

Let's begin by clearing up a misconception. Today's Torah portion does not deal with leprosy. Yes, it's there in the Etz Hayim: the Hebrew word tzara'at is translated as leprosy.

Incorrect translation according to philologists, those people who study historical linguistics. Heller, Heller and Sasson have traced the translation of tzara'at to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It was there that the Hebrew noun was translated as *aphe lepras*. In the Latin Vulgate, this became *plega leprae*. These words in Greek and Latin implied a skin condition that spread over the body, not a term of ritual impurity.

The noun tzara'at appears about two dozen times in the Hebrew Bible, almost exclusively in Leviticus.

Some have suggested that the proper translation of tzara'at is "mold." The recent identification of a specific mold (*Stachy'botrys*) that contaminates buildings and causes respiratory distress, memory loss, and rash, and the fact that mold has been present for millennia, lend support to the translation of tzara'at as "mold."

There's another reason why to translate the Hebrew as "leprosy" is not appropriate. There was no leprosy as we know it in the Middle East during the time period the Hebrew Bible was written. That's according to medical historians.

And the juxtaposition of the section on the purification of skin diseases with the appearance of tzara'at (or plague) in the inside walls of a house suggest a much broader definition of the Hebrew word—something that covered any scaly skin blemish or blemish on leather, the walls of a house, and woven cloth.

At this point, some might be thinking: yes Aaron, but most of today's text deals with the laws of purification governing the metzora, the one who is afflicted with skin disease.

The original meaning of the purification text was connected to the belief that one's life affected others in the community. One's sin could change the entire community. Impurity was contagious. It could be contracted through contact.

To protect the community from impurity, it was sometimes necessary to exile the sinner so that he or she would not contaminate the rest of the community.

There were three major ways to atone for sin: sacrifice, fasting and suffering and death. The suffering and death were obviously a last hope of atonement and reconciliation with God. But we can understand how mourning customs such as sackcloth and ashes and ritual cleansing became linked with repentance and reintegration into the community.

Rabbi Shai Held, Chair of Jewish Thought at Mechon Hadar in New York, has an interesting take on the text. He writes that Chapter 14 of Leviticus illustrates the tremendous investment in the social and religious reconnection of persons formerly stigmatized and excluded by virtue of the disease. The marginalized, isolated person is

reintegrated with an elaborate ritual comparable only to that of the ordination of the High Priest.

Today, it's not so different. The community tends to withdraw from contact with those individuals with illnesses like depression. Or addiction. Or with schizophrenia like my brother.

Dealing with someone with depression, schizophrenia or addiction is not a rewarding experience. It is almost impossible for that person to get outside of him or herself. And of course, logic and reason don't work.

How does one love someone who is an addict?

In her book about the death of her brother who died of a heroin overdose, Houstonian Stephanie Wittels Wachs writes, "I think about the day a person dies, how the morning is just a morning. It's not the last morning. It's all very ordinary. And then it's all over.

"The space between life and death is a moment."

I believe our patriarchs and matriarchs understood that better than we do.

For them, the purification ritual marked a return from near-death to life and a reintegration into the community. The addict who is able to conquer addiction and remain sober is a modern example of one who has returned from the dead.

Stephanie's brother was unable to make that transition. He died at age 30 of a heroin overdose.

She writes, "There is no end to grief. There's only navigating the way to a new normal."

Yes, we have rituals to navigate a way to a new normal after death. We don't have a religious ritual to mark the transition from addiction to sobriety.

I believe our forefathers deeply understood the interior of the human psyche although they used different words, metaphors and rituals to express that understanding.

They certainly understood that the space between life and death is a narrow bridge.

Shabbat shalom.