

God's Everlasting Covenant

presents

The Leper and the Tongue

You may be wondering what these two seemingly unrelated topics have to do with one another. If we were reading them for the first time, we certainly would! Before we get into the study, we'd like to explain something.

Typically, we write the teachings of our ministry in the 2nd person plural. There are four reasons for this: First, I (Deborah) don't like to always be referring to myself, what I think, what I know, what I believe. In my mind, it sounds like trying to draw attention to or elevate myself above everyone. Second, most of the time we (my husband and I) discuss the teachings we put onto the site, and we agree, and so feel the teachings are "ours." Third, we like to include ourselves with you, the reader. We feel that you are part of us. Even though we may not have met you personally, we want you to feel included. And we want to include ourselves as part of the entire Body of Messiah. This is especially the case when we are teaching truths that are in the Bible or what the Torah teaches as instructions, statutes, commandments (*mitzvot*). And last, we want you to understand that as we teach you, we are reminding ourselves we are held accountable to the LORD for what we teach others. We want you to understand that we do not hold ourselves up as perfect doers of what Yeshua taught. We do not claim to be perfect followers of what is written in the Torah. None of us will do that until Messiah returns. But we are submitting ourselves to the Torah as we come to understand what the LORD commands for His people to be holy (set apart). We are learning just like you, and we are imperfect. We do not think of ourselves as having understood it all, thus assuming we are in an authoritative position to be teaching everyone else. That would reflect arrogance on our part.

In light of that, while recently studying the scriptures, we made an interesting discovery. As a side note, we want to give credit where credit is due. We use First Fruits of Zion's Torah Club material and are currently studying Volume I "Unrolling the Scroll." There are actually five volumes and this is a wonderful way to study the scriptures. We highly recommend them and you can find their Torah Club material [here](#).

Back to our topic. The last few weeks, we have been looking at Leviticus. You might be thinking, what in the world can one learn from that boring book? Honestly, that's the way I used to look at it. Not anymore! What I learned is that there is a direct relationship between the leprosy described in the Scriptures, which we will call biblical leprosy, and the words we speak out of our mouths. That is what we are going to look at together in this study.

Let's begin with an understanding. The leprosy spoken of in the Bible is not what we know as leprosy today, which is called Hansen's disease. Biblical leprosy is the Hebrew word *tzara'at*, and it was something that was curable (although it didn't happen too often). How do we know this? Because there was a cleansing ritual in Leviticus for

someone who no longer had the disease. **The cleansing ritual was not a cure.** This ritual would take place *after* the person was cured or healed. Also, it was possible for clothing or fabric to contract biblical leprosy. Even an entire house could have leprosy in the Bible, and the ritual for cleansing a house was similar to cleansing a person. For purposes of this study, we are not going to take the time to go into this particular aspect of the topic. Rather, we intend to go into more depth about a possible way someone contracted biblical leprosy and how this has spiritual application for us today. Daniel Lancaster of First Fruits of Zion writes:

Traditional rabbinic opinion does not regard biblical leprosy as a normal disease. Instead, the rabbis saw it as a divine punishment. The idea does have some biblical support. In Numbers 12:10, Miriam the sister of Moses, was punished with leprosy for speaking derisively against Moses. Second Chronicles 26:20 tells how King Uzziah was punished with leprosy for defying the Torah by offering incense in the Temple. Second Kings 5:27 tells how Elisha's servant, Gehazi, was smitten with leprosy for taking money from Naaman. Based on these passages, the rabbis believed that biblical leprosy was an affliction for specific sins. (*Torah Club v. 1, Parashat Tazria*, Daniel Lancaster, First Fruits of Zion, 800-775-4807, www.foz.org)

So, it is possible that biblical leprosy may have been a punishment by God for a particular sin.

Before we move on, we should have a brief discussion about what it meant in the Bible to be "unclean", *tamei* in Hebrew. Most of us have been taught that "unclean" meant "sinful." This is not what the Torah teaches. A better translation of *tamei* is "unfit." Strong's gives this definition: a primitive root; to be foul, especially in a ceremonial or moral sense (contaminated):--defile oneself, to be or to make oneself unclean. We will see how biblical leprosy can be equated to moral contamination in a few minutes, but we see here that *tamei* really means to be ritually unfit for the Temple service. People became unclean or *tamei* during the normal course of life. They became ritually unfit. This is just part of the human condition. It was not a sin to be unclean. It only meant that while in their unclean status, they couldn't go into the Temple. They would have to wait and follow God's prescribed way of becoming ritually clean again, which always involved using a *mikvah* (ritual bath).

One of the most important aspects about contracting biblical leprosy was that the infected person was required to go before the priest. It was only the priest who could diagnose the affliction and pronounce him ritually unfit. It was an involved process, which we won't go into here. If the priest determined the person did indeed have biblical leprosy, he had to tear his clothes, keep his hair unkempt, cover his mouth and he had to constantly yell out "unclean, unclean." He had to live in isolation outside of the camp. (See Leviticus 13:45-46). To us in our modern way of thinking, this seems cruel and unusual punishment. However, biblical leprosy was highly contagious, not in the sense that the affliction was a communicable disease, but in terms of ritual

contamination. The ritual unfitness associated with biblical leprosy was communicable. Everything the leper touched was made unclean or unfit – furniture, clothing, animals and people. Someone who had biblical leprosy became as ritually unfit as a dead body. During the time of the Temple, people wanted to be able to ascend up to the Temple to worship God, and one had to be ritually fit or clean in order to enter the grounds. When you remember that this was the way that God prescribed for the people of Israel to draw near to Him, it makes a lot more sense. People took great precaution to avoid becoming ritually contaminated, especially during the biblical feasts.

Let's now deal with the moral implications and how this could apply to us today. Let's think back to when Moses' sister, Miriam was afflicted with leprosy. Numbers 12:10 tells us that Miriam and Aaron began to complain about Moses because he married an Ethiopian woman. Let's imagine for a minute what might have said..."What about Moses marrying that woman? She's not one of us. Who does he think he is? Just because God speaks directly to him, he probably thinks he can do anything he wants. Well we heard God, too. He has spoken to us. We have just as much right to be the leaders as he does! I've had it and I'm going to give him a piece of my mind!"

The LORD heard them. Now this man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone on earth. Suddenly the LORD told Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting." The three of them went out. The LORD came down in a column of cloud and stood at the entrance to the tent. He summoned Aaron and Miriam, and they both went forward.

Numbers 12:2b-5

If it were me, I'd be shaking in my boots! Can you imagine being summoned by the LORD just after you had been talking badly about your brother who was a prophet and the person God spoke to face to face? Not only did the LORD summon Miriam and Aaron, but He summoned Moses, too. Moses was going to hear about what they had said behind his back! As we continue reading, we see that the LORD strongly rebukes them. The verse above tells us that Moses was the most humble man on the earth. That is not because of what other people thought or said about him. That was what the LORD said about him! The LORD knew Moses by his humility. He also knew Moses would not likely stick up for himself, and so the LORD took it upon Himself to defend Moses. Listen to the words of the LORD and King of the Universe:

"Listen to what I say: when there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. But it isn't that way with my servant Moses. He is the only one who is faithful in my entire household. With him I speak face to face and clearly, not in riddles; he sees the image of the LORD. So why weren't you afraid to criticize my servant Moses?" The anger of the LORD flared up against them, and he left. But when the cloud was removed from above the tent, Miriam had leprosy, as white as snow."

Numbers 12:610a

Miriam was afflicted by the LORD with biblical leprosy. What was her crime? She criticized Moses, who the LORD called “my servant.” We might ask ourselves why Aaron wasn’t afflicted with leprosy as well because the LORD clearly rebuked them both. While we can’t be absolutely certain, perhaps it was Miriam who actually spoke the critical words while Aaron only listened and nodded in agreement. The Torah says both Miriam and Aaron criticized their brother. Although Aaron most certainly was guilty for his part, it appears that the more severe punishment came to the one who had actually spoken the evil words.

Let’s now turn to the moral implications of biblical leprosy. Again, we’re going to share from commentary on the Torah from First Fruits of Zion.

The rabbis considered biblical leprosy to be primarily a punishment for the sin of evil speech. The Hebrew term for evil speech is *lashon hara*. It literally means “evil tongue.” The rabbinic association between evil speech and leprosy is derived from the story of Miriam’s leprosy. (*Torah Club v. 1, Parashat Tazria*, Daniel Lancaster, First Fruits of Zion, 800-775-4807, www.ffoz.org)

That’s an interesting correlation, and don’t you agree it makes sense? Just as leprosy makes one ritually unfit, so does evil speech make one unfit or defiled. Listen to the words of Yeshua. “Don’t you see that anything that enters the mouth goes into the stomach and passes out into the latrine? But what comes out of your mouth is actually coming from your heart, and that is what makes a person unclean. For out of the heart come forth wicked thoughts...lies, slanders...” (Matthew 15:18-19). James the Righteous (Ya’acov), Yeshua’s younger brother tells us that the tongue is a fire, a flame that has its origins in hell.

So too the tongue is a tiny part of the body, yet it boasts great things. See how a little fire sets a whole forest ablaze! Yes, the tongue is a fire, a world of wickedness. The tongue is so placed in our body that it defiles every part of it, setting ablaze the whole of our life; and it is set on fire by hell itself...it is an unstable and evil thing, full of death-dealing poison!

James 3:5-8

Let’s think about the effects of gossip for a moment. Someone says what they intend to be an innocent remark about someone else, but it can often grow into something much more causing strife and division. I can think of one such situation in my own life. I was good friends with a pastor and his wife in my church. One time, I went to them for counsel on something because they regularly gave wise and sound advice, skillfully applying God’s Word to situations. In this particular instance, I didn’t agree with the advice they gave me. It sounded too harsh for the situation. Instead of keeping it to myself, I spoke with someone else who I felt had a better understanding of the situation. That part was alright, but I made the mistake of sharing what my pastor friend and his

wife had said, and I explained it in a way that was critical. This was gossip and I was using *lashon hara* against a godly couple who were genuinely trying to help me. Well, as often happens, what I said got back to the couple. They called me on the carpet, very lovingly. They were hurt by what I had said, and rightly so. I had to humble myself and ask for their forgiveness, which they graciously gave me. I learned a huge lesson! We need to think before we speak. Off hand comments or remarks can do a lot of damage. They can hurt feelings and cause division in the body of Messiah. We can damage our congregations and our souls. This is a much bigger issue than we think it is. To this day, I thank the LORD that the above situation went no further than it did, and we are still good friends. Those words spoken so carelessly could have caused a lot of damage.

Here's another example. Suppose you are gathered together with some friends for dinner, and someone brings up another believer. A thought pops into your head about that person and you say it. "So-and-so really has a negative view of life. They are always focused on the negative." And then another person chimes in. "Yeah, now that you mention it, So-and-So does often complain about things." Before you know it, everyone is gossiping about this believer. And the next time these friends see this person, each of them is more stand-offish and aloof. After all, they don't want to be affected by this person's negativity. And then they start watching for signs of negativity or complaining whenever they are with this person. People start talking. And So-and-So suddenly finds himself or herself not feeling as loved and accepted, and so he or she stops coming to worship or Bible studies. And it all started because one person felt they had to talk about someone's negativity....it's a tiny flame that so quickly turns into a raging forest fire, ravaging everything in its path. This is how leprosy began. It started with a tiny spot or blemish and quickly spread across the entire body. Evil speech is much the same.

Again, we can learn a lesson from the leper. He or she was isolated from the community and had to live outside the camp. This was true even if the leper was married. Imagine, having to live away from your spouse, children, parents, and friends, isolated and alone. But doesn't evil speech have the same effect on us? It isolates us from one another, dividing families, friends, and congregations. A person who was afflicted by leprosy because of evil speech received a fitting punishment. Just as their speech isolated individuals from one another, so now they would be isolated so they didn't contaminate others. What a vivid word picture!

James writes in his letter, "if anyone thinks himself to be religious and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless" (James 1:26). I would like to share again the written commentary from First Fruits of Zion because I can't think of a better analogy for this scripture:

Imagine a person who spent the whole day carrying buckets of water to fill a cistern, only to find that the cistern had a leak and the water had all drained out. All his toil and labor was wasted. That's the way it is for us if we are busy studying, learning, praying and living a life of faith and godliness, but not controlling our tongues.

Why are the way we talk and the things we say such a big deal? Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that the universe is made out of words. God spoke and the world came into being. The power of speech is the power to create. With our words, we create our own realities. (*Torah Club v. 1, Parashat Tazria*, Daniel Lancaster, First Fruits of Zion, 800-775-4807, www.ffoz.org)

This is so true. With our words, we either build up or we tear down. We need to speak positive and affirming words into the lives of our spouses, children, parents, grandparents, friends and co-workers. We should especially speak gracious and kind words when speaking with members of the household of faith, those who believe in Messiah Yeshua, who brings us together so we can be a blessing to one another. With our tongues, we either bless or we curse. Blessing brings life. Cursing brings death. We're sure you will agree that our world could use a lot more life. There's plenty of death all around us. Let's use our words to bless, and we will bless our Father in heaven every time we open our mouths! That would indeed change the world!

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