

## Tazria-Metzorah 5783

*Arielle Stein*

“Your task is to make one color look like six. After that, you must make six colors look like one. This should happen all in yellow, on one piece of paper, by Monday.” Ugh, Josef Albers, color theorist, strikes again. The first thing a person learns in painting class is to never use paint directly from the tube. Doing such a thing would make assignments like the one just noted impossible and would reveal a painter’s own lack of depth and understanding. Taken straight from the tube, paint is considered “pure”. It lacks depth, expression, and a sign of the hand of the person who uses it. This denigration and rejection of purity, even in relation to paint, surprised and delighted me. This painterly rejection of purity stands in stark opposition to the ways that the Torah seemingly depicts it.

This week’s Torah portion, Tazria-Metzora, focuses on purity-almost exclusively. It describes two categories: Tahor and Tame. Typically translated as “pure” and “impure”, these are temporary states of being that humans occupy and are part of an intricate ritual system dealing with the ancient priestly cult, temple, the human body and even family life. The assessment of purity mostly relates to ritual status; where a person has recently been and what they have touched determine their social role.

אֲדָם כִּי־יִהְיֶה בְּעוֹר־בָּשָׂרוֹ שָׂאֵת אוֹ־סִפְחָת אוֹ בְּקֶרֶת וְהָיָה בְּעוֹר־בָּשָׂרוֹ לְנִגַּע צָרַעַת וְהוּבָא אֶל־אֹהֲרֵן הַכֹּהֵן אוֹ אֶל־אַחֵד מִבְּנָיו

*הַכֹּהֲנִים:*

*When a person has on the skin of the body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly infection on the skin of the body, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons, the priests.<sup>1</sup>*

In Tazria-Metzora, skin disease is the dominant example of impurity. Tzaraat, a mysterious illness, appears in spots and covers the body of the afflicted with a white, scaly infection. It turns every hair in its wake white as well. This disease can afflict any person and sometimes even affects houses! With its ability to infect architecture, Tzaraat is not your usual cough, cold or even flu. Part of what makes Tzaraat so strange is that it just appears! It does not have an observable cause. Unlike other types of biblical impurity, this one is highly visual. It is visible to any onlooker yet does not seem to relate to anything in the seen world. Although generations of scholars and doctors have tried to tie this illness to a known disease, no one is quite sure what it could be. It remains mysterious.

Alas! No mysteries are left uninvestigated in Torah. Our sages have sought out potential causes for Tzaraat for thousands of years. Vayikra Rabbah lists seven reasons for an outbreak of Tzaraat: gossip, murder, an oath taken in vain, illicit sexual acts, pride, theft, or miserly behaviors. This connects Tzaraat with almost any category of improper social behavior. Here, Tzaraat acts as punishment. Aside from murder, the acts listed are largely invisible-except for their harmful impact on others. Through the onset of Tzaraat, they become hyper-visible. With this approach, Tzaraat seems to be less about impurity and more about making the unseen seen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sefaria.org/Leviticus.13.2?lang=bi&aliyot=0>

Other sources approach Tzaraat not through the lens of punishment. In Arakhin, the Talmud interprets Tzaraat as “tzarot”, distress (tzuris, for the yekkes in the crowd). Through this re-pronunciation, the text transforms Tzaraat into a physical manifestation of distress, an internal state of being which easily goes unnoticed, Tzaraat continues to make the unseen seen. Perhaps this enables a community to rise to compassion, instead of descending into punishment or blame.

Ramban understood Tzaraat as the withdrawal of God’s presence from a person or place. When this withdrawal of godliness occurred, the Tzaraat appeared in its stead. Like the Talmud in Arakhin, this aspect of Ramban’s view of Tzaraat acts as a flashing light, encouraging those around the afflicted to take notice-to see what easily goes unnoticed-to recognize and acknowledge suffering, distress, and the absence of the divine presence. Rabbi Samson Hirsch understood Tzaraat through the method with which it is treated, examination, identification, and prescription by a Kohen. Based on this, Hirsch classified Tzaraat as a spiritual sickness, not a medical problem. These interpretations of Tzaraat present an opportunity to consider impurity made visible by Tzaraat as a manifestation of suffering that requires special forms of recognition and treatment.

In Tazria-Metzora, a person afflicted with Tzaraat must tear their clothing and go around the camp exclaiming “Impure! Impure!”. While this act can refer to mourning rituals, enforce isolation and or shame the person afflicted, these are not the only ways this practice can be understood. Chilean, Jewish, artist, magician, and healer Alejandro Jodorowsky called acts like these “psychomagic”-a form of healing that uses dreams, art, and theater to heal psycho-spiritual and sometimes even physical

wounds. Through prescribing this theatrical, psychomagical act, the Kohanim grant the afflicted person a role in their own recovery process. In Hullin, the Talmud sees this proclamation as the afflicted person dramatically letting others know what is happening, so that they may pray for him or her. In this case, the calling out of “Impure! Impure!” summons others to the aid of the afflicted. It is a cry for help as well as an act of expiation and a further making of the formerly invisible visible.

Our sources provide us with inspiration to approach purity status as something that signals a need for special care, concern and attention. Through viewing Tzaraat as the temporary outcome and manifestation of invisible states of distress and suffering, we arrive at an alternative way to understand purity in our sacred texts.

Master of color theory Josef Albers taught his students to look beyond the surface to be able to see true color:

*“Usually, we think of an apple as being red.*

*This is not the same red as that of a cherry or tomato.*

*A lemon is yellow and an orange like that of its name.*

*Bricks vary from beige to yellow to orange,*

*and from ochre to brown to deep violet.*

*Foliage appears in innumerable shades of green.*

*In all these cases the colors named are surface colors.”*

Like Tzaraat on the skin, looking at the surface and beyond can encourage one to investigate and reveal what is initially hidden. Whether you are shouting “Impure! Impure!” in the public square or mixing gray into your pure yellow paint, it is only through such acts that invisible distress can be seen and depth revealed. So, next time you discover a patch of suspicious skin or mix your paint for a project, remind yourself that impurity is not always cause for punishment. Sometimes, it is exactly what is needed for healing to begin.