

Parshas Tazria-Metzora – Moshe Dovid Spitzer (reprinted)

ו אייר תשע"ה – 24 April 2015 – שבת פ' תזריע-מצורע

---

**Answer True or False: Tzoraas is (a) Leprosy (b) Psoriasis (c) Mould (d) None of these**

The translation of tzoraas as leprosy is not recent. 'Leprosie' appears in the first English translation of the chumash (published 1382); one and a half thousand years previously the Septuagint (Greek) translation rendered 'nega tzoraas' as 'aphe lepras', a plague of leprosy, and the Latin translation is 'plaga lepra'.

The disease known as leprosy is caused by the bacterium Mycobacterium leprae. Found mainly in the tropics, it is estimated that it affects 2.5 million people worldwide. Depigmented patches occur on the skin, and nerves stop functioning. The disease can be highly destructive, causing deformity of the face and loss of the fingers and toes. Leprosy is contagious, thought to be spread by inhalation of bacteria emitted from a carrier; however, prolonged close contact with a carrier is necessary. Since the development of antibiotics it is now treatable, though treatment takes many months.

From this description alone it is clear that tzoraas is not leprosy: in fact, their only common feature is light patches appearing on the skin. Leprosy does not affect clothing or buildings as tzoraas does. Leprosy is not known to turn hair white, and it takes months or years to cure with antibiotics, whereas tzoraas can heal spontaneously in days.

Historically lepers have been reviled and ostracised, a unique stigma which sufferers of other severe diseases have not had to bear. Interestingly, one suggestion is that this was actually carried over from the ritual isolation of a person with tzoraas.

Much discussion has been devoted to this subject in medical literature; other suggested translations are the diseases vitiligo, syphilis, scabies and neurodermatitis. Yet another suggestion is that tzoraas is psoriasis, which even sounds the same! (But 'psoriasis' is derived from the Greek 'psora' – 'itch', and we are not told that tzoraas was itchy). As recently as 2003, an article in the journal Perspectives in Biology and Medicine suggested that tzoraas be translated as 'mould' on the basis that certain moulds can infect both buildings and humans, causing significant symptoms. (This is, at least, an attempt to explain how tzoraas can also affect clothing and buildings, something which is beyond the other suggestions.)

From a superficial look at its laws tzoraas does indeed seem to be some form of contagious disease. However in Jewish tradition it is generally accepted that tzoraas is a physical manifestation of spiritual malaise, which as the gemora states is brought upon a person as a result of committing certain sins. It is brought upon a person in order to encourage him to do teshuva.

Rabbi S.R. Hirsch argued in the strongest terms against identifying tzoraas as a medical condition. Among his proofs are: (1) tzoraas which covers the whole body does not make one impure – how does this make sense? (2) all furniture is removed from the house before it is pronounced impure – this counters any idea that the laws are to do with infection control (3) if tzoraas appears on a bridegroom, or during a festival, the kohen does not examine it until after the festivities are over – surely at these times it is even more important to ensure the affected person is isolated! (4) the metzora is not banned from cities which were not walled at the time of Joshua (5) the laws apply only to Jews. In the same vein, Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetsky in Emes LeYaakov points out that the laws of tzoraas only apply after being diagnosed by a kohen; if there were a risk of contagion, safety would dictate immediate isolation even if there were just a suspicion of disease, without waiting for confirmation.

Despite these arguments, many rishonim do indeed write that tzoraas is contagious. These include Rambam – himself a doctor! (Moreh Nevuchim 3:47), Ibn Ezra, Rabbeinu Bachye (14:7) and Abarbanel. They write that tzoraas is indeed brought upon a person because of his sins, but once he has it, he can infect others. Ralbag goes even further, ascribing it completely to natural causes such as decay of the body's tissues. In the last century too, the Meshech Chochma entertains the possibility that tzoraas is contagious, writing that the kohen needed Heavenly help not to contract tzoraas after coming into contact with it. It is difficult to understand how these authorities would answer the arguments proposed above.

Perhaps the best approach is just not to translate tzoraas at all!