

spirit
torah portion



Seeking The Spiritual

In the midst of the Book of *Leviticus*, the Torah spends two parashiyot focused on the disease *tzara'at*.

No ordinary disease, *tzara'at* cannot only effect a person's skin but also clothing and even the stones of a house. While *tzara'at* is often translated as leprosy, it is most likely not that disease.

In fact, if we consider the fact that our tradition ascribes spiritual reasons for this malady, it is no surprise that *tzara'at* doesn't match up cleanly with any disease known to modern medicine.

While there are a variety of explanations within our tradition as to the cause of *tzara'at*, the most common one is that *tzara'at* is caused by speaking slander and gossip. This is a clear sign of the seriousness with which our ancestors took the issue of proper speech. Still, it is a very unusual cause for disease.

Unusual also is the manner in which a person is healed of the disease. The Torah gives a very specific course of inspections by the priest, waiting periods, isolation and cleansing rituals as part of the purification process. When the sufferer of *tzara'at* is finally free of the disease, he is instructed to bring two birds as part of a ritual: One bird is to be slaughtered; the other is set free.

The Torah doesn't explain the meaning behind this ritual, but a lesser-known midrashic work called *Midrash Tadshe* tries to uncover the meaning in these details. I'd like to thank Professor Alan Cooper of the Jewish Theological Seminary from whom I recently learned this interpretation.

The *Midrash Tadshe* claims that, "God provided the birds as a sign for those who bring them: Observe how one bird is slaughtered and buried in the earth; just as it is impossible for this bird to move from its place, so it is impossible for the *tzara'at* to recur. Lest you say that the condition has gone away never to return

Parshat Tazria/
Metzora: *Leviticus*
12:1-15:33; *II Kings*
7:3-7:20.



Rabbi Steven
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so I can revert to my corrupt behavior, consider the bird that has been freed, which remains alive and would be able to return. Thus, if you renege on your repentance, you will end up with a relapse of *tzara'at*."

It seems to me that there is a profound insight in the *Midrash Tadshe's* understanding of this ritual. When

we are spiritually sick, we feel a great sense of relief when we are healed. When we act badly and suffer the effects of that bad behavior, we just want to emerge from that suffering. And when it is over, we want to bury it like the bird in this ritual. We want to get rid of the pain. But our sense of relief can blind us to the possibility that the pain can return as a result of future bad behavior — it can return just as the bird that at first flew away.

Ultimately, the Torah is teaching us of the importance of guarding against a recurrence of this spiritual illness. If we do this properly, perhaps the bird that is released can then become a positive symbol of our own freedom to avoid past pitfalls. ➔

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CONVERSATIONS

Why do you think Jewish tradition sees slander and gossip as such severe problems? The priest functions in a healing role in the Torah. While doctors play a critical role in healing in our society today, can you think of three other people in your life who play a healing role — whether professionally or not?

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