YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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GEOGRAPHY IN THE PARASHA

***PARASHAT TAZRIA-METZORA***

**The *Tzara’at*-affected House**

**By Prof. Yoel Elitzur**

***Tzara’at* as a Real-life Phenomenon in the Second Temple Period and Thereafter**

The *tzara’at* that the Torah describes is not a recognized disease today, and its prominent symptoms – hair turning white (or yellow, in the case of an affection on the head or beard) and a patch of undiscolored flesh within the swelling – are unknown to us. Traditional translations, following the Septuagint, refer to the Biblical *tzara’at* as “leprosy” and the *metzora* as “leper,” as *lepra* was a generic name for any skin disease in ancient and classical Greek. In modern English and other contemporary European languages, the word “leprosy” or its cognates – as well as *tzara’at* in Modern Hebrew – commonly refers to Hansen’s disease, a serious illness that has affected people throughout history, particularly before the last century. Left untreated, Hansen’s disease can cause disfiguring skin lesions and can even lead to loss of limbs, as well as paralysis, hearing loss and vision loss, and finally death. However, modern leprosy bears little actual connection to the Biblical *metzora* and *tzara’at* and to *lepros* and *lepra* of the Septuagint. As mentioned above, the Biblical *tzara’at* has different symptoms, and in the time of the Septuagint, the Greek word *lepra* was used for any kind of skin illness.

Moreover, Hansen’s disease apparently did not even exist during the Biblical period. Clear descriptions of this disease first appear in Greek writings from the first and second century CE. Among numerous skeletons from Egypt and the land of Israel dated to the first millennium BCE that were examined by scholars, not one case of Hansen’s disease was found. The most ancient skeleton with signs of Hansen’s disease was revealed in Jerusalem in 2009 inside an ossuary dated to the first century CE. Echoes of Hansen’s disease exist in rabbinic sources, [[1]](#footnote-1) but *Chazal* never connected leprosy with *tzara’at*. In the Cairo Geniza, fifteen touching letters from the eleventh century were found, written in Hebrew by a group of lepers who stayed near the hot springs of Tiberias in an attempt to heal their affliction. In the letters, the lepers request financial assistance from the Jewish communities. The lepers describe their suffering, using Biblical terminologylike *shechin* (“inflammation”) and *garav* (“scurvy”) for the disease itself, and words like “pained” and “afflicted” to describe themselves, but even they never used the word *tzara’at* in connection with their condition. In addition, leprosy can be contagious (though not highly contagious, as it was thought to be in previous generations), unlike Biblical *tzara’at*, which is not contagious at all.[[2]](#footnote-2) Finally, a person can recover from *tzara’at* in the span of one week, while leprosy is a chronic illness.

*Tzara’at* existed during the Second Temple period; a forty-cubit by forty-cubit unroofed chamber was designated specifically for *metzora’im* in the Women’s Court of the Temple (*Mishna Midot* 2:5). Two generations following the destruction of the Temple, Rabbi Yehuda provided a detailed description of the precise way in which Rabbi Tarfon purified three *metzora’im* (*Torat Kohanim*, *Metzora* *Parasha* 1).

***Tzara’at* of the House**

In contrast to the *tzara’at* that would afflict a person’s body, the Tannaim viewed the laws of *tza’arat* afflicting clothing and the walls of a house as entirely theoretical. *Chazal* interpreted *tzara’at* of the house in alternately positive and negative lights. The positive:

Rabbi Shimon son of Yochai taught: When the Canaanites heard that Israel were coming to their country, they arose and hid their wealth inside their walls and in their fields. The Holy One said: I did not promise their forefathers that I would bring their descendants into a land laid waste, but rather to a land full of all kinds of goodness, as it is written: “And houses full of all kinds of goodness” (Deuteronomy 6:11). What, then, did the Holy One do? He caused sores to appear on a person’s house, and when he took it apart he would find the treasure. (Leviticus Rabbah 17).

And the negative:

“The owner of the house (*asher lo ha-bayit*; literally, ‘he that the house is for him’) shall come” (Leviticus 14:35). Why then, “for him”? [That means to say that] if one devotes his house to himself exclusively, refusing to lend his belongings by pretending he did not own them, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, exposes him as he removes his belongings. (*Yoma* 11b)

And:

So it is with *tzara’at* affections. First they come on his house. If he repents – good; if not – then the [affected stones of the house] must be pulled out, as it says, “The priest shall order the stones to be pulled out” (Leviticus 14:40). If he repents – good; if not – then [the house] must be torn down. If he repents – good; if not – [the *tzara’at* affections] come on his clothes and they must be washed. If he repents – good; if not, [the affection] must be torn out, as it says, “He shall tear it out from the cloth” (13:56). If he repents – good; if not, [the clothes] must be burned, as it says, “The cloth shall be burned” (13:52). Then [the affections] come on his body. If he repents – good; if not – [the priest] goes and returns. If he repents – good; if not, “he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp” (13:46). (Ruth Rabbah 2)

The common denominator between all of these homilies is that none of them portrays this form of *tzara’at* as a real-life phenomenon.

**Did *Tzara’at* of the House Exist?**

The *Tosefta* states:

There was never an affected house, and there never will be one. Then why was this law written? That you may study it and receive reward. Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon said: There was a place in the vicinity of Gaza that was called *Churveta Segirta* (“ruins of affected houses”). Rabbi Shimon son of Yehuda of Kefar Akkum said: There was a place in the Galilee that they would mark off, saying: “Affected stones were there.” (*Nega’im* 6:1)

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 71a) cites this dispute along with two other similar disputes regarding the wayward and defiant son and the idolatrous city, but there is a distinction between these two examples and that of the *tzara’at*-affected house. In the other two cases, the dispute is formulated differently:

There was never a wayward and defiant son, and there never will be one. Then why was this law written? That you may study it and receive reward. Rabbi Yonatan said: I saw him and sat on his grave…

There was never an idolatrous city, and there never will be one. Then why was this law written? That you may study it and receive reward. Rabbi Yonatan said: I saw it and sat upon its ruins.

From a statistical perspective it seems surprising that among all the Sages, Rabbi Yonatan was the one who sat on both the grave of the wayward and defiant son and the ruins of the idolatrous city. I once heard a solution – that in each of these two instances, Rabbi Yonatan is using a poetic metaphor, and both times he is referring to Jerusalem. To explain, Jerusalem is called an “idolatrous city” because of the widespread idolatry practiced there in the years leading up to the destruction of the Temple. Likewise, the people of Jerusalem are represented metaphorically by the wayward and defiant son, who disobeyed his father and met his demise as a result.

The dispute over the *tzara’at*-affected house diverges from the uniform schematic structure of the first two disputes cited in the Talmud. The first opinion in the *tosefta*, which rejects the existence of the *tzara’at*-affected house, is followed by the names of not one, but two sages – the son of Rabbi Shimon son of Yochai and a prominent disciple of his. Both of them cite traditions that include specific information concerning the remnants of a *tzara’at*-affected house.

**The Gazan Tradition**

Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon provides a piece of information that cannot be interpreted as a literary homily, neither does it resemble a traditional folk identification. Rabbi Elazar was at least a second-generation resident of the Upper Galilee; his father lived in the Galilean city of Tekoa and both of them were buried in Meron. Gaza is more than ninety miles from the region where Rabbi Shimon, his children and his disciples spent their days. What is more, during that period there were no Jews at all living in Gaza, which was entirely Hellenistic since the Roman conquest of the land in 63 CE. There was a Jewish presence in the agricultural areas surrounding Gaza until the Bar Kokhba rebellion, but these communities were eliminated following the rebellion’s suppression.[[3]](#footnote-3)

On the other hand, it should be noted that Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon does not attest explicitly to the existence of *tzara’at*-affected houses – only that there was a place called “Churveta Segirta,” which he believed referred to this phenomenon. The Sages heard this information from Rabbi Elazar but did not alter their position regarding *tzara’at* of the house. If they had done so, the *baraita* would have been formulated differently; it might have stated: “In the beginning, it was said that there was never an affected house, and there never will be one, until Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon came and said: There was a place in the vicinity of Gaza that was called Churveta Segirta.” What, then, is the position of the Sages? Do they accuse Rabbi Elazar of lying? Certainly not. It seems, then, that the Sages do accept Rabbi Elazar’s testimony, but maintain that the existence of such a name does not necessarily prove the existence of *tzara’at* of the house. As Ramban states: “There is no need to seek out the reason for names of places” (commentary on Genesis 23:9). There are many place names whose meanings are completely unclear to us, and there are sometimes place names with multiple possible interpretations. If one insists on attempting to understand the meaning of this name, he might take into consideration that the root S-G-R is found in various Aramaic idioms, referring to closing or locking. Thus, it may be that the ruin that Rabbi Elazar spoke of was described as *segirta* not due to *tzara’at*, butbecause the site was considered “shut tight,” closed off from public access.

Is it possible to identify this place that Rabbi Elazar describes? Today, there is no known site in the country, neither near Gaza nor in any other region called “Churveta Segirta” or any name of that nature.[[4]](#footnote-4) Isaiah Press suggested identifying Churveta Segirta with the nondescript ruin of “al-Kharba” or “er-Rasm”[[5]](#footnote-5) between Deir al-Balah and the ruins of Kfar Darom. This kind of identification is a product of the “identify at all costs” school of thought, and should not be given credence.

The *tzara’at*-affected house in the Gaza region interested R. Ishtori Haparchi from a halakhic perspective, concerning the holiness of the land and its borders. The *tzara’at*-affected house is a *mitzva* that is bound by the land, as the Torah states: “Upon a house in the land you possess” (Leviticus 14:34). The mention of the *tzara’at*-affected house in the Gaza region indicates that Gaza is imbued with the holiness of the land of Israel. Some *Acharonim* dealt with the question whether Gaza was included within the territory consecrated by the returnees from Babylonia. It is well known that places that were not recaptured by the returnees from Babylonia were generally exempt from tithes and the laws of *shemita*. These places were also viewed as bearing “impurity of the land of the nations” like all land outside the land of Israel (*Gittin* 8a and others) unless they were interpolated within the land of Israel proper. Impurity of the land of the nations is similar in severity to the impurity of a corpse, and thus the *tzara’at*-affected house – which bears a lesser degree of impurity – would not be an important consideration in such an area. Maharit maintained that the Gaza region was not consecrated, and the tradition cited by Rabbi Elazar may have been from the First Temple period, while R. Jacob Emden maintained that the Gaza region was indeed consecrated by “the returnees from Babylonia.” In our discussion on *Parashat Toldot*, we cited evidence supporting the latter position.



Title page of R. Ishtori Haparchi’s *Kaftor Va-ferach*, Venice 1549 (hebrewbooks.org)

**The Galilean Tradition**

In contrast to the Gazan tradition, which, on the one hand, was an authentic testimony concerning a place name, and on the other hand, did not possess the characteristics of a traditional folk legend, the second tradition is precisely the opposite case. Rabbi Shimon son of Yehuda, who cites the tradition, was a prominent disciple of Rabbi Shimon son of Yochai. In most of the places where his name appears in rabbinic literature, he cites views and statements in the name of Rabbi Shimon. The name of his place of residence appears in numerous variations: *Kefar Akko*; *Akkom*; *Akkos*; *Eikom*; *Eikos*; *Kefar Abbom*; *Eibom*; *Abbos*; *Eibos*; and *Kefar Eitam*. The sources do not provide any indication of the identification of this place. Most scholars of Talmudic geography preferred the version *Kefar Akko* and tied this name to Caphareccho, which Josephus mentions in *The Wars of the Jews* (II:573). These scholars identified this site near Acre.[[6]](#footnote-6) In such a case, I prefer to leave this identification as an open question; in any case, it stands to reason that a prominent disciple of Rabbi Shimon would live in the Galilee near his mentor.

Rabbi Shimon son of Judah makes a general statement, without pointing to any specific location, and relates that there was a certain place in the Galilee that contained stones labeled as *tzara’at*-affected. The tradition he cites is written in the past tense: “There **was** a place in the Galilee that they marked off.” Even though he was speaking of the same Galilee where he and his mentors spent their lives, Rabbi Shimon son of Judah is unable to point to any specific location. In light of this, it seems that he was merely citing a vague tradition, a story passed from one student to another in the halls of the *beit midrash*. It is no wonder that the Sages are not convinced by this anecdote, and stand firm in their position: “There was never an affected house, and there never will be one.”

**For further study:**

S. G. Browne, “How Old is Leprosy,” *British Medical Journal* 1970, 3:640-641 (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1701736/pdf/brmedj02305-0068.pdf>).

C. Cohen, “Literary and Philological Aspects of BH צרעת,” *Korot* 21 (2011-2012), 255-291.

M. Gil, *Palestine During the First Muslim Period*,Tel Aviv 1983, 2, 457-475 [Hebrew].

M. Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634-1099* (trans. E. Broido), New York 1992, 183-185.

Ishtori Haparchi, *Kaftor Va-ferach*, Lunz ed., Jerusalem 1897, 129 and citations in notes [Hebrew].

A. Hyman, “R. Shimon ben Yehuda,” *Toldot Tanna’im Ve-Amora’im*, 1177 [Hebrew].

I. Press, “*Churveta Segirta*,” *A Topographical-Historical Encyclopaedia of Palestine*, 2, Jerusalem 1948, 252; “*a-Rasm*,” 4, 882 [Hebrew].

G. Reeg, “Meron,” “Tekoa,” *Die Ortsnamen Israels nach der rabbinischen Literatur*, Wiesbaden 1989, 423-424, 621-622 [German].

D. P. Wright and R. N. Jones, “Leprosy,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4, 277-281.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. See *Bereishit Rabba* 60 and parallels: “Jephthah died through the loss of his limbs. Wherever he went, a limb would fall off.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *metzora* separates himself from the camp because he is ritually impure, not for medical reasons. This can be seen from the fact that the *metzora* does not always have to separate himself, such as: if “he has turned all white” (Leviticus 13:13); or according to *Chazal*, during the seven days of celebration following his marriage or during the three festivals (*Sifra Tazria* 5); and if he is in an unwalled city (*Mishna Kelim* 1:7). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A small number of Jews found their way back to this region during the Amoraic period; see our discussion on *Parashat Toldot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Names similar to either *churveta* or *segirta* individually do exist: In the southwestern Mount Ephraim region there are two Arab villages whose names were preserved in the Aramaic form – Kharbata – and in Lebanon there is a similarly named village – Harbata. As for *segirta*, the Lower-Galilean moshav of Ilaniya was originally called Sejera, after the nearby Arab village al-Shajara. In addition, there exists in the Upper Galilee a Druze village called Sajur. However, Sejera/al-Shajara was apparently an Arabic name in origin (meaning “the tree”), and it is accepted that Sajur is an Arabic version of the Talmudic name Shezor. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Arabic word *rasm* means “remnant of ruins.” Almost all ruins in the land of Israel bearing this name are found in the Gaza/Ashkelon region; apparently the term was used particularly frequently in the Arabic dialect of this region. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Compare to the similar case of Kefar Ludim, which was adjacent to Lod (*Gittin* 2a). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)