

# SERMON

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In this short D'var Torah I want to think about the way that people with mental health problems are treated. I am going to look at how the rabbis of old radically re-thought the humiliating treatment of those infected with tsara'at in the bible, shifting their community away from fear and expulsion and towards acceptance and compassion.

ספר ויקרא פרק יג  
(מה) וְהָצַרְוֹעַ אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ הִנָּנַע  
בְּגָדָיו יִהְיוּ פְרָמִים וְרֹאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פָרוּעַ  
וְעַל שָׁפְּם יַעֲטֶה  
וְטָמֵא טָמֵא יִקְרָא :

### Leviticus Chapter 13

(45) And the tsaruah who has the affliction, his clothes shall be torn and his head bare, and he shall put a cover upon his upper lip, And he shall cry, "unclean, unclean".

In the Tanach, when an Israelite is declared by a priest to be tsaruah, often mis-translated as leprous, his or her appearance is immediately altered to warn the un-afflicted, s/he must dwell outside the limits of the camp and s/he must shout out "unclean, unclean". Rashi captures the stark meaning of this cry: "he must proclaim aloud that he is unclean, so that people may keep away from him" (Sifra, Tazria Parashat Nega'im, Chapter 13 7; Mo'ed Katan 5a). According to the p'shat (simple meaning) of the Torah, there are afflictions that the community must be protected from, that are too dangerous either physically or emotionally to allow the pure and the impure to mingle. The afflicted must bear the brunt of their suffering alone, or with other sufferers, in the camp of the drowned. The bible treats tsara'at as an infection from which people need to be protected.

This understanding of tsara'at was radically overturned by the rabbis. They did not think that tsara'at was infectious but rather saw it as an external manifestation of a spiritual malady. Armed with this new understanding, how would they deal with the biblical verse above requiring the community to self-distance from the tsaruah?

In Masechet Sotah (32b) there is a discussion reflecting on whether a person needs to confess their sins aloud, revealing their disgrace to the whole community. One clear saying in the name of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai holds that **"a person must recount... what is to his discredit in a loud voice"**. In other words, in confession a person's sins must be announced to the whole community to allow for everyone to accommodate both the sin and the atonement. This statement accords well with the kinds of extreme positions taken by Rashbi elsewhere in the tradition, but the editors of the Talmud are so affronted by the harshness of Rashbi's position that they decide to actually re-write his statement as: **"a person must recount... his suffering in a loud voice"** and then, in an even

more astounding act of re-reading, they justify this revision by re-casting our “tamei, tamei” text from Leviticus as a call for compassion:

**בבלי סוטה דף לב/ב  
כדתניא  
וטמא טמא יקרא  
צריך להודיע צערו לרבים  
ורבים מבקשים עליו רחמים**

**Talmud - Masechet Sotah 32b**

As it has been taught:

**“And he shall cry, unclean, unclean” (Lev. XIII, 45)  
[the tsaruah] must to make his suffering known  
to the community**

**And the community seeks mercy for him.**

The tsaruah’s cries of “unclean, unclean” are reworked by the rabbis not as a warning to flee, “run from me for I am infectious”, but as an obligatory cry for help by the afflicted which imposes an obligation on the listener to offer help and compassion; “run towards me for I am suffering!” This exquisite reframing turns the cry “tamei, tamei” into an appeal for compassion, not fear.

From this the Talmud derives a general rule, that:

**...וכל מי שאירע בו דבר  
צריך להודיע לרבים  
ורבים מבקשים עליו רחמים**

...everybody to whom a calamity has occurred  
Must make it known to the community  
And the community seeks mercy for him.

Approximately a quarter of UK adults will experience a mental health problem in any given year. Times are changing and many more people are now likely to report their distress to someone else, but mental illness can still carry a degree of stigma; people can still turn from the mentally ill as if they are infectious. It can still feel as if recounting mental distress is like having your clothes torn, your head bared and being forced to cry “unclean, unclean”.

This rabbinic reframing away from the idea of infection has huge implications. The mentally ill need to know that when they reveal their suffering their listeners will move forwards in compassion rather than backwards in fear. In the rabbinic tradition when you hear someone crying “tamei, tamei” – it means that they are outside, alone and frightened; and the right response is to move towards that person and to offer them love and support. If that compassionate response is guaranteed then the rabbis feel free to say that the sufferers themselves are obliged to reveal the depths of their suffering in public. In a properly functioning compassionate society there is an obligation on the person to reveal their suffering, and a concomitant obligation of the part of the listeners to respond appropriately. There is a correct choreography to revelation and response.

The rabbis were brave enough to utterly revise the simple meaning of our holy Torah when necessary. They believed that the ultimate call of the Torah is to serve the Good, not the literal meaning of the Torah’s words. That belief requires systemic exegetical courage. Creating a world where those who are struggling can really speak out also requires courage; courage on the part of the listener, and even more on the part of the speaker.