

## Unclean? Declare it Yourself

Vayikra 13:45

מה וְהִצְרוּעַ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ הִנְגַע בְּגָדָיו יִהְיוּ פְרָמִים וְרָאָשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פְרוּעַ וְעַל-שָׁפָם  
יַעֲטֶה וְטָמֵא | טָמֵא יִקְרָא:

**As for the person with a leprous affection, his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out, “Impure, Impure!”**



Rashi

He announces that he is unclean, so that everyone should stay away from him. [Torat Kohanim 13:155]

Rashi

he shall cover with his garments (from, “Who covers Himself with light” [Psalms 104:2]). The point is that he should not infect others with his breath. **Ibn Ezra**

and he shall cloak himself up to his lips.” This means that he is to keep his mouth covered so that his breath does not offend anyone around him as it contains bacteria harmful to others.

Tur ha'aroch

As it is taught in a baraita: It is derived from the verse: “And he will cry: Impure, impure” (Leviticus 13:45), that a leper must publicize the fact that he is ritually impure. He must announce his pain to the masses, and the masses will pray for mercy on his behalf. And likewise, one to whom any unfortunate matter happens must announce it to the masses, and then the masses will pray for mercy on his behalf.

Chullin 78a:2

The Gemara continues and asks: What is the halakha concerning a leper with regard to greeting others? The Gemara suggests: Come and hear a proof from the following baraita: The verse states: “And he shall cover his upper lip” (Leviticus 13:45). This means that his lips should be stuck together, that he should be like one who is ostracized and like a mourner, and he is prohibited from greeting others or being greeted. The Gemara concludes: Indeed, learn from this that this is so.

Moed Katan 15a:12

Embedded in these verses is a communal imperative to care for others. According to the Talmud, one calls out their infected status not only to warn others of the contagion, but also to elicit compassion and prayers on one's behalf (BT Moed Katan 5a). It is the responsibility of the affected person to isolate, ask for help, social-distance, and it is the responsibility of the community to offer the support, prayer, and ultimately whatever assistance was possible. No one should be isolated more than necessary - for as much as the individual suffers, so does the community...In the ongoing quest to understand the intersection of the "I" and "we" in communal life, these texts remind us how life flows freely in between the two. How we take care of one impacts the other. In the last week as several Governors have decided to "re-open" parts of their economy, and as Americans protested ongoing closures and shut-down orders, declaring "enough already" to our isolating and social-distancing, I couldn't help but think about the need for our leaders to embody the example of the Priests of old. Tradition values the return of individuals to community, but *only after* the proscribed rituals and expectations are completed, and there is some assurance that the reintegration into community would not endanger anyone further.

**Yael Ridberg**

According to the Meshech Chochma, quoting Talmudic sources, Tzaraat was highly contagious. It may be that it was not necessarily from the physical transmission, but rather because the infected person suffered from a defect of the spirit, an ethical virus, that could easily be transmitted to someone with a weak spiritual immune system or other underlying spiritual maladies. That is one of the reasons the infected person would have to call out "impure, impure," so people would know to avoid him and practice social distancing from him.

**Rabbi Ben-Tzion Spitz**

The "Motzi Shem Ra" of Metzora: The only sin so heinous that it could cause a person to be isolated from the community, violate the entire Torah, and desecrate God's name, is a deed that can't be taken back, cleaned up, or resolved. To the rabbis, this was nothing but rumors, hearsay and gossip...The metzora isn't the victim of COVID-19; the real metzora is the one who gives currency to an evil report and denies the whole Torah, on which we rely. Thus, the metzora is anyone who spreads conspiracy theories about COVID-19, promotes false information for personal gain, contributes to the misunderstanding of innocent people, or promotes fear instead of hope. He is a metzora who should be marginalized for the sake of calm and hope in the midst of a pandemic.

**Rabbi David Lyon**