

Tazria

תזריע

“She conceives”

Leviticus 12:1 – 13:59

Torah Together



The next two *Torah* portions deal with ceremonial cleanness and skin diseases. These subjects definitely seem strange when seen from our modern viewpoint. However, insight into God’s character can be gained by considering these instructions from God’s perspective.

1. Purification after Childbirth - 12:1-8

a) Why do you think a woman was considered ceremonially unclean after giving birth? What was the length of the period of purification if the baby was a boy? What about a baby girl? Why do you think it was different?

b) What process was to be followed at the end of the purification period for her to be ceremonially clean? What if the woman was particularly poor? What was the purpose for this process and what was the result?

Interaction with God

The uncleanness referred to here is **ceremonial** or **ritual** uncleanness. Perhaps the concept is best understood by considering the fact that God is **perfectly holy** and it is not possible for holiness to interact with that which is unholy. Thus for us to be able to commune with God (which is His desire), we must first be in a state of holiness, **clean and set apart** for interaction with God. While we may not fully comprehend the reasons for this, it is clearly of significant importance to God.

What’s Unclean about Childbirth?

It’s not the birth of the child that makes a woman ceremonially unclean, it’s the flow of blood that accompanies the process. This is consistent with the rules for menstruation (**Leviticus 15:19-30**). It seems whenever human blood flows outside the body, it renders the person ceremonially unclean for a prescribed period of time. God definitely considers blood of paramount importance.

Leprosy, Really?

The Hebrew word translated “infectious skin disease” or leprosy is *tzara’at*. It is believed to be any of a number of infectious skin diseases which involve skin discoloration, irritation, and flaking. (Today, leprosy is defined to be a very specific disease, known as Hansen’s disease, that often involves severe deformation as well as skin abnormalities.)

In the ancient times, such skin diseases were feared because they were contagious and often caused permanent disfigurement. As such they were often considered judgments from God. There are several examples in Scripture in which a person was struck with *tzara’at* after engaging in malicious gossip and murmuring. (In Hebrew, malicious gossip is known as *lashon ha’ra*, the evil tongue.) Thus the Rabbis often connect malicious gossip and leprosy together. See **Numbers 12** for one such case.

2. Regulations about Infectious Skin Diseases - 13:1-46

a) Whose job was it to determine if a person had an infectious skin disease? What specifically did he look for? What were the possible outcomes after examination?

b) What happened to a person if a skin disease covered his entire body?

c) When does a skin boil qualify as an infectious skin disease? What about a burn?

d) How are skin lesions on the head to be treated? When is baldness considered an infectious skin disease?

e) What role did the priest play in this entire process? What were the requirements of a person who was pronounced unclean?

3. Regulations about Fungus or Mildew - 13:47-59

What was to be done with an article of clothing that had a visible fungus or mildew? Describe the process that was followed. What were the possible outcomes for such an article of clothing?

Mildew and Leprosy

Given that the symptoms of leprosy (or *tzara'at*) were abnormalities and discolorations on the skin, it's not surprising that people would use the same term to describe the presence of mold or mildew on the surfaces of objects. It is not uncommon to see black or dark colored molds growing on cloth or leather items and even on stones used in the construction of homes. Thus, when such growths were observed on everyday objects used by the Israelites, those objects were thought to be "afflicted with *tsara'at*."

Note that the procedure for dealing with such afflicted objects mirrors the procedure for afflicted humans: the object is isolated for a period and inspected by the priest. If the infection has cleared up or not grown, the object can be thoroughly cleaned and "brought back into the camp."

"and the priest shall pronounce him clean."
Leviticus 13:23 b

Clean and Unclean

טהור

This is the Hebrew word *Tahor*, usually translated **clean**. It means:

- to be bright, pure
- sound, clear
- unadulterated, uncontaminated
- innocent, holy
- to be clean

טמא

This is the Hebrew word *Tamei*, usually translated **unclean**. It means:

- to be foul, especially in a ceremonial or moral sense
- contaminated
- defiled, polluted
- to be unclean

In **Ezekiel 44:23**, speaking of His priests, God says, "They [the priests] are to teach my people the difference between the **holy** and the **common** and show them how to distinguish between the **unclean** and the **clean**."

Much of Leviticus is about learning to differentiate between what God considers **clean** and what He considers **unclean**. We would do well to study this distinction and try to understand its importance to God.

Digging deeper

1. It has been suggested that God's purpose for these laws was to guard the Israelites against the spread of infectious diseases. List the arguments for and against this idea. What is your opinion? What other reasons do you suppose God may have had for giving us these laws?

2. The *Haftarah* for this week tells the story of Naaman and how he was healed of leprosy (**II Kings 4:42 - 5:19**). In addition, **II Chronicles 26:16-23** tells the story of how Uzziah, King of Judah during the time of Isaiah's prophecy, contracted leprosy. See if these stories help with your understanding of this issue.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Jeremiah 46:13-28

Brit Hadashah : Luke 2:22-24; John 19:31-37; Acts 13:16-17;
Revelation 8:6 – 9:12; 16:1-21