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בס"ד

On Sara'at – Leviticus 13–14

1. A Skin Disease

Leviticus 13–14 comprises a self-contained unit, within the section of laws of ritual purity and impurity, that deals exclusively with various types of *sara'at* breakouts that affect humans, fabrics and leather, and houses. These two chapters provide descriptions and diagnoses, detailing which cases are to be declared “impure” (*tameh*) and which are questionable, and prescribes the regulations pertaining to each category. Purification procedures are also specified. It is the only source in the Torah for such information.

The first category to be legislated is that of human skin diseases, which are characterized by assorted conditions including eruptions, scaling, burns, and boils. The priest must examine the individual in question for the presence of symptoms such as shiny spots, discolorations, inflammations and scabs. In a questionable case he sequesters the individual for a seven-day period at the end of which he checks for healing or spread; he must note the depth of lesions, flesh that became raw, hair that turned whitish (or yellowish on the head or beard), and other developments. Sometimes he sequesters the individual for a second seven-day period. The minute detail the text provides bestows the aura of a medical treatise upon the section.

Concerning the definitely stricken man, his clothes are to be rent, his hair is to remain uncut (disheveled), he is to cover himself to his mustache, and he is to call out *tameh*, *tameh* when necessary to warn others not to make physical contact with him. Until cured, he must dwell outside the camp.

The root derivation of the word *sara'at* (צִרְעָת) is obscure. Ibn Ezra takes it to mean “sickness,” but it surely appears to refer to several specific conditions

and not to be a general term for all types of illnesses. If צִרְעָה (*sir'ah*, Exod. 23:28; Deut. 7:20; Josh. 24:12) means “hornet,” as many take it to be (but not Ibn Ezra, who considers it to be related to *sara'at*, and translates it as a “blow” or “wound”), perhaps *sara'at* received its name from being a condition in which the skin appears to have been bitten by a hornet. Others, basing themselves on the great degree of sound similarity between the consonants of צ (*sadi*) and ש (*sin*), a similarity that has prompted some interchangeability of letters, consider צִרְעָה to be related to שְׂרִיעַ (Lev. 21:18; 22:23), which refers to an elongated limb. The latter is perhaps derived from the idea of “stretched,” as in Isaiah 28:20 מְהֻשְׁתָּרַע, while *sara'at* would refer to a condition that “stretches” or spreads. (The alliteration in that Isaiah 28:20 verse capitalizes on the similarity in sounds between the *samekh*, *sadi* and *sin* sounds.)

The word נָגַע, frequently appearing in the same phrase with *sara'at*, but also, even in a *sara'at* context, often occurring on its own, basically means “touched,” in the sense of “stricken.”

Most modern medical specialists in skin disorders agree that the skin afflictions described in Leviticus should not be translated, as has long been done, as “leprosy.” The latter disease does manifest enlarging and spreading blotches and ulcerations consistent with the biblical description. However, it is marked by slow rotting of the limbs, loss of fingers and toes, lack of feeling in certain nerve regions, paralysis, and deformities for which there is no known cure and which do not fit the biblical symptoms. *Sara'at* should rather be understood as referring to other dermatological conditions involving lesions, scaling and flaking, possibly including vitiligo and psoriasis. But there is no clear-cut, specific understanding of what the phenomena were.

The medical historian Dr. Julius Preuss, in his classic work *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine* (originally published in 1911, here cited from the 1978 edition, p. 325) addresses this issue. He makes the point that aside from leprosy (and syphilis, which is no longer proposed as a candidate for *sara'at*), skin diseases are generally not life-threatening, and it appears that this had been the case, and known to be so, with standard skin diseases in biblical times. *Sara'at*, on the other hand, appears to have been considered life-threatening. When Aaron saw Miriam stricken with *sara'at*, he said to Moses: "Let her not be as one who is dead, who upon exiting his mother's womb has half his flesh eaten away" (Num. 12:12). He apparently feared that she was in the grip of death, even if perhaps it would be a prolonged process.

In addition, the purification rites for one who had been stricken with *sara'at* have a great deal in common with those for one who had contracted impurity through contact with a human corpse. Regarding the *mesora'*, the Torah states:

And he [the priest] shall take the live bird, along with the cedar wood, the crimson stuff, and the hyssop, and dip them together with the live bird in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the fresh water. He shall then sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the eruption and cleanse him...The one to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, shave off all his hair and bathe in water; then he shall be clean. After that he may enter the camp, but he must remain outside his tent seven days. (Lev. 14:6-8, NJPS)

Regarding the corpse-defiled person, the text reads:

And the priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff, and throw them into the fire consuming the [red] cow...and fresh water shall be added to them in a vessel...The clean person shall sprinkle it upon the unclean person on the third day and on the seventh day, thus cleansing him by the seventh day. He shall then wash his clothes and bathe in water, and at nightfall he shall be clean. (Num. 19:4,17,19, NJPS)

Another indication that *sara'at* was viewed as having a connection to death is a feature of the impurity it

may communicate. Only a *mesora'* and a human corpse – implied in the Torah as concerns the *mesora'* and made explicit by the sages through exegesis – possess the stringency of defiling people and vessels "in the tent," that is, by merely being in the same enclosure with them.

Preuss further points out that skin is especially susceptible to environmental conditions and modifications in the manner of living. Possibly, just as people of our times have diseases that were unknown in antiquity, the ancients may have had diseases that have since disappeared or some aspects of which have changed. He concludes that leprosy may possibly be one of the diseases denoted by *sara'at*.

An historical consideration against identifying *sara'at* as leprosy has arisen from the research of some historians who claim that it appears leprosy was unknown in the ancient Near East in early biblical times. Some speculate that it may have been brought to that region by Alexander's large returning armies from India in the fourth century B.C.E.

Even if *sara'at* is not leprosy, the spread of a skin disease with unbearable itching and seemingly unstoppable peeling-off of skin, which sometimes was chronic and which would greatly interfere with one's productivity, often terminating it, was very likely associated with death. Ponder Job's experience. He had *שָׁחִין רָע* ("severe boils") – a type of *sara'at* – "from the sole of his feet to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7) and endured enormous suffering from it. As the talmudic aphorism has it: "Four are considered as dead: the destitute, the *mesora'*, the blind, and the one without children" (*b. Ned.* 64a).

As the *mesora'* was required to reside outside the camp – apparently in special dwellings – it is implied that there was great fear of the disease, although not necessarily of premature death.

The Torah does not explicitly comment concerning the ritual effects that the stricken individual would have on others through the various modes of contact, although it provides corresponding regulations for the stricken house. It may have been considered self-evident. The sages derive the relevant regulations through exegesis.

2. Other Types of *Sara'at*

Following skin *sara'at*, the Torah speaks of *sara'at* of wool or linen fabrics, whether in garments or plain material, as well as in leather garments or vessels. These appear to be unrelated to the types of *sara'at* that occur on the skin of humans and apparently received the *sara'at* designation due to their similarity in having surface discolorations and to their spreading characteristic. The symptoms in these cases are outbreaks of greenish or reddish discolorations, which apparently include yellowish or brownish respectively. Presumably, the problem is of a fungus nature. (Abarbanel's unscientific suggestion that the fabric may have "caught" the *sara'at* from the *mesora'* individual is not hinted at and has not been shown to reflect Israelite thought in biblical times.) In these other types of *sara'at* also, when there is a doubt, the item is sequestered for seven days. If the affection spread, the item is burned. Otherwise, it is laundered, again sequestered for seven days and reexamined. If the discoloration faded, that portion is cut out of the item, washed and declared pure; otherwise, it is burned.

Finally, the Torah addresses *sara'at* of a house – fungus and molds of greenish or reddish (yellowish or brownish) streaks in the plaster or mud coating of the stones in the walls. The *kohen* "closes" the house for seven days. If on the seventh day the symptoms had spread, the problematic stones are removed, the house scraped and again closed for seven days. If subsequently the *sara'at* reappeared, the house must be destroyed. All *sara'at* debris must be discarded outside the town in an impure place (a "dump"). If upon the reexamination the plague had not spread the house is declared pure and purification procedures similar to those prescribed for the individual who was cured from *sara'at* are carried out.

Cases of extreme contamination such as described in the Torah that necessitated destroying fabrics or houses were not well-known, if known at all, in certain regions of the world. It is thus assumed that to some extent the damaging fungi and molds in fabrics and walls are climate-specific. We read in the Talmud:

According to which authority does the following baraita go: "An afflicted house [with *sara'at*,

according to the Torah's description] never existed and is never going to exist, so why was it written [in Scripture]? – in order to expound it and receive reward." According to which authority? According to Rabbi Eleazar the son of Rabbi Simeon.

It was taught in a baraita: Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Zadoq said, "There was a place within Gaza called 'the ruins of the afflicted house.'" Rabbi Simeon of Kefar Acco said: "I once went to Galilee and saw a place they were marking off and they said 'leprous stones were moved there'" (*b. Sanh.* 71a).

Although the impossibility or rarity of a house being afflicted with *sara'at* as expressed in these passages has been explained to be a result of the Torah's many technical specifications, the clear implications of these statements seem to make the point.

Many commentators had never heard of a single actual case of *sara'at* of garments or walls and looked upon the Torah descriptions of them as "miraculous" manifestations. The Rambam, a man of science and a practitioner of medicine, writes:

The term *sara'at* is a homonym used for various effects that are dissimilar one to another...and this change that may take effect in garments or houses that the Torah calls *sara'at* is not from the natural order of the world but is a sign and wonder that existed among Israel to caution them against speaking *lashon har'a* (slander).

MT, Laws Regarding the Sara'at Impurity 16:10

However, one may wonder about its not being from "the natural order of the world." Following are excerpts from an article regarding toxic molds in houses (generally linked to water damage) from an article, "Haunted by Mold" by Lisa Belkin (*The NY Times Magazine*, August 12, 2001, p. 28 ff.).

The investigators cut square holes in nearly every wall, then removed the Sheetrock to reveal a coating of mold hiding on the other side. It is thick and black and gangrenous...

Moldy homes have been around since biblical times...In Leviticus 14:33-45, the Lord tells

priests who learn the particulars will surely feel they have mastered.

This fear consists of more than the possibility that non-priests may misdiagnose. In the neighboring cultures, observation of the *sara'at* was accompanied by incantations and pagan rites directed to demigods, while the person in charge was perceived as removing demons. In Israel, to ensure that there be no idolatrous association or misunderstanding of human powers, the one who examines the stricken individual must be the priest who will take care not to give the impression that he is performing magical rites or be thought of as removing demons.* The priest's function was thus limited to making a determination with nothing else said or performed. So it was especially important to make sure that all *sara'at* cases were brought to an individual who was continually in contact with the sanctuary and fully imbued with the spirit of the Torah, the priest.

In Deuteronomy (24:8), the phraseology cautioning Israel to be careful regarding *sara'at*, particularly to scrupulously heed the priest's instructions, is unusually expansive:

Be guarded with the *sara'at* plague (הַשָּׂמֶר בְּנִגְעַת (הַצָּרַעַת) to be exceedingly careful (לְשֹׂמֵר מְאֹד), and do everything exactly (וְלַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכֹל) as the *kohanim-leviim* instruct you – as I commanded them be careful to do (תִּשְׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת).

By stressing the singular role of the priests together with the need for meticulous compliance with their instructions and by repeating the points, the verse reflects a critical underlying concern that the rituals not be misconstrued. It may very well have been focused on precluding any associations with the practices of the neighboring pagan cultures.

4. As Retribution

In Tanakh, *sara'at* of the human variety is a common punishment that G-d metes out for serious transgressions. Miriam became severely afflicted with it upon having spoken negatively of Moses (Num. 12:1 ff.). King Uzziah contracted it upon having violated sanctuary law by performing an incense offering though he was not a *kohen*, spurning the warning he was given. He remained afflicted for the

rest of his life (2 Chr. 26:16-21). Gehazi, upon having lied to Naaman in Elisha's name (in his greedy attempt to receive a gift, thus diminishing the glorification of Hashem's name) and then attempting to conceal it from Elisha, was cursed by the prophet to become afflicted with "leprosy" and it immediately took hold upon him (2 Kings 5:20-27). The latter case was a type of "measure for measure." For unethically taking possessions from Naaman, Elisha told him that "the *sara'at* [that had been removed from] Naaman shall be attached to you and your descendants forever."

The Deuteronomy verse that cautions Israel, "Be guarded with *neg'a hasara'at* to be exceedingly careful," is followed by, "Remember what Hashem your G-d did to Miriam on the journey" (Deut. 24:8-9). These two verses constitute a brief, self-contained paragraph, that is, they are preceded and succeeded in the Masoretic text by spaces (*setumot* in this case). Such juxtaposition calls for an explanation. Given that the only event recounted in the Torah that fits the statement concerning Miriam is the episode cited in Numbers 12 in which G-d struck her with *sara'at*, the Sifra (on Lev. 14:35) derives from it the rule that G-d metes out such plagues because of slanderous speech.

Rabbi Simeon the son of Eleazar adds that *sara'at* also comes because of arrogance, deriving the lesson from the passage cited above that depicts the sin of King Uzziah that resulted in his becoming afflicted with *sara'at*. (Miriam's transgression may also be seen as an example of arrogance, in that she equated her and Aaron's prophecy to that of Moses.) The talmudic sages – in an *aggadic* vein – added a number of other failings that may cause *sara'at* (*b. Arak.* 15b-16a). The bottom line is that the tradition recognizes that G-d brings on the plague for moral sins, warning man to correct himself.

Despite the fact that in the pre-Torah world *sara'at* was commonly viewed as retribution meted out by the gods, nowhere in the ancient Near East besides in Scripture was it seen as retribution for moral transgressions. It is noteworthy that in the section legislating the laws of *sara'at* the Torah itself does not provide any explicit explanation concerning what brings it on. This is consistent with the Torah's methodology and general theological position.

Endnote

* Perhaps the priest was also required to ensure that he not be perceived as the healer, which the idolatrous priest was usually thought to be (in addition to being a practitioner of pagan rites). Indeed, in their systems, healing was inextricably linked with their rituals. Within the Torah's prescribed details for *sara'at*

nothing is mentioned regarding treatment of the condition. Of course, the Torah countenanced the practice of healing by humans while it was understood that ultimately G-d is the true healer, but in the case of *sara'at* it appears that the malady was seen as being solely dependent on G-d to be the healer.

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