

Dear Rabbi Fried,

I wanted to ask you if the Tzaraat leprosy described in the Torah still exists. It says that if a pink or white patch appears on the skin a Kohen is summoned and he judges it...Does that still happen today?

Marcela A. R.

Dear Marcela,

You are referring to Vayikra/ Leviticus Ch. 13, which describes in great detail the intricacies of this “*Tzaraat*”. It is not actually referring to the infliction of the skin affliction we today call leprosy, we only call it that as we are unclear what exactly it is. This is clear from the fact this affliction affects the hair, and even spreads to clothing, as the Torah spells out in that chapter. Furthermore, at the end of the following chapter, we learn that this malady may affect one’s home as well. No disease we know today would equally affect the skin, one’s clothing, and the walls of the house.

Maimonides, in fact, points out that the order that this affliction takes place is the opposite of the way it is described in the Torah. The Talmud explains that the source of this affliction is actually a spiritual one. It results from the misdeed of “*Lashon Hara*”, or negative gossip about a fellow Jew. That is why the atonement therein is by bringing bird offerings, birds that chirp like the one who “chirped” with idle gossip.

Maimonides explains that if one begins to gossiping against a fellow Jew, first a sign appears, as a type of “sickness” on the walls of the home. This indicates, in a miraculous way, that the home has been defiled by this type of speech. If the gossiper doesn’t repent and change his ways, the affliction gets closer to him – by affecting the “shirt on his back”. If the person still doesn’t take heed and learn his lesson, then it goes to the skin of his body. If the Kohen pronounces his affliction to be “*Tzaraas*”, he is deemed to be a “leper”, and is sent outside the camp, to be distant from all other Jews, until he changes his ways. The sign of full repentance is the miraculous disappearance of the affliction, to be pronounced by a Kohen to get the license to reenter the camp.

The Torah says these laws apply only in Israel (Leviticus 14:34). The classical medieval commentary, Nachmonides, explains. Only when the Jews were in Israel at their highest level, with the Temple intact and the Divine Presence, the Shechina, dwelling with them in a tangible way, do these laws and miracles take effect. The Jews had a very high level of connection to the Shechina, which caused them to be in the best of health, their homes unusually beautiful, their clothing stunning, all glowing with holiness. During such times it would be very rare for a Jew to succumb to one of the lowest of sins: deriding a fellow Jew. By doing so, he would cause the Divine Presence to vacate from his home, causing a sign of disgust, and a wake up call to that Jew to reconnect to the level he should be on. Unfortunately, we are light years away from that type of level today, as we are distant from Israel in its full glory. This, sadly, renders these laws temporarily non-applicable. We still can, however, glean important messages from them to enhance our holiness and to understand the power of speech.

It is interesting this section always falls out right before Pesach. Pesach, among other things, means “*Peh Sach*”, or “speaking mouth”. The converse of *Lashon Hara* is to speak words of holiness, such as at the Seder, where our words build generations and a connection to the miracles of the past. These are the words that will take us into the future!