

# Are We the Lepers of Israel?

*Parashat Tazria-Metzora*



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In this week's Torah portion, we learn about skin diseases that can cause impurity. These particular diseases required a separation between the unclean individuals and those that were healthy.

*“When anyone has a swelling or a rash or a shiny spot on their skin that may be a defiling skin disease, they must be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons who is a priest. The priest is to examine the sore on the skin, and if the hair in the sore has turned white and the sore appears to be more than skin deep, it is a defiling skin disease. When the priest examines that person, he shall pronounce them ceremonially unclean.” – Leviticus 13:2,3 [NIV]*

## What Does Leprosy Mean for Us Today?

How are diseases that have long since been cured by modern medicine relevant to us today?

A person who was declared by the priest as having a defiling skin disease had to move out of the camp, and everything that that person touched was considered to be unclean. One of the skin diseases that we learn about in this week's parasha is leprosy, which has been vanquished by modern medicine.

Though discussing it may seem irrelevant today, we are faced with the challenge of finding a new meaning amongst the seemingly unrelated diseases that appear in our reading.

Leprosy is a skin disease which is mentioned in the Bible as being a serious and contagious infection with no cure. In Jewish thinking and understanding, the cause of the disease is a punishment for one's negative behavior, especially for slander - when we hurt people and embarrass them in public, through gossip, or by speaking badly about them behind their back.

It's very easy to start talking poorly about others or to partake in listening to hurtful gossip. It's hard not to believe slander when we hear it, no matter how many times we discovered it to be false, without any shred of truth.

## **Slander is a Disease**

Negativity has power; we tend to remember the downfalls or faults of others before we think of their positive attributes. When we say or hear negative stories about other people, we feel a degree of satisfaction. It's a sensation of feeling full after devouring another person.

From innocent, happy children who see the good, beautiful, and the fun in everything, we've become wary adults who are experts in finding the unacceptable, the different, and the bad in others and in the world. The ironic part is that we like things that way, we even enjoy it.

It seems as if today that the category of sinful speech is one that no one is ashamed of anymore. I think that most of us are guilty of sinning in this category nor do I think that anyone would have a problem confessing to this.

On the other hand, however, if I were to ask if anyone sinned in the categories of impure thoughts, theft, and fraud - no one would confess. This is because these these things are thought of as being more shameful.

With improper speech and slander, we all know these are a sin, but no one is really ashamed of it. The leprosy that comes from negative speech is the physical sign of a negative mental state, and that is exactly Yeshua's intent when He speaks the following:

*“What goes into someone’s mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.” – Matthew 15:11 [NIV]*

At His disciples request, Yeshua explains this saying:

*“But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.” – Matthew 15:18,19 [NIV]*

## Going Out of the Camp

The big question is, how do we get out of this situation? The leper, the one who spoke evil and hurt others, goes out in isolation outside the camp, away from the group.

Outside there's no one to talk about, and there begins the mental process of purification, which leads to the purging of the disease. Then, the leper is immersed in water, shaved of all body hair, and only after that can start life over again. This is a reference to being born again.

In our understanding, one who is born again is an individual who declares that he believes in God and considers Yeshua to be his personal Savior, and from that moment on he dedicates his life to God. That person is immersed in water and comes out as a new person, this signifies the death of the old man and his sin, and his resurrection as a new beginning.

## A Leper Nation

Even as a nation, God gives us a second chance and a new beginning. God cleanses us over and over, and He gives us countless possibilities to do so for one main reason that repeats itself dozens of times in the Torah - that we would be His people, and He would be our God. As a result, we are

commanded to keep and to do God's commandments.

*“Therefore say: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.’ They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.” - Ezekiel 11:17-20 [NIV]*

There were times in which Jews were considered by the nations of the world to be lepers. We were rejected and pushed out of the camp. God promised that this would change, the world would see the people of Israel as a blessing, and they will want to be near us.

In fact, we see this trend growing stronger today. The reason for this is Yeshua, who was crucified as King of the Jews. Believers from all over the world want to take part in His kingdom, they want to share in this blessing, and so they draw near to the King of the Jews and His people.

## **Leprosy Means Rejection**

When I look for a relevant meaning for this parasha, I understand it as being about rejection, be it rightfully or wrongfully. Even today, we see those different from us as being ones who we would want to keep our distance from, we want to push them out of the camp, just as the leper is cast out. Be it because of the color of their skin, their race or nationality, religion or faith.

We are often times most afraid of a person who shares our religion, faith, race, or nationality, but holds a theology that is different from ours. It's as if we feel compelled to keep our distance.

We see the person with the different theology as being dangerous, someone who could infect us with the “modern leprosy” of thinking outside of our theological box.

## Can Lepers Bring Blessing?

Could it be that the word of salvation, of redemption, of success could come from the mouth of a leper? This happened in the haftara of this week's Torah portion.

Can it still happen today? Will we be able to receive the message, the truth? Most importantly, as far as I and the work of Netivyah are concerned: Will the people of Israel be willing to hear the gospel of salvation from the mouth of a Messianic Jew?

Our haftara reading this week is 2 Kings 7:3-20. In the chapter preceding the haftara, we are told of the great famine in Samaria, which was caused by the Aramean siege.

The Aramean army encircled the city of Samaria and completely cut it off it from all supplies in order to conquer the city. The famine in Samaria was terrible, people were starting to eat their children, they were in complete despair.

The king wanted to kill the prophet Elisha. Elisha turned to the king and promised salvation, but it was difficult for the leadership to sustain hope during such a desperate and difficult time.

Our haftarah begins with chapter 7 verse 3, there we focus on four lepers, who were in anguish even more so than the inhabitants of the city. They had almost died of starvation, so they decided to take a final risk of going to the camp of Aram to ask for mercy.

Even if they were to get killed, it wouldn't matter, they said they're already dying of starvation, but maybe the soldiers of Aram will throw some crumbs their way.

I think the four lepers made a lot of noise as they approached, because they did not want the guards to see them sneaking in like spies, or like an observation or assassination team. They wanted to draw the attention of the Aramean soldiers and ask for a few crumbs of bread out of pity.

When the lepers arrive at the camp, they found it abandoned, and scripture tells us that God made the sound of the lepers' approach as the sound of a mighty army, so that the Arameans thought that the Egyptian army had come to fight them.

The result was that the army of Aram fled, and left everything behind - food, silver, gold - all their property.

Our lepers begin to plunder the camp, but they start to feel guilty. One of them rose up the nationalist sentiment, despite the fact that they were kicked out of the city during the siege.

## The Lepers' Test

That same night, they immediately went back to report to the king, but the king feared it was a trap:

*“The king got up in the night and said to his officers, ‘I will tell you what the Arameans have done to us. They know we are starving; so they have left the camp to hide in the countryside, thinking, ‘They will surely come out, and then we will take them alive and get into the city.’” - 2 Kings 7:12 [NIV]*

After the king confirmed that this was not a trap, the people went out of the city and were saved, just as Elisha prophesied.

## In Conclusion

You could look at us, the Messianic Jews, as those who are infected with leprosy. The rest of the inhabitants of the city don't want to come into contact with our theology.

In regards to the internal Jewish dialogue, they have kicked us out of the camp. But it's us who have the opportunity to bring the report of Yeshua, who is sitting and waiting right around the corner.

I suppose that the people of Israel want to check and see if this is some sort of Christian trap, designed to get them to convert their religion.

However, we are tested as well. What report do we bring? A report of Judaism or of Christianity? Will the people, after coming to faith, remain faithful to the Torah and to the traditions of their ancestors and Jewish identity?

The gospel we preach should lead to the fact that we can truly and honestly say “yes” to all of these questions.

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