

Parshat Tazria-Metzora Out of Bounds

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The most challenging aspect of Tzara'at is finding the causal relationship between the onset of the Nigayim¹ and that which precipitates them. Glaringly absent from the Torah's description of the "disease" is the reason for its appearance. Given the paucity of Torah sources, it is strange that, when asked, people unhesitatingly associate Tzara'at with Lashon Hara. This dissonance can likely be explained by two phenomena. The first of which is the tremendous popularity and influence of Rashi's commentary on the Torah. In a number of places in Tazria-Metzora and elsewhere, Rashi quotes Midrashei Chazal that attribute the problem of Tzara'at to Lashon Harah.² Additionally, the Torah's most famous case of Tzara'at is seemingly a bona fide case of Lashon Harah. When Miriam speaks disparagingly about her brother Moshe, she is stricken with Tzara'at. While this can explain the source of the popular sentiment, it still does not sufficiently elucidate the reason for the correlation between Tzara'at and Lashon Hara or address the more fundamental question as to what causes Tzara'at.

The Gemara in Arachin³ brings a statement from Rabbi Yochanan that there are seven improprieties that precipitate Negayim: Lashon Harah, murder, swearing falsely, illicit relations, haughtiness, theft and miserliness.⁴ It is a striking statement. Given the dearth of information in the Torah as to the causes of Tzara'at, how did Rabbi Yochanan compile such an extensive list? Also, interestingly, Lashon Harah, though enumerated first, is just one of many causes for Negayim. One could suggest that many times a plethora of explanations is an indication of uncertainty as to the true reason for

or rationale behind a phenomenon. Multiple suggestions are therefore offered to compensate for the deficits of the alternatives since no one explanation is sufficient. In that case, Rabbi Yochanan would be presenting numerous options rather than a definitive list. That type of explanation is generally true or might be viable when the suggestions are proffered by a number of different authorities, but it is less likely in a case where all the causes are listed by a single individual. Even if it were to be true in this instance, all the questions and points made above would still be relevant.

In order to reach a clearer understanding of Tzara'at, we need to do a quick survey of all the stories in Tanach which relate to Tzara'at or a Metzora.⁵ In the Torah, we have three stories. The affliction of Paroah and his household when they improperly take Avraham's wife Sarah.⁶ Moshe's hand breaking out in Tzara'at as part of the signs God grants him at the Sneh.⁷ Miriam's contracting of Tzara'at after speaking about her brother Moshe.⁸ In the Navi, we have King David's cursing of Yoav and his family with Tzara'at when Yoav⁹ underhandedly assassinates Avner, after Avner secretly met with David on a plan to unify all the tribes of Israel under David's leadership.¹⁰ Elisha's curing of the Tzara'at of Na'aman, the general of Israel's archenemy Aram,¹¹ and his subsequent cursing of his protégé Geichazi with Tzara'at for soliciting without compensation from Na'aman for Elisha's curative services.¹² Two chapters later, we have the story of the "Four Lepers" which we read as the Haftorah for Parshat Metzora (or Tazria-Metzora).¹³ Chazal claim that the unidentified individuals in the story are Geichazi and his three sons.¹⁴ In either case, the story revolves around four individuals who are banished from what seems to be the capital city of the Northern Kingdom of Israel because they

¹ בדבר תורה השימוש במילה "צרעת" מובנה המחלה בכללה ומילת "נגעים" מובנה התסמינים והתופעה של המחלה

² בדרך ישיב - שלא יהיו שאר טמאים וישיבים עמו. ואמרו רבותינו מה נשתנה משאר טמאים לישיב בדרך, הואיל והוא הבדיל בלשון הרע בין איש לאשתו ובין איש לרעהו, אף הוא יבדל: (ויקרא יג, טו) טהרות - ...לפי שהנגעים באין על לשון הרע, שהוא מעשה פטופטי דברים, לפיכך הזקקו לטהרות צפרים, שמפטפטי תמיד בצפצוף קול: (שם יד, ד) מצרעת כשלה - ...באות זה רמז שלשון הרע עוסק באומרו לא יאמינו לי, לפיכך הלקהו בצרעת, כמו שלקתה מרים על לשון הרע: (שמות ד, ו) שלח לך אנשים - למה נסמכה פרשת מרגלים לפרשת מרים, לפי שלקתה על עסקי דבה שדברה באחיה, ורשעים הללו ראו ולא לקחו מוסר: (במדבר יג, ב)

³ א"ר שמואל בר נחמני א"ר יוחנן על שבעה דברים נגעים באין: על לשון הרע, ועל שפיכות דמים, ועל שבועת שוא, ועל גילוי ערויות, ועל גסות הרוח, ועל הגזל, ועל צרות העין. (ערכין טז.)

⁴ עיני ילקוט שמעוני משלי רמז תתקלח שיש שש סבות לצרעת בשם ר' יוחנן וויקרא רבה פרשה יז ד"ה ג על עשרה שמביא עשר סבות לנגעים

⁵ נעשה סקירה של כל המקרים בתנ"ך אבל כדאי לעיין בכל מקרה בפנים
⁶ וינגע יקוק את פרעה ונגעים גדלים ואת ביתו על דבר שרי אשתו אַרְבָּם: (בראשית יב, יז) מניחים שהנגעים של פרעה הם צרעת

⁷ ויאמר יקוק לו עוד הבא נא ידך בחיקך ויבא ידו בחיקו ויציאה והנה ידו מצרעת פֶּשֶׁלָג: (שמות ד, ו)

⁸ והענן כר מעל האהל והנה מרים מצרעת פֶּשֶׁלָג ויפן אהרן אל מרים והנה מצרעת: (במדבר יב, י)

⁹ ויבא הוא השר הצבא של דוד המלך, אבנר הוא השר הצבא של שאול ואיש בשת (כל ישראל חוץ משבט יהודה)

¹⁰ יחלו על ראש ויאב ואל כל בית אביו ואל יקרת מבית ויאב זב ומצרע ומחזיק בפֶּלָךְ ויפלו בקרב וחסר להם: (שמואל ב ג, כט)

¹¹ מלכים ב ה; ונעמן שר צבא מלך ארם היה איש גדול לפני אדניו ונשא פנים כי בו נתן יקוק תשובה לארם והאיש היה גבור חיל מצרע: (שם א)...ויבדל ויטבל בירדן שבע פעמים כדבר איש האלהים וישב בשרו כבשר נער קטן ויטהר: וישב אל איש האלקים הוא וכל מחנהו ויבא ויעמד לפניו ויאמר הנה נא ידעתי כי אין אלקים ככל הארץ כי אם בישאל ועתה קח נא ברכה מאת עבדך: (שם יד-טו)

¹² וצרעת נעמן תדבק בך ובזרעך לעולם ויצא מלפניו מצרע פֶּשֶׁלָג: (שם כז)

¹³ מלכים ב ז; וארבעה אנשים היו מצרעים פתח השער ויאמרו איש אל רעהו מה אנחנו ישיבים פה עד מתנו: (שם ג)

¹⁴ וארבעה אנשים היו מצרעים - אמר רבי יוחנן: זה גחזי ושלישת בניו (סוטה מז.)

were Metzora. At the same time, the city is on the verge of a catastrophic collapse from the enduring siege laid by the army of Aram. The Metzora are situated in no man's land between the army of Aram and the fortified city. They, like those in the city, are dying from starvation and make the difficult decision to throw themselves to the mercy of the army of Aram rather than face certain death from malnutrition. As they approach the encampment of Aram, they discover that it had been suddenly abandoned by the troops of Aram who left all of their supplies behind. They begin to eat and loot the encampment, but then have a change of heart and decide to notify the king of the miraculous salvation that Elisha predicted God would provide the city. The last instance is the story of Uziah, the King of Yehudah, who, along with Yeravam ben Yoash of the Northern Kingdom, successfully returns Yisrael to the former glory and cache it had reached under Shlomo HaMelech. At the pinnacle of his success, Uziah decides that he would like to bring an incense offering in the Temple. Despite the protestations of the assembled Kohanim, he personally attempts to illicitly offer the incense on the Golden Altar. In the midst of his rage and a moment before he succeeds at offering the incense, he suddenly breaks out in Tzara'at and is whisked out of the Mikdash.¹⁵ Uziah is then sanctioned with a living exile because of his Tzara'at and for the remainder of his life his son replaces him as the king for the day to day affairs of the kingdom.

The story of King Uziah is the most enlightening because the verses there describe the reasons behind his missteps that eventually lead to his downfall. "As long as he sought God, God made him prosper...and his fame spread as far as the entrance of Mitzrayim...and his name spread far abroad, for he had fortified himself extraordinarily, until he was strong. As he became strong, his heart became haughty until the point of self-destructiveness and he betrayed God his Lord and went into the Sanctuary of God to burn incense on the Altar."¹⁶ At first glance, it would seem that Uziah's fatal flaw lies in his arrogance. As the Torah predicts,¹⁷ you will become fat with

prosperity and kick away God; your success will cause you to desert God. While this is the obvious conclusion from the preceding story, it has limited usefulness in discerning the underlying causes of Tzara'at. Arrogance and haughtiness are helpful in explaining the particular story of Uziah's deposition, but they do not afford a deeper insight into the root cause of Tzara'at which would then be extrapolable to the other instances throughout Tanach.

On the other hand, some light might be shed on the matter in the continuation of the story. When Uziah enters the temple, the priests confront him and try to dissuade him from proceeding with the following argument, "it is not for Uziah to bring the incense offering to God; that is the purview of the Kohanim, the children of Aharon, who are sanctified for the purpose of burning the incense; leave the Temple, you are trespassing, this will not be your honor from God."¹⁸ They entreat the king to be satisfied with his stature as the civilian ruler and implore him not to usurp the position consecrated for the priests. The priests' response in combination with the verses above present a picture that defines haughtiness as the aggrandizement of the individual to the point where it blurs their ability to clearly see their limits. They are so overcome with themselves, self-centered that they no longer see anything being outside their purview or right. With such a person, there is no room for others or God, they are a one man show.

Extrapolating this broader concept, one can then suggest that the underlying cause of Tzara'at is a result of overstepping one's bounds, not knowing their proper place. It is the inability of the person to see beyond themselves. In that case, the only appropriate place for such an individual is to be banished from society, to be alone outside the encampment or city. As a quid pro quo (מדה כנגד מדה), if they can only think of themselves, they should be isolated from society to be by themselves. If they cannot see others, they should not be granted the right to be with others. Living with others is a privilege that requires one to value and consider others beyond themselves. The punishment of the Metzora

¹⁵ וַיִּבֶן יִזְחָק אֶת הַמִּלְחָה וַיְהִי מִצְרַע עַד יוֹם מוֹתוֹ וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּבֵית הַחֲפְשִׁית וַיּוֹתֵם בֶּן הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל הַבַּיִת שִׁפְט אֶת עַם הָאָרֶץ: (מלכים ב טו,ה) וְדַבְרֵי הַיָּמִים בְּכֹן; וַיִּזְעַף עֲזִיָּהוּ וַיִּזְדוּ מִקְטָרֵת לַהֲקָטִיר וּבִזְעָפּוֹ עִם הַכֹּהֲנִים וַחֲצָרָתוֹ בְּמִצְחֹו לִפְנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּבֵית יִזְחָק מֵעַל לְמִזְבַּח הַקְּטָרֹת: וַיִּפֹּן אֵלָיו עֲזִרְיָהוּ כֹהֵן הָרֹאשׁ וְכָל הַכֹּהֲנִים וַהֲנִה הוּא מִצְרַע בְּמִצְחֹו וַיִּבְהַלּוּהוּ מִשָּׁם וְגַם הוּא נִדְחַף לְצִאת כִּי נִגְעוּ יִזְחָק: וַיְהִי עֲזִיָּהוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ מִצְרַע עַד יוֹם מוֹתוֹ וַיֵּשֶׁב בֵּית <חַחֲפְשׁוֹת> הַחֲפְשִׁית מִצְרַע כִּי נִגְזַר מִבַּיִת יִזְחָק וַיּוֹתֵם בְּנוֹ עַל בֵּית הַמִּלְחָה שֹׁפֵט אֶת עַם הָאָרֶץ: (שם טו-כא)

¹⁶ וַיְהִי לְדַרְשׁ אֲלֵקִים בַּיָּמֵי זְכַרְיָהוּ הַמַּבְיֹן בְּרֹאֵת הָאֲלֵקִים וּבַיָּמֵי דָרְשׁוֹ אֶת יִזְחָק הַצִּלְיָחוֹ הָאֲלֵקִים...: וַיִּזְעַרְהוּ הָאֲלֵקִים עַל פְּלִשְׁתִּים וְעַל הָעַרְבִים הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּגוֹר בְּעַל וְהַמְעוּנִים: www.swdaf.com

וַיִּתְּנוּ הָעַמּוּנִים מִנְחָה לְעֲזִיָּהוּ וַיִּלֶךְ שָׂמוֹ עַד לְבָאוֹ מִצְרַיִם כִּי הִחְזִיק עַד לְמַעְלָה...: וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּיְרוּשָׁלַם חֲשֻׁבְנוֹת מְחֻשָּׁבֵת חוֹשֵׁב לְהִיּוֹת עַל הַמַּגְדָּלִים וְעַל הַפְּנוֹת לִירוֹא בְּחַצִּים וּבְאַבְנֵים גְּדוֹלוֹת וַיֵּצֵא שְׂמוֹ עַד לְמַרְחֹוק כִּי הַפְּלִיא לְהַעֲזֹר עַד כִּי חִזְקוֹ: וַיַּחֲזַקְתּוּ גְּבַה לְבוֹ עַד לְהַשְׁחִית וַיַּמְעַל בַּיִקוֹן אֲלֵקִיו וַיָּבֵא אֶל הַיָּכֵל יִזְחָק לַהֲקָטִיר עַל מִזְבַּח הַקְּטָרֹת: (שם ה-טז)

¹⁷ וַיִּשְׁמַן יִשְׁרוּן וַיִּבְעַט שִׁמְנוֹת כֶּשֶׂת וַיִּטֵּשׂ אֱלוֹק עֶשְׂהוּ וַיִּנְבֵּל צוּר יִשְׁעָתוֹ (דברים לט,טו)

¹⁸ וַיָּבֵא אַחֲרָיו עֲזִרְיָהוּ הַכֹּהֵן וַעֲמֹו כֹהֲנִים לִיקְוֹן שְׂמוּנִים בְּנֵי חִיל: וַיַּעֲמָדוּ עַל עֲזִיָּהוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ לֹא לָךְ עֲזִיָּהוּ לַהֲקָטִיר לַיִקוֹן כִּי לַכֹּהֲנִים בְּנֵי אֶהֱרֹן הַמְקַדְּשִׁים לַהֲקָטִיר צָא מִן הַמִּקְדָּשׁ כִּי מַעֲלָת וּלֹא לָךְ לְכַבֹּד מִיִּקוֹן אֲלֵקִים: (שם יז-יח)

(בדד ישב, מחוץ למחנה מושבו) is an attempt to rehabilitate this individual. It hopefully will have them reflect on their self-centeredness and teach them to treasure those that are around them. This concept is embedded in the word utilized to describe the recovery of the Metzora. As Rashi notes, the Navi describes the Metzora's recuperation as V'Asafto (ואספתו), that he is gathered or returned from his Tzara'at; this is because "upon his rehabilitation the Metzora is returned to human interaction and in his illness everyone is distant from him."¹⁹

Looking back at the list of seven items that Rabbi Yochanan claims precipitate Tzara'at, they share the common denominator of all being people who overstep their bounds or take that which does not belong to them. In his arrogance (גסות הרוח), Uziyahu, the king, also fancies himself as the Kohen Gadol. A murderer (שפיכות דמים) supplants God as the granter and taker of life (מלך ממית ומחיה). Yoav's vengeful murder of Avner, not only undermines God, but also seizes King David's position by overriding

the king's prerogative, wishes and negotiations. Geichazi purports to represent the Navi Elisha for personal monetary gain. He then lies to Elisha about those ill-gotten gains. Illicit relations, especially adultery, always involve overstepping one's bounds and taking that which does not belong to them.

That is exactly what God admonishes Miriam and Aharon for doing when they spoke about Moshe. What right did they have and how could they speak "disparagingly" about Moshe who was in a different league than them?²⁰ Lashon Harah is always overstepping one's bounds. It is the taking of a right that does not belong to the individual to both judge and diminish a person for selfish benefit. One might even suggest that it was chosen as the quintessential paradigm of this phenomenon (צרעת) because it is the most common violation of this concept of being self-aware and not impinging on the rights and boundaries of others. In addition, as can be seen below, the stories in Tanach correlate with the different suggestions of Rabbi Yochanan.

מקרים של צרעת	על שבעה דברים נגעים באין
משה (שמות ד), מרים (במדבר יב)	על לשון הרע
יואב (שמואל ב ג)	ועל שפיכות דמים
גיחזי (מלכים ב ה)?	ועל שבועת שוא
פרעה (בראשית יב ע"פ המדרש), דוד (גמ' סנה' קד.)	ועל גילוי עריות
עזיהו (מלכים ב טו, ד"ה ב כו)	ועל גסות הרוח
גיחזי (מלכים ב ה)?	ועל הגזל ועל צרות העין

In these days of "isolation," it behooves us to take the time to reflect on ourselves and to ensure that we emerge as better people who treasure others and can see beyond ourselves. We need to have earned the right to rejoin society because we no longer see others as obstacles or stepping stones to our success, but rather as precious partners to appreciate and cherish.

Shabbat Shalom

¹⁹ ואספתו מצרעתו - אסיפה במצורע היא לשון רפואתו כי בהתרפאותו הוא נאסף אל תוך בני אדם ובחליו הכל בדלין הימנו: (רש"י מלכים ב ה, ו)

²⁰ ויאמר שמעו נא דברי אם יהיה נביאכם יקוק במראה אליו אתוידע בחלום אדבר בו: לא כן עבדי משה בכל ביתי נאמן הוא: פה אל פה אדבר בו ומראה ולא בחידות www.swdaf.com

ותמנת יקוק יביט ומדוע לא יראתם לדבר בעבדי במשה: ויחר אף יקוק בם וילך: (במדבר יב, ו-ט)