In modern medicine, jaundice is defined as a symptom of a disease rather than the disease itself. The main sign of jaundice is the yellowing of the skin and the sclerae, caused by high levels of bilirubin in the blood. Bilirubin is the chemical that is produced when red blood cells are destroyed and is eventually removed from the blood's circulation by the liver. Jaundice can be caused by several conditions: from the overproduction of bilirubin which the liver can't destroy, from a defect in the function of the liver preventing it from removing bilirubin from the blood, or from a blockage of the hepatic ducts thereby decreasing the flow of bilirubin from the liver to the small intestines [1].

In Hebrew, jaundice is referred to as either the modern term tzaheveth, derived from the word zahav, gold, or the Biblical term yerakon, derived from the word yarok or green. The word yerakon is found six times within Tanach, (Devarim 28:22, Melachim I 8:37, Yirmiyahu 30:6, Amos 4:9, Chagai 2:17 and Divrei Hayamim 6:28), generally in conjunction with the word shidaphon. Rashi and several other commentators define yerakon as an agricultural condition in which the surface of the grain becomes pale and yellowish-green. In contrast, Rav Hirsch understands yerakon as referring to either jaundice or chlorosis [2].

Further information regarding yerakon can be found with the Mishnah and Talmud. Firstly, it is clear from Taanis 19a that yerakon refers to an emergency state spurred by an epidemic, as it is written, “the alarm is sounded and prayers are recited” when yerakon and shidaphon are found among the population. A more explicit definition of yerakon is provided by Rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro who states “Yerakon is grain whose appearance became pale. And there are some who interpret yerakon to be an illness where the facial appearance of a person turns green like the grass of the field [2].”

It seems clear that the word yerakon is derived from the word yarok, green. The story of Rabbi Nathan and the circumcision of a child born following the death of his two older brothers who had both died due to complications of their circumcision help to understand the definition of yarok. When Rabbi Nathan saw the third baby had a green complexion, he suggested that the mother wait until he becomes “full blooded.” Rashi explains that his green color was caused by anemia and he was weak from lack of blood production. Modern bible scholars offer different explanations for yarok, either the pallor caused by severe anemia or jaundice secondary to icterus neonatorum. Furthermore, there are other instances where yarok can mean different shades. In Chullin, there is a discussion suggesting that yarok could be various shades of yellow or a “green resembling the leek.” In addition, there is a postmenstrual flow that is called yarok which may or may not render a woman a niddah. Lastly, the milk of a kosher animal is considered white, while the milk of a non-kosher animal is said to have a greenish tinge [2].
There are several Talmudic causes for the phenomenon of jaundice. In Shabbas 33a, it is said that yerakon is a punishment for baseless hatred. It is also thought to be caused by urinary retention (Berachos 62b, Tamid 27b; Berachos 44b.) Dr. Rosner suggests that the disease of the gallbladder was originally caused by urinary retention and refers to the uremic coloration in a patient with advanced kidney disease [2].

There are many treatments suggested in the Talmud for jaundice. The flesh (Yoma 84a) or the urine (Berachos 7b) from a donkey should be ingested. Additionally, water of palm trees and a potion of roots (Shabbos 109b) are a suggestion to alleviate the condition of jaundice. Also, a potion described by Rabbi Yochanan (Shabbos 110a) and other remedies (Shabbos 110b) are suggested for jaundice in the Talmud [2].

The term yerakon can refer to several different conditions. The Biblical yerakon (other than Yrimiyahu 30:6) seems to be an affliction of grain. The Talmudic mention of yerakon refers to either jaundice or anemia. Dr. Rosner suggested that because yerakon was thought to be caused by baseless hatred, as hatred and anger are related to yellow bile or gall, it would make sense to conclude that the term yerakon is jaundice. However, the story concerning a newborn that had a greenish tinge does not provide support for either interpretation. Based on this story, Dr. Rosner finally concludes that there is no clear conclusion concerning whether the Talmudic yerkaon is in fact jaundice [2].

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