



Like a Leper Messiah

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We Jews, who have been perennial outcasts, ought to read the Torah's account of the leper with particular care.

“Leper,” we should note from the outset, is not really an accurate rendering of the Hebrew, מצורע (*metzora*). The biblical affliction of *tza'arat* is clearly different from what we today call “leprosy,” most obviously so because it can only be fully cured by spiritual means. Yet the King James translation is helpful in its way, not only because it reminds us of similar symptoms, but also because it gives us a familiar historical point of comparison.

Throughout history, lepers have been demonized and feared, quarantined and often even physically sent out of society to go and live in leper colonies. It's hard to fathom a more extreme version of the outcast. Surely, then, there is something in the leper's story that we need to know.

Toward the end of last week's *parashah*, Tazria, the Torah begins to catalog all manner of skin afflictions and finally comes upon *tzara'at*—what we'll call leprosy for the time being. Then, in Parashat Metzora, we move to the process for **curing** the leper.



This cure is effected through an intricate set of mysterious rituals. The priest orders two birds, one of which he slaughters over an earthen vessel with fresh water in it. He then takes the live bird, together with cedar wood, crimson worm, and hyssop, and dips them all into the blood of the other bird, and sprinkles the blood seven times onto the leper. Then the leper washes his clothes, shaves off all his hair, and bathes in water. After seven days, he will be pronounced pure.

Yet even before the leper is fully “cured,” before the seven-day clock starts, as soon as he undergoes the ritual and bathes, we read:

ויקרא יד:ח

ואחר יבוא אל המחנה

Leviticus 14:8

...after that, he shall enter the camp.

This is rather surprising, since we were told earlier, when we first read about leprosy:

ויקרא יג:מו

כל ימי אשר הנגע בו יטמא טמא הוא בדד ישב מחוץ למחנה מושבו.

Leviticus 13:46

As long as the disease is on him, he shall be impure. He shall sit alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

“He shall sit alone.” It’s very stark, very sad language. Indeed, the leper might be outside the camp for a very long time. Yet the Torah does not then simply abandon him to a state of permanent exile. Instead, our *parashah* takes us directly into the detailed procedure for his treatment. His condition is monitored and, when he shows signs of healing, the priest goes



out to him and performs the ritual. As soon as that is complete, the leper is immediately taken back into the camp. He must still remain outside his tent for a week, in a kind of liminal space, perhaps as a cautionary measure. But he is back among his people, in the Camp of Israel.

That's the paradigm. That's how the Torah wants us to deal with the leper. Help him, and bring him back in.

But, it seems that model did not last. We will read about lepers again, later in Tanakh, and this time their situation is altogether different.

The Haftarah is not chosen randomly; it always has some thematic link to the *parashah*. Often, it offers a new spin on that theme, and serves as a subtle way of reflecting on and reinterpreting the original story. The Haftarah for our *parashah* is taken from the book of Kings, and it begins—as you might guess—with another story of lepers:

מלכים ב ז:ג-ד

וְאַרְבָּעָה אֲנָשִׁים הָיוּ מִצִּרְעִים פֶּתַח הַשָּׁעַר וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ מָה אֲנִיחוּנוּ יֹשְׁבִים פֹּה עַד מָתָנוּ. אִם אֲמָרְנוּ נָבֹא הָעִיר וְהָרָעַב בָּעִיר וּמָתָנוּ שָׁם וְאִם יֹשְׁבֵנוּ פֹה וּמָתָנוּ. וְעַתָּה לָכֵן וְנִפְלֶה אֶל מַחֲנֶה אָרָם אִם יַחֲיֵנוּ נַחֲיָה וְאִם יָמִיתֵנוּ וּמָתָנוּ.

2 Kings 7:3-4

Four men, who were lepers, were outside the entrance to the gate. They said to one another, “Why should we sit here, waiting for death? If we decide to go into the town, we shall die there; and if we just sit here, we still die. So let us go down into the Aramean camp. If they let us live, we shall live; and if they put us to death, we would have died anyway.”



They end up going into the camp and finding it abandoned, and their report plays a pivotal role in the story. But leaving aside the context for a moment, let's just consider the opening image.

These lepers are sitting outside the gate—starving, abandoned, and totally desperate. Where is their healer? Where is their community? All they have is each other, the other lepers. It is eerily like a little leper colony.

The book of Kings documents the chaotic years of wars and wicked monarchs. After King Shlomo's reign, things had begun to fall apart. So what we're seeing here is a society that has so completely devolved that it is no longer tending to its most needy. We went from a whole *parashah* devoted to bringing the leper in to a story of lepers who are hopelessly outside, lingering pathetically at the gates.

Yet there is an even more harrowing account of the leper in Jewish tradition. It appears in the last chapter of Massekhet Sanhedrin. Our Rabbis in this *perek* are dealing with all kinds of major theological issues, including theories of redemption. One of the questions they ask (on 98a) is: "When will the messiah come?" There are lots of cryptic answers that read like riddles. There is even a radical opinion that there will be no messiah for Israel. But one of the most striking answers is given in a story that features leper-like imagery:

תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין צח.

ר' יהושע בן לוי אשכח לאליהו דהוי קיימי אפיתחא דמערתא דרבי שמעון בן יוחאי... אמר ליה אימת אתי

משיח

אמר ליה זיל שיליה לדידיה

והיכא יתיב

אפיתחא דקרתא



ומאי סימניה

יטיב ביני עניי סובלי חלאים וכולן שרו ואסירי בחד זימנא איהו שרי חד ואסיר חד אמר דילמא מבעינא

דלא איעכבא

Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 98a

R. Yehoshua ben Levi came upon Eliyahu (the prophet) standing by the entrance to the cave of R. Shimon ben Yohai¹... He asked him, "When will the messiah come?"

Eliyahu replied, "Go and ask him yourself."

"Where does he sit?"

"At the entrance to the city."²

"And by what signs will I recognize him?"

"He is sitting among the poor suffering sick. They all untie their bandages all at once when they need to rebandage themselves. But he unties and rebandages in parts, one by one, thinking, 'Maybe I'll suddenly be needed, and I want to be ready at any minute.'"

Notice how this story plays on the imagery in our *parashah* and its Haftarah:

"Where does he sit?" (Talmud) / "He sits alone." (Leviticus)

"The entrance to the city." (Talmud) / "The entrance to the gate." (Kings)

And the answer to the question of when the messiah will come, in this version is: he's already here! But no one notices him. In fact, he's the ultimate outcast: a leper. That means, by all

¹ The Talmud (on Shabbat 33b) tells the story of R. Shimon ben Yohai fleeing Roman persecution and hiding in a cave with his son for 13 years, where they were sustained through the miraculous appearance of a carob tree and a spring of water, and did nothing else but study Torah. In part because of this tale, R. Shimon ben Yohai becomes associated with mystical knowledge. R. Yehoshua ben Levi, who lived a century after R. Shimon, also had mystical encounters with figures like Eliyahu and the Angel of Death. Placing him at the entrance to R. Shimon's cave is a way of suggesting that some secret knowledge is being passed from one figure to the other, in an exchange mediated by Eliyahu.

² The printed edition of the Talmud doesn't name the city, but the medieval versions in manuscripts all agree the city is Rome. This adds another dimension to the story: not only is the messiah outside a city, but he is waiting outside the grand city of Israel's enemy, the wealthiest city in the world.



rights—in fact, by God’s order—you should be doing everything you can to bring him in and heal him. But instead, he sits there, with the other lepers, waiting for you.

At this point, we ought to remind ourselves again that none of these stories are really about leprosy. In fact, the classical commentators generally agree that—though it had a physical manifestation—this was a spiritual malady.

This lends an entirely different read to all of these stories. The one who sits alone outside the camp is suffering **spiritually**. When we go out to heal him, and to bring him in, we are tending not just to his body, but to his aching soul. Maybe that’s why he’s brought back in a week before he is fully cured, because, in a sense, bringing him back into the camp **is** the cure.

But what happens? Time passes, society hardens, and we begin to forget to bring people in. We forget those who are suffering spiritually. They are left to sneak their way—or fight their way—back into the community.

And then, eventually, they give up. They sit outside, nursing their wounds, waiting. Waiting for something to change.

The image of the messiah waiting on us carries a certain irony, since in our daily prayers and declarations of faith, it is we who describe ourselves as waiting for the messiah. “And even though he may tarry,” as the recitation of Maimonides’ 13 principles of faith puts it, “nevertheless I will wait for him.” But in the scene Eliyahu describes to R. Yehoshua ben Levi, it is as if those inside the city are waiting for the messiah while the messiah waits, on the other side of the entrance to the city, for someone to come out and find him.



Perhaps that is why the book of Lamentations, which we read on the day we mourn the destruction of Jerusalem, as we beg for our redemption, also subtly evokes the image of the leper outside the camp. It begins with language that will be familiar from our *parashah*:

איכה א:א

אֵיכָה יֹשְׁבָה בְּדָד הָעִיר רַבְתִּי עִם

Lamentations 1:1

Alas! The city, once great with people, sits alone...

Back in the Talmud, the story ends with R. Yehoshua ben Levi going up to the Leper Messiah and asking him:

א"ל לאימת אתי מר

א"ל היום

"When will you come, Master?"

"Today," he answered.

R. Yehoshua is confused. Today?! He goes back to Eliyahu and says, "He lied to me! He said he would come today, but he has not." Eliyahu explains that, no, it's true, but what he meant was "today" as it appears in this line from the Psalms:

תהלים צה:ז

הַיּוֹם אִם בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמָעוּ.

Psalms 95:7

Today, **if** you will hear God's voice.



Redemption could come today, any day, any moment. But first, we have to “hear God’s voice.” And what does God say? We’ve long forgotten, but it was right there in our *parashah*, in the beginning of the procedure for curing the leper:

ויקרא יד:ג

וַיֵּצֵא הַכֹּהֵן אֶל מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה

Leviticus 14:3

The priest shall go outside the camp.

The redeemer doesn’t come to us. We go out to find the redeemer. We go out to the sick, the suffering, the outcasts of all kinds. We comfort them, cleanse them, heal them. And we bring them back into the camp, in through the gates, back into the community. When we remember how to do that, our redemption is at hand. In fact, maybe that **is** our redemption.

The leper, it turns out, is the one who can save us all.

