

by Audrey Gale Hall, mentored by Dr. Caryn Tamber-Rosenau

The question:

Why does tsara'at pollute the Israelite community?

Tsara' what?

- Tsara'at = mysterious biblical phenomenon on skin, fabric, houses
- Sometimes translated "leprosy" or "scale disease"; not actually disease
- Cause for banishment outside Israelite camp (and later, cities)
- Priest declares someone ritually clean/unclean based on inspection
- Some symptoms resemble albinism, bejel, eczema, Hansen's Disease, leishmaniasis, melanoma, psoriasis, scabies, vitiligo

Pollution

- Tum'ah, a ritual status, translates as polluting, defiling, unclean
- Cleansing depends on type
- Tsara'at brings tum'ah onto the place where YHVH (Hebrew deity) dwells among the Israelites
- Some tum'ah require expulsion
- Other causes of tum'ah include certain animals, birth, bloodshed, corpses, ejaculation, contacting ghosts, idolatry, menstruation, murder, etc.

FINDINGS

Tsara'at continues to resist the kind of definition that might satisfy modern medical authorities. Its status as "unclean" is connected to a broader and more complex system of purity.

Metsora'im, people with any condition called tsara'at, would have lived with disgust, ostracism, and in many cases permanent exile from their extended family/faith community. Their bodies were religiously and scientifically unacceptable.

This project identified four themes in biblical and later literature which offer points of contact between metsora'im on the one hand, and on the other, LGBTQI+ and disabled people. We create our own communities and ways of living, on the margins of what is considered pure, holy, and safe.



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1 Contagion & danger

- Some scholars propose medical basis for tsara'at legislation
- Some scholars say there's *no medical basis at all*
- Bible doesn't mention disease spread
- Priests allow contact before expulsion
- Tsara'at invoked in curses

2 Ambiguity & anomaly

- Levitical concern w categorizing
- 0% tsara'at or 100% tsara'at = clean
- Association w/ anomalous animals
- Impurity as "matter out of place," i.e. apparently dead skin flaking, discolored

3 Sexuality & bodily fluids

- Theories of tsara'at as an imbalance of internal bodily fluids, including semen
- Prohibition against metsora'im (lepers) having sex or touching shared objects
- Metsora'im were expelled alongside people w/ recent genital discharges

4 Ugliness or disability

- Tsara'at would impact people's mobility, nervous system, daily pain levels, ability to do work in the community/economy
- Blemishes or "defects" defiled even priests; tsara'at is all about blemishes
- Tsara'at opposes biblical beauty standards: ruddy (reddish-brown) skin, clear skin, thick hair, full beard, mobility