



## What Can We Learn from the Spiritual Disease Described in the Torah?

### Spiritual Roots for Physical Ailments

I'm terrified of the awful illness that plagues so many people in our times. In Israel and in Torah observant circles we don't even dare mention the proper name of this dreadful disease that has taken so many lives, as we don't want, G-d forbid, to call it upon anyone. We simply call it הַמַּחֲלָה/hamachala – 'the sickness.' In biblical times it doesn't seem like people suffered from cancers, aids and heart attack. The only illness mentioned by name in the Bible is *tzara'at* – a disease usually mistranslated as 'leprosy,' yet it is more accurately translated as 'psoriasis.' (Cheyne and Black, [Encyclopedia Biblica](#), Shai A, Vardy D, Zvulunov A (2002). [Psoriasis, biblical afflictions and patients' dignity] (in Hebrew). *Harefuah* 141 (5): 479–82, 496. PMID12073533). By mentioning the symptoms and the process of curing the disease of *tzara'at* in great details, the Torah offers a model for finding the cause and healing of any disease throughout the ages. I find it interesting that although permission was given for the doctor to heal (*Shemot* 21:19), the Torah chose specifically the Kohen to diagnose *tzara'at* and to oversee the healing procedure of this spiritual disease. By choosing the Kohen, in his capacity as spiritual healer, rather than a physician, to heal the only disease mentioned by name in Scripture, the Torah insinuates that the root of illness is spiritual rather than physical. Throughout the Talmud and Midrashim, Chazal view *tzara'at* as a consequence for various transgressions involving interpersonal misconduct, particularly *lashon hara* (slander/gossip). "Rabbi Yossi Ben Zimra said: Whoever speaks *lashon hara* - *tzara'at* comes upon him..." "Reish Lakish said: 'This shall be the ritual for a *metzora*' – this shall be the ritual for the *motzi shem ra* (the person guilty of defamation)." "Rav Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: *tzara'at* comes on account of seven things: 1) *lashon hara*; 2) murder; 3) false oaths; 4) immorality; 5) arrogance; 6) theft; 7) stinginess" (*Babylonian Talmud, Arachin* 15b-16a). Also, today, most illnesses have spiritual causes. Therefore, addressing the spiritual root of illness helps to achieve its physical cure.

### Various Types of *Tzara'at* Illustrate Different Aspects of Character Flaws

The different types of illness indicate the particular character-trait that the diseased person needs to work on and do *teshuvah* for (repent). For example, various kinds of *tzara'at* allude to different aspects of negative speech.

ספר ויקרא פרק יד פסוק נד

זאת התורה לכל נגע הצרעת ולנתק: (נה) ולצרעת הבגד ולבית: (נו) ולשאט ולספחת ולבהרת:  
 "This is the law for every lesion of *tzara'at*, and for a *netek*, [the name of the lesion of *tzara'at* when it occurs on an area of hairy skin]. For *tzara'at* of garments and houses, for a *se'et*, for a *sapachat* and for a *baheret*" (*Vayikra* 14:54-56).

The Hebrew roots of the three kinds of *tzara'at* mentioned here can refer to three different motivations for engaging in evil speech. Each one having its own spiritual root and way of repentance:

1. שֵׂאֵת/Se'et – 'a rising' – Alludes to a person speaking against others in order to raise his own stature.
2. סַפַּח/Sapachat – 'a scab' – Alludes to a person joining (*sipuach*) – a group of people who speak against others. In ordinary circumstances, he would not speak *lashon hara*, but to be sociable or to fit in, he would.

3. **בְּהֶרֶת/Baheret** – ‘a bright spot’ – Alludes to a person might have done something against someone else, and in an attempt to exonerate himself, he speaks against that person. He clarifies (*bahir*) or rationalizes his behavior (Based on the *Chatam Sofer*).

### Teshuvah – The Optimal Cure

**ספר ויקרא פרק יד פסוק ב** זאת תהיה תורת המצרע ביום טהרתו והובא אל הכהן:  
(ג) ויצא הכהן אל מחוץ למחנה וראה הכהן והנה נרפא נגע הצרעת מן הצרוע:

“This shall be the law of the person afflicted with *tzara’at*, on the day of his cleansing: He shall be brought to the kohen. The kohen shall go outside the camp, and the kohen shall look, and behold, the lesion of *tzara’at* has healed in the afflicted person” (*Vayikra* 14:2-3).

One of the tasks of the Kohanim was to determine if a sign on a person, garment, or house was in fact *tzara’at*. Rebbe Michel Z’lotchover explains that the Kohanim represent the *tzaddikim* (perfectly righteous) in each generation. Their purpose is to direct us toward teshuvah and good deeds. In order to engender teshuvah, the person afflicted with *tzara’at* was commanded by the Torah to go unshaven, wear torn clothes, and proclaim in the streets that he was impure. These are all actions that disgrace a person and makes him aware that he must repent. The process of purifying *tzara’at* – a physical ailment with a spiritual root identified by the kohen – can be experienced figuratively today through spiritual healing where we ask Hashem to help us ‘see’ the underlying roots of our ailment and guide us to fix them through, *emunah* (faith), forgiveness and changing direction. For example, I recently experienced awful, burning hives on my face that made me look terrible. When I did spiritual healing on myself the word ‘anger’ came up. This was surprising for me since I never usually get angry. That is, I never yell at people. Yet, spiritual healing brought my inward unexpressed anger into my awareness. That same week, I had experienced four different very challenging incidents with various people. The frustration I felt expressed itself in angry, burning lesions on my face. So, in my spiritual self-healing, I worked on accepting the difficult situations exchanging my anger with *emunah* that everything would resolve itself and so it eventually did. This inner self-healing is a way of integrating regretting our negative actions and emotions and transform them into closeness with Hashem. Thus, spiritual healing engenders teshuvah in a real and practical way.

### From Physical to Spiritual Healing in the Era of Redemption

In the Torah and Talmud relying on physicians and medicine was questionable. According to Rav Acha of the Talmud, a person, who is wholly faithful and cleaving to Hashem, does not need to rely on manmade cures. Rather, he should search within his heart to find what spiritual failing may have caused him to become susceptible to illness and repent. Yet, the ordinary person, whose faith is weak and feels himself too far from Hashem to rely on ‘miracles,’ has no choice but to avail himself of the current therapeutic options. Therefore, according to Rav Acha, when seeking cures from physicians, as is the way of the world, we must apologize to Hashem for our lack of *emunah* in G-d (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 60a). There is no need to apologize for practicing or receiving spiritual healing, as spiritual healing both emanates from and strengthens our *emunah* in Hashem. The increasing popularity of spiritual healing in our time reflects our yearning for *geulah* (redemption) when we and our health once again will be completely in Hashem’s hand. As the Ramban explains: “When Israel is perfect and numerous then they will not be ruled by nature at all... For Hashem will remove all sicknesses from among them, to the extent that they will neither need a doctor, nor to guard themselves in the ways of medicine at all as it states, “*I am G-d your Healer*” (*Shemot* 15:26). In this manner, the *Tzaddikim* would act during the time of prophecy. Even if a sin would befall them and they would become ill, they would not go to the doctors, but only to the prophets...” (*Ramban, Vayikra* 26:11). May our prayers and spiritual healing lead us to greater closeness with the Almighty! May we learn to open the channels that eventually will lead us to prophecy and complete repentance! May Hashem heal all the sick and remove illness from all of us forever!