

# Ancient vs Modern Medicine

Tazria 5782/2022

Over the next two weeks the Torah is going to deep dive into biblical medical/spiritual ailments. It seems a relatively mundane thing, perhaps irrelevant to the modern reader. We live in a time where the idea of spiritual impurity has very little real-world impact beyond the laws of family purity. We don't have a temple, we don't bring sacrifices, and we don't have priests who can call out our spiritual ailments.

The Parasha begins the discussion by looking at the various afflictions that can occur on a person's skin, and the need for the priestly examination, followed by the process by which to regain the pure status<sup>1</sup>. Rashi explains that the list of ailments are physically different through their colour, each one is white than the previous one, and that impurity is only confirmed through the verbal confirmation of a priest<sup>2</sup>.

As Robert Alter notes, this form of ancient affliction and diagnosis should not be confused with the other medical ailments, ancient or modern, that have been confirmed by science. This is something completely different, and we need to understand it as completely different<sup>3</sup>.

The Ramban notes this as well through his examination of the tzaarat, the markings, of a house or physical items. He says that obviously these are not universal, they don't happen anywhere else, rather they are a specific metaphysical occurrence that happens within the Jewish people<sup>4</sup>.

So what relevance does this have today?

Abigail Pogrebin notes that the laws of tzarat have almost trained us to understand the minutiae of physical cleanliness in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most revealing is not solely the way in which to protect oneself – washing hands, quarantine, time, space etc – but more importantly that these mechanisms allow one to come back into the machane (camp), to regain entry into society for an individual, and to regain a sense of normalcy for society at large.

It is a fascinating understanding. It allows us to see Jewish wisdom as a carrion call to some of the things that occur within present day society despite the fact that the initial application has been long dormant.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**