

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?

It is important to realize that the uncleanness defined here is ritual or ceremonial uncleanness. This does not necessarily imply physical uncleanness. As blood clearly has significant spiritual meaning to God, perhaps it is the issue of blood that God considers unclean. (This is consistent with the laws of Niddah in Leviticus 15:19-30.) The total period of purification for a boy was 40 days (he was to be circumcised on day 8) and for a girl was 80 days. From today’s perspective, there is no reason for the difference. However, it is true that ancient Middle Eastern society valued male offspring more than female.

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?

After the prescribed period had elapsed, the mother was to bring a year old lamb (as a burnt offering) and a young pigeon or dove (as a sin offering) to the priest at the entrance of the tabernacle. If the woman could not afford a lamb, she could substitute a pigeon or a dove for the lamb. The sin offering made atonement for the uncleanness and the burnt offering symbolized renewed commitment and thankfulness to God for the birth of their offspring. After the sacrifices were made, the woman was ritually or ceremonially clean. (See Luke 2:22-24 where Mary and Joseph did this for Yeshua. Also Exodus 13:2-23 speaks of the consecration of the first born, Yeshua in this case.)

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?

It was the priest’s job to examine a person and determine if a skin blemish was a tzara’a. If it was more than skin deep and had a discolored hair in it, then it was a tzara’a and the person was pronounced unclean. If it was questionable, then the person was to be isolated for 7 days and checked again. If the condition had cleared up, the person would wash his clothes and would be clean. If it had spread, then the person was pronounced unclean.

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

If a skin disease covered his entire body, then as long as there was no raw flesh, the priest was to pronounce him clean. This seems to describe a case where a skin disease has spread but then healed.

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

Both a boil and a burn are treated similarly. If in the process of healing, a spot turns white and produces discolored hair (perhaps gotten infected?), then the priest pronounces him unclean. If there is doubt, a seven-day isolation period is prescribed. If the spot clears up or remains unchanged, then he is clean.

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

If sores on the head or scalp are more than skin deep and result in discolored hair, then person is isolated for 7 days and re-examined. If it hasn’t spread, then the person is shaved and waits another 7 days. If it still hasn’t spread, then he is clean. If a man loses his hair naturally, he is still clean. If he loses it because of a skin disease, then he is unclean.

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

The priest played only the part of judge. Any healing was up to God. If a person was pronounced unclean, then he must wear torn clothes, leave his hair unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out “Unclean! Unclean!” when meeting someone on the road. He must also live alone (or with similarly afflicted people) outside the camp.

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?

If an article of clothing had a fungus or mildew, it was taken to the priest who examined it and kept it isolated for 7 days. If the fungus spread, then the article was unclean and burned. If it didn't spread, then the article was washed and reexamined. If it still hadn't spread, the discoloration was cut out and the remainder could be used.

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

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.”

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?

While following these laws may limit the spread of infectious skin diseases, it would not help limit the spread of other diseases. It could be that these infectious skin diseases were judgments upon individuals by God. (Some Jews associate these laws with spreading slander.) In any case, God is very concerned that one's body be in a ceremonially clean state before He can fellowship with him. It reinforces the requirement for holiness in His people.

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