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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.

First come human skin diseases 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 and then checks for healing or spread; he must note the depth of lesions, flesh that became raw, hair that turned whitish (on the head or beard, yellowish), 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 must be rent, his hair is to remain uncut (disheveled), he is to cover himself to his mustache and he calls out “*tameh, tameh*” when necessary to warn others not to make physical contact with him. Until cured, he dwells outside the camp.

The word *צָרַעַת*, according to Ibn Ezra, means “sickness,” but it surely appears to refer to specific conditions and not to be a general term for all types of illnesses. Its root derivation is obscure. If *צָרַעַה* (“*sir`ah*,” Ex. 23:28; Deut. 7:20; Josh. 24:12) means “hornet,” as many take it to be (but not Ibn Ezra, who translates it as *sara`at*), 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” and “ש” (“*sadi*”–“*seen*”) that prompted some interchangeability, consider *צָרַעַת* to be related to *שָׂרַעַת* (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 *מִהַשְׁתַּרַע*, while *sara`at* would refer to a condition that “stretches” or spreads. The word *נָגַעַת*, 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 Aharon saw Miriam stricken with *sara`at*, he said to Moshe: “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 *mesor`a*, 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, 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 *mesor`a* and a human corpse – implied in the Torah as concerns the *mesor`a* 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 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 BCE.

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 had it: “Four are considered as dead: the destitute, the *mesor`a*, the blind, and the one without children” (BT *Nedarim* 64a).

As the *mesor`a* 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 the stricken individual would have on others through the various modes of contact, although it provides such laws 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 *mesor`a*

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 question 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 re-examined. 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* showed up again, the house must be destroyed. All *sara`at* debris must be discarded outside the city in an impure place (a “dump”). If upon re-examination 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:

Like 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]? – to expound and receive reward.” Like whom? Like Rabbi Eleazar the son of Rabbi Shimon....

It was taught in a *Baraita*: Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Sadoq said, “There was a place within Gaza called ‘the ruins of the afflicted house.’” Rabbi Shimon of Kfar Acco said: “Once when I went to Galilee I saw a place they were marking and they said ‘afflicted stones were moved there’” (BT San. 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 *Hilkhot Tumat Sara`at* 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.).

...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 Moses and Aaron how to rid a house of mold. First ask a priest to inspect it. Then scrape the inside walls and throw all contaminated materials in an unclean part of town. If that doesn’t work, the house “must be torn down – its stones, timber and all the plaster.”

“That’s exactly what we do today, except we skip the priest part,” says David C. Straus, who, as a professor of microbiology and immunology at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, is a 21st-century version of a mold priest. The molds that Straus and others try to exorcise are everywhere. There are thousands of varieties, found in every region of the country....

...We do know for a fact that mold is associated with cognitive impairment in some people,” says

Dr. Wayne Gordon, a neuropsychologist and professor of rehabilitation medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in Manhattan.... These doctors cannot yet say definitively how these toxins work and why they affect some people more than others....

For some reason, it appears that mold in homes has either become more prevalent in recent times or is diagnosed more frequently. (See, "The Turmoil Over Mold in Buildings," by Dennis Hevesi, *The NY Times*, March 23, 2003.)

In the case of house *sara`at* the Torah teaches a lesson in caring. When someone reports to a *kohen* that he noticed in his house what might be a *neg`a sara`at*, a *kohen* must examine the house. First, however, "The *kohen* shall command that they clear the house before the *kohen* comes to examine the plague, so that not everything in the house shall become defiled; afterwards the *kohen* shall come to examine the house" (Lev. 14:36). The underlying intent of this verse appears clear – the *kohen* is mandated to prevent as much loss as possible for the homeowner. He is not to assume that the house is probably not stricken before he begins; he must always instruct that the house be emptied and ascertain that it was emptied before the examination. This is a humanitarian concern within the legalistic intricacies.

The Sages point out that this is a particularly illustrative example of the Torah's compassion on one's possessions (M. *Nega'im* 12:5). Most vessels can be cleansed from impurity through ablution in water. The only vessels irreparably rendered impure when in a house at the time that a *kohen* declares it plagued are the earthenware ones (Lev. 11:33), invariably the least expensive of all the vessels.

3. Regarding the Priest's Role

In all cases of *sara`at* it was the priests who determined the onset, progression and termination of the condition. They were exclusively responsible for all the examinations, decisions and declarations of pure and impure, as clearly and continuously emphasized throughout the relevant chapters: וְהוֹבִיֵא אֵל אֱהָרֹן הַכֹּהֵן אוֹ אֶל אֶחָד מִבְּנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים; וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן; וְהִסְגִּיר הַכֹּהֵן; וְטִהַר הַכֹּהֵן; וְטִמְאוּ הַכֹּהֵן; וְצִוָּה הַכֹּהֵן.

In introducing the several subsections of *sara`at*, G-d speaks to Moshe or sometimes to Moshe and Aharon

together (Lev. 13:1; 14:1; 14:33), and does not instruct them to inform *Bene Yisrael* of the details although they are very relevant to everybody. This is in contrast to the other laws that are under priestly aegis but applicable to all Israel, such as the sacrifices and other cases of impurities; in those many cases they were instructed to inform *Bene Yisrael*. Some have suggested that the reason for this difference is that the details of *sara`at* are very technical and too complex for the average layman. They would be expected to read the Torah text, become generally familiar with these laws and know when they must consult the priest. But, according to this opinion, they were not required to be fully conversant with the manifold subtleties such that great effort must be expended in transmitting these to them.

However, it may be that the reason not to promote teaching the intricacies of these regulations to the public-at-large – and only these regulations – lies in the fear that some non-priests may take these laws into their own hands. After all, the decision regarding purity or impurity does not entail any action whatsoever, ritual or otherwise, but merely involves observation and diagnosis, a capacity many who learn the particulars will feel capable of.

This fear consists of more than the possibility of misdiagnosis. In the neighboring cultures, observation of the *sara`at* was accompanied by incantations and pagan rites directed to demigods, while the priest was perceived as removing demons. In Israel, to assure there be no idolatrous associations or misunderstanding of human powers, the one who examines the stricken individual must take care not to give the impression that he is performing magical rites or be thought of as removing demons.* The *kohen'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 *kohen*.

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

Be guarded with the *sara`at* plague (הִשְׁמַר בְּגִנְעָה) (לְשִׁמְרָה 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 Moshe (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 Na`aman 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 Na`aman, Elisha told him "the *sara`at* of Na`aman shall be attached to you and your descendants forever."

The Deuteronomy verse that cautions Israel to "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 Shimon 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 Aharon's prophecy to that of Moshe's.) The Talmudic Sages – in an *aggadic* vein – added a number of other failings that may cause *sara`at* (BT *Arakhin* 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 *kohen* was also required to assure that he not be perceived as the healer, which the idolatrous priest was usually thought to be, besides 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.