

Confronting *Tuma/Tahara*

I. Parshat Para, the End of Parshat Shemini and Much of the Upcoming Text: The Topic of Tuma

II. Entering the world of *Chukim*

רשי: ויקרא יט:ט

את חקתי תשמרו. ואלו הן: בהמתך לא תרביע פלאים וגו'; חקים — אלו גזרת מלך שאין טעם לדבר:
 Rashi: Chukim are edicts of the king for which there is no reason

רמבן: ויקרא יט:ט

את חקתי תשמרו

ואין הכונה בהם שתהיה גזרת מלך מלכי המלכים בשום מקום בלא טעם כי כל אמרת אלוה צרופה רק החקים הם גזירת המלך אשר יחוק במלכותו בלי שיגלה תועלתם לעם ואין העם נהנים בהם אבל מהרהרין אחריהם בלבם ומקבלים אותם ליראת המלכות וכן חוקי הקב"ה הם הסודות אשר לו בתורה שאין העם במחשבתם נהנים בהם כמשפטים אבל כולם בטעם נכון ותועלת שלימה

Ramban: And the intention about them is not that there be any decree of the King of the kings of kings in any place without a reason, since 'every word of God is pure'

Rather, statutes are decrees of a king who imprints it with his authority without revealing their purpose to the people; such that the people do not benefit from them but rather question them in their hearts.

- What does Rashi really mean?
- Does Rashi, nonetheless, actually propose a “reason” for Chukim?
- Practically speaking, do we have the right to suggest a reason for Chukim?
- What does our approach to this issue depend on? Would Rashi and the Ramban suggest different answers to this question?

III. Entering the world of *Tuma/Tahara*

- Defining our terms.
- Negative or limited?
- A potential [partial] rationale...

IV. Specific Cases

A. *Tumat Yoledet*

ויקרא: יב-א-ו
 וידבר יהוה אל-משה לאמר:
 דבר אל-בני ישראל לאמר אשה כי תזריע וילדה זכר וטמאה שבעת ימים כימי נדת דותה תטמא:
 וביום השמיני ימול בשר ערלתו:
 ושלשים יום ושלשת ימים תשב בדמי טהרה בכל-קדש לא-תגע ואל-המקדש לא תבא עד-מלאת ימי
 טהרה:
 ואם-נקבה תלד וטמאה שבעים כנדתה ושלשים יום ושלשת ימים תשב על-דמי טהרה:
ובמלאת ימי טהרה לבן או לבת תביא כבש בן-שנתו לעלה ובן-יונה או-תר לחטאת אל-פתח אהל-מועד
 אל-הפנה:

On the completion of her period of purification, for either son or daughter, she shall bring to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering.

Why does a *Yoledet* bring a *Chatat*?

- Age-old answer
- Expanding the idea of a *Chatat*
- Offering my own "litvaks midrash"

B. *Tsara'at*: Disease or Divine Reckoning?

1. Abravanel, Ralbag, Meshech Chochma: Communicable disease

2. Many other authorities: Not natural phenomenon based on details clearly inconsistent with the characteristics of communicable diseases, including:

- The kohen diagnoses *Tsara'at* based only on examination of those parts of the body which he can readily see. No careful examination is required in the folds of the body.
- When *Tsara'at* is suspected in a dwelling, the Torah orders the kohen to remove everything from the house before conducting his examination. If *Tsara'at* is a communicable disease, such a procedure would expose the public to potentially infected material.
- Examinations of potential *Tsara'at* are not performed by the kohanim on Shabbat, Holidays, or upon a bridegroom during the seven days of celebration following his wedding.

- The laws of *Tsara'at* only apply to the dwellings in the Land of Israel and only after the land has been divided into individual holdings. These laws do not apply to homes owned by non-Jews or to dwellings of any ownership in the city of Yerushalayim.
- The laws of *Tsara'at* do not apply to non-Jews. A lesion contracted by a convert before his conversion to Judaism is of no consequence.
- Under certain circumstances, if lesions cover an individual's entire body he is not considered contaminated.
- After the nation's entry into the land, a *Metsora* is only to be excluded from walled cities (as determined by the city's status at the time of the conquest of the land). He is to be allowed to remain in unwalled cities and to roam freely through the rest of the countryside.

C. If not natural-then what is the cause? What is God's message?

תלמוד בבלי ערכין טז.

א"ר שמואל בר נחמני א"ר יוחנן [יונתן] על שבעה דברים נגעים באין על לשון הרע ועל שפיכות דמים ועל שבועת שוא ועל גילוי עריות ועל גסות הרוח ועל הגזל ועל צרות העין

The Talmud lists, in the name of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani quoting Rabbi Yonatan, seven sins which cause the affliction of *Tsara'at*: evil or damaging speech, murder, perjury, sexual immorality, arrogance, robbery and miserliness.

מדרש רבה משלי טז

ואלו הן: עינים רמות, לשון שקר, ידים שפכות דם נקי, לב הרש מחשבות און, רגלים ממהרות לרוץ לרעה, יפים קזבים עד שקר, ומשלח מדנים בין אחים, ואמר רבי יוחנן וכלן לקו בצרעת

The Midrash cites six phenomena drawn from the book of Mishlei which trigger the illness: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that spill innocent blood, a heart that ponders thoughts of violence, feet always ready to run for evil purpose, false testimony (that results in the spreading of lies) and the sowing of discord between brothers.

Of these associations between crime and punishment, however, only one seems to capture the rabbinic imagination completely. *Over and over again, the Rabbis link the punishment of Tsara'at to the related crimes of Motzi Shem Ra, slander (lit. the bringing out of a 'bad name'), and Lashon Hara, evil or damaging speech.* Both of these actions are considered grave transgressions within Jewish Law.

The rabbis find support for the link between these sins of speech and the affliction of *Tsara'at* in a series of clues, including:

- The term *Metsora*, itself, can be broken down and linguistically connected to the expression *Motzi Shem Ra* (slander).

- Moshe is temporarily struck with *Tsara'at* at the Burning Bush when he casts aspersions on the Israelites by doubting their willingness to respond to God's call for the Exodus.
- Miriam is punished with *Tsara'at* when she maligns her brother, Moshe.
- The practical response to *Tsara'at* (seclusion from the community) fashions a punishment which fits the crime. The *Metsora* must distance himself through isolation from society because his words created 'distance' between husband and wife; between a man and his friend.¹
- The bird-offerings brought by the *Metsora* at the end of his period of seclusion mirror the nature of his sin. He injured others through the "chatter" of slander and gossip. His purification is, therefore, effectuated through the means of "chirping, twittering" birds.²

D. Speech as the defining human trait: The power of speech

בראשית ב:ז

וַיִּצְרֶה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֶפְרָל מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה:

And HaShem, God, formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

תרגום אונקלוס

וּבְרָא יי אֱלֹהִים ית אָדָם עֶפְרָא מִן אֲדָמָתָא וּנְפַח בְּאַפּוּהִי נְשָׁמָתָא דְחַיִּי וְהוּת בְּאָדָם לְרוּחַ מְמַלְלָא:

..... and man became a speaking spirit

¹ Talmud Bavli Arachin 16b

² Ibid