



PARSHAT TAZRIA

PARSHA GUIDE



Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Tazria!

A Difficult Diagnosis

This week's parsha contains one of the strangest sets of laws in the entire Bible: the laws of an affliction called צָרַעַת, "tzara'at."¹ The Bible goes on for dozens of verses about how to diagnose this bizarre affliction: Is the lesion whitish in color? Does it appear to be deeper than the rest of his flesh? What about the hair on the lesion - is it white or yellow? Has the lesion spread? Where is it: on his body, his head? And the cure for tzara'at is perhaps the most bizarre part of all. You take two birds, a piece of cedar wood, a scarlet thread, and a hyssop plant, and dip them all in blood... it sounds like total hocus pocus.

You can imagine a skeptic comparing it to the first scene of *Macbeth* with the witches' cauldrons. What meaning does any of this have for our modern lives? The Bible is totally silent on that question.

Or is it?

Following the Signs

Let's take a quick look at some of these laws. I think we'll find that, yes, on the surface, these are dry, highly technical, and completely obsolete laws -- but between the lines, there's a much deeper story being told, a story whose lesson has powerful implications for our lives today.

Here's how the purification process begins:

Leviticus 14:4-6

4 ...he will take, for the person that is to be cleansed, two live, clean birds, a cedar stick, a strip of scarlet, and hyssop. 5 The priest shall command to kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel, over living waters. 6 As for the live bird, he shall take it, and then the cedar stick, the strip of scarlet, and the hyssop, and, along with the live bird, he shall dip them into the blood of the slaughtered bird, over the living waters.

ויקרא יד:ד-ו

ד... וְלָקַח לְמַטְהַר שְׁתֵי-צִפְרִימֵי חַיִּוֹת, טְהוֹרוֹת; וְעֵץ אֲרֶז, וְשָׁנִי תוֹלַעַת וְאַזְבֵּי הַ וְצִנּוֹה, הַכֹּהֵן, וְשָׁחַט, אֶת-הַצִּפּוֹר הָאֶחָד -- אֶל-כָּלִי-חָרֶשׁ, עַל-מַיִם חַיִּים. וְ אֶת-הַצִּפּוֹר הַחַיָּה יָקַח אֹתָהּ, וְאֶת-עֵץ הָאֲרֶז וְאֶת-שְׁנֵי הַתּוֹלַעַת וְאֶת-הָאַזְבֵּי; וְטָבַל אֹתָם וְאֶת הַצִּפּוֹר הַחַיָּה, בְּדָם הַצִּפּוֹר הַשָּׁחֻטָה, עַל הַמַּיִם הַחַיִּים.

¹ Some translations render "tzara'at" as "leprosy" - but Rav Shimson Raphael Hirsch (in his comment on Leviticus 13:59) makes a very compelling case that biologically this isn't leprosy.



INSTRUCTIONS

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life's biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That's why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we'll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you're planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the "Source Sheet" for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, "Parshat Tazria: The Bizarre Purification of the Metzora" (available for viewing at www.alephbeta.org). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

A Spiritual Recipe

So we've got two birds. One is killed, its blood made to drip into a pool of clear water in an earthenware vessel. Then a priest takes the live bird - along with a piece of cedar wood, a scarlet thread and a plant called a hyssop - and he dips them into the blood of the dead bird and sprinkles it onto the metzora (the person afflicted with tzara'at). At the end of this purification process, the metzora can come back into the camp, but he still has to wait outside his home for seven days.



PONDER THIS

Here's the question: does any of this remind you of anything? When else in the Bible do we have a process involving wood, hyssop, blood, this being that would live, this being that would die - when afterwards, there was a seven day period during which something had to be kept outside of the house?



Here's a hint: when the Bible talks about the malady of tzara'at, it refers to it as a נגע - "a plague."



PONDER THIS

When was the last time the Bible talked about plagues?

If you're thinking Egypt, you're onto something. We find that the Bible uses the word נָגַע to describe one (and only one) of the plagues against the Egyptians: the killing of the firstborn. In fact, before we get to the discussion of tzara'at in Leviticus, this is the *only* prior use of the word נָגַע, in the entire Torah.

Exodus 11:1

1 The Lord said to Moses, "I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will send you from here. When he sends you, he will completely drive you out of here.

שמות יא:א

א וַיֹּאמֶר יְקוּה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, עוֹד נִגַע אֶחָד אָבִיא
עַל-פְּרֹעֶה וְעַל-מִצְרַיִם--אֶחָד-כֵּן, יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם
מִזֶּה: כְּשִׁלְחוֹ--כָּלָה, גֵּרֶשׁ יִגְרַשׁ אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה.

Return to Egypt

So we have the *plague* of the firstborn in Egypt and the *plague* of tzara'at. But that's only one connection. So let's ask: are there more commonalities between the story of the Exodus and the purification ritual for the metzora?



PONDER THIS

Here's another clue. The word for hyssop (אֲזוֹב) also appears extremely infrequently in the Bible. Was there any hyssop in the story of the Exodus?



Hint: We were dipping it into blood then, too...

Yes, there was hyssop in the Exodus story:

Exodus 12:22

22 And you shall take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and you shall extend to the lintel and to the two doorposts the blood that is in the basin, and you shall not go out, any man from the entrance of his house until morning.

שמות יב:כב

כב וּלְקַחְתֶּם אֶגְדַת אֲזוֹב, וּטְבַלְתֶּם בָּדָם
אֲשֶׁר-בַּסֶּף, וְהִגַּעְתֶּם אֶל-הַמַּשְׁקוּף וְאֶל-שְׁתֵי
הַמְּזוּזוֹת, מִן-הַדָּם אֲשֶׁר בַּסֶּף; וְאַתֶּם, לֹא תֵצְאוּ
אִישׁ מִפֶּתַח-בֵּיתוֹ--עַד-בֹּקֶר.

On the very night when all of Egypt's firstborn were dying, the Israelites were having a dramatically different experience. They were hushed in their homes in Goshen, listening from afar to the anguished cries of the Egyptians. God spared the Israelites that night, passing over their homes – because earlier that day, they had taken none other than a bundle of hyssop, dipped it in blood, and painted the blood onto the doorposts of their homes.

This is the *only* other time in the entire Five Books of Moses that we find this image of hyssop being dipped in blood, and it just happens to have occurred on the very same night as the נִגַע, the plague - that word which is used over and over again to refer to tzara'at.

And, just like in the metzora's purification process, where we have a piece of wood with blood on it, so too we find wood with blood on it in the Exodus story - the wood of the doorposts. Is it starting to sound like too much to be a coincidence?

Two Birds



PONDER THIS

Let's try to uncover some more connections. In the metzora's purification process, there are two birds, these two things which seem to be the same, except one dies and the other gets to live. Do we find anything like that in the Exodus story?

We certainly do. In Egypt, we had two nations living side by side. Two sets of firstborns: the Egyptian firstborn and the Israelite firstborn. The Egyptian firstborns all died that night. But what of the Israelites? The Israelite firstborn lived. One bird went to life; one bird went to death.

In fact, look at how the live bird is described in the metzora's purification process:

Leviticus 14:7

וְשָׁלַח אֶת-הַצֹּפֶר הַחַיָּה עַל-פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה

He will send away the live bird into the field



PONDER THIS

Do you recall the language describing how the Israelites would go free after the tenth plague? We saw it earlier, when God declared that he would bring one more plague upon Egypt...

ישלח אתכם מזה

He will send you [Israel] from here

After the tenth plague, the Jews were sent out into the desert - with language that echoes the “sending away” of the live bird.

Blood and Water



PONDER THIS

Let's keep moving: in the purification process for the metzora, we take the dead bird's blood and let it drip into the water. In the Exodus, do we have any blood going into water?

Well, what happened at the splitting of the Red Sea?

Exodus 14:28

28 And the waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen, the entire force of Pharaoh coming after them into the sea; not even one of them survived.

שמות יד:כח

כח וישבו המים, ויכסו את-הרכב ואת-הפרשים, לכל חיל פרעה, הבאים אחריהם בים: לא-נשאר בהם, עד-אחד.

As soon as the Israelites crossed through the wall of parted waters, the waters returned and crashed down on all of the pursuing Egyptians. Their blood filled the waters, just like the blood of the dead bird. The similarity to the purification process is eerie.

A Week-Long Wait



PONDER THIS

Finally, the metzora has to wait outside his home for seven days. Is there anything like that in the Exodus story? Something that can't be in the home for a seven day period?

As a matter of fact, there is:

Exodus 12:15

15 For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, but on the first day you shall clear away all leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leaven from the first day until the seventh day that soul shall be cut off from Israel.

שמות יב:טו

טו שְׁבַעַת יָמִים, מִצּוֹת תֹּאכְלוּ--אֶךְ בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן, תִּשְׁבִּיתוּ שָׂאֵר מִבֵּיתְכֶם: כִּי כָל-אֹכֵל חֻמֵץ, וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל--מִיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן, עַד-יּוֹם הַשְּׁבַעִי.

In the Exodus story, there's a seven day waiting period, during which *chametz* (leavened bread) is banished from the house. God gives that command to the Israelites on the night of the Exodus, right after telling them to put blood on their doors. Add that piece of evidence to our long list of surprising parallels between the purification process for the metzora and the Exodus from Egypt - and it all becomes pretty hard to deny.²

It's almost as if the metzora's purification process is a mini-Exodus from Egypt. But why? What does the Bible mean to teach us by constructing the purification process of the metzora in a way that it models the Exodus from Egypt?

I'll leave you to ponder that. In our guide to Parshat Metzora, we'll pull it all together.

² We're not the first ones to notice these connections between the metzora's purification process and the Exodus from Egypt. Nachmanides on Leviticus 14:4 comments that the metzora's process resembles the Passover offering brought in Egypt just before the Exodus. See source sheet for his comment.



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Thanks for understanding - we love you guys, too.

Source Sheet

Leviticus 14:4-6

4 Then the kohen shall order, and the person to be cleansed shall take two live, clean birds, a cedar stick, a strip of scarlet, and hyssop. 5 The kohen shall order, and one shall slaughter the one bird into an earthenware vessel, over living waters. 6 [As for] the live bird, he shall take it, and then the cedar stick, the strip of scarlet, and the hyssop, and, along with the live bird, he shall dip them into the blood of the slaughtered bird, over the living waters.

Exodus 11:1

1 The Lord said to Moses, "I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will send you from here. When he sends you, he will completely drive you out of here.

Exodus 12:22

22 And you shall take a bunch of hyssop and dip [it] in the blood that is in the basin, and you shall extend to the lintel and to the two doorposts the blood that is in the basin, and you shall not go out, any man from the entrance of his house until morning.

Exodus 14:28

28 And the waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen, the entire force of Pharaoh coming after them into the sea; not even one of them survived.

Nachmanides on Leviticus 14:4

Cedar wood, scarlet and hyssop: ...Now, the laws of metzora, the laws of the afflicted house, and the contamination from a human corpse are related, and note they resemble the Pesach in Egypt.

Exodus 12:15

15 For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, but on the first day you shall clear away all leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leaven from the first day until the seventh day that soul shall be cut off from Israel.

ויקרא יד:ד-ו

ד... ולקח למטהר שתי צפרים חיות, טהרות; ועץ ארז, ושני תולעת ואזב. ה וצנה, הכהן, ושחט, את-הצפור האחת --אל-כלי-חרש, על-מים חיים. ו את-הצפור החיה יקח אתה, ואת-עץ הארז ואת-שני התולעת ואת-האזב; וטבל אותם ואת הצפור החיה, בדם הצפור השחטה, על, המים החיים.

שמות יא:א

א ויאמר יקוה אל-משה, עוד בנע אהד אביא על-פרעה ועל-מצרים--אחרי-כן, ישלח אתכם מזה: כשלחו--כלה, גרש יגרש אתכם מזה.

שמות יב:כב

כב ולקחתם אגדת אזוב, וטבלתם בדם אשר-בסוף, והגעתם אל-המשקוף ואל-שתי המזוזות, מן-הדם אשר בסוף; ואתם, לא תצאו איש מפתח-ביתו--עד-בקר.

שמות יד:כח

כח וישבו המים, ויכסו את-הרכב ואת-הפרשים, לכל חיל פרעה, הבאים אחריהם בים: לא-נשאר בהם, עד-אחד.

רמב"ן על ויקרא יד:ד

ועץ ארז ושני תולעת ואזוב: ... והנה המצורע ותורת הבית המנוגע וטומאת המת קרובים והנה הם כדמות פסח מצרים.

שמות יב:טו

טו שבעת ימים, מצות תאכלו--אך ביום הראשון, תשביתו שאר מבתיהם: כי כל-אכל חמץ, ונקרתה הנפש ההוא מישראל--מיום הראשון, עד-יום השבעי.