clear statements implicating particular actions with this disease. Still, the sages found ways of implying that *Tzara'at* was the just deserves of people who committed particular sins (especially those who were guilty of gossip and slander. The word *Metzorah*, or one afflicted with *Tzara'at*, sounds a lot like *Motzi shem ra*, the term for slander.

1. How should we respond today to the equation of illness with sin?
2. What might have led the Rabbis to conclude that there was a connection between *Tzara'at*, a highly contagious and isolating disease and *Motzi shem ra*, slanderous words?
3. Do you think of illness as a punishment? Why do good people get sick.

While the Bible speaks of *Tzara'at* as a divine affliction, this did not preclude the *kohanim*, the priests, from being given an important role in dealing with someone who is stricken with this illness. Here are some verses from our Parshah which speak about the role of the *Kohen*:

**Leviticus 13:1-2** When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of his body, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons, the priests. The priest shall examine the affection on the skin of his body.

**Leviticus 13:31** The priest shall isolate the person with the scaly affection for seven days...

**Leviticus 13:44** The priest shall pronounce him impure; for he has the affection on his head...

**Leviticus 14:2-3** When it has been reported to the priest, the priest shall go outside the camp. If the priest sees that the leper has been healed of his scaly affection, the priest shall order two live birds...he shall slaughter one of the birds...he shall dip them in blood of the bird that was slaughtered....He shall then sprinkle it seven times on him who is purified of the eruption.

**Leviticus 14:11** These shall be presented before the Lord with the man to be purified at the entrance of the tent of meeting, by the priest who performs the purification

1. What do these verses teach us about the role that the *Kohen* played in dealing with the victim of *Tzara'at*? What limitations were there on the Kohen ability to treat the *Metzorah*?
2. What effect do you think it had on a person suffering from a mysterious disease to be treated by the Kohen, one of the most respected people in the community?
3. The Kohen is more of a healer than a physician. What is the difference between these two terms?
4. What role should religion play in the treatment of illness and disease? In what ways is the role of the Rabbi different from and similar to that of the *Kohen* in the Bible?

### **Sanhedrin 98a**

When R. Joshua ben Levi found the prophet Elijah standing by the entrance of the cave where R. Simeon ben Yohai was buried, he asked him, "Will I attain the world-to-come?" Elijah: "If the Lord here desires it."

He then asked him, "When will the Messiah come?" "Go and ask him yourself," was his reply. "Where is he sitting?" "He is at the entrance to the city of Rome." "And by what sign may I recognize him?" "He is sitting among the lepers burdened with sicknesses. All of them first untie all the bandages over their sores and then retie them, whereas he unties and reties each bandage separately, saying to himself: Should I be wanted, I must not be delayed."

1. Why is the Messiah sitting among the lepers in this story?
2. How is Rabbi Joshua Ben Levi to recognize him? Why are his actions different from the other people present at the gate of Rome? For that matter why is he in Rome rather than Jerusalem?
3. There are many passages in the Talmud which denigrate and disparage the person afflicted with leprosy. Why do you think this passage takes such a different attitude?

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### ***How to use Torah Table Talk***

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind  
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

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