

# OHRNET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

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by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### An Eternal Covenant

*“And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised...” (12:3)*

Saturday morning, 8 o'clock. The rest of the world is making its way to work through a gray London morning, but at a synagogue in an up-market part of North-West London, men in suits and ladies in hats are turning up to Synagogue Shabbat services. The people range from the fully Shabbat observant, to those whose connection to Judaism is a distant childhood memory.

And without realizing it, they are attesting to the accuracy of our Sages' words, "Every mitzvah for which the Jewish People have sacrificed their lives during periods of state persecution – including circumcision – is still observed by them." Also, "Every mitzvah that the Jews accepted upon themselves with joy, such as circumcision, endures." Although to the Western secular mind, brit milah may seem like mutilation, it endures when many other mitzvahs have fallen by the wayside.

After a boy has been brought into the covenant of Avraham Avinu, of Abraham, we bless him and say, “In the same way that he has entered into the brit, so should he enter into Torah, and to chupa, to marriage and good deeds!” This blessing is unique. At no other beginning in the life of a Jew do we give such a blessing. We don't say when a boy puts on tefillin for the first time, “Just as you have put on tefillin, may you enter marriage and good deeds.” Why is brit milah unique?

Because it is indelible and cannot be removed. Similarly, we bless the child that his attachment to Torah, to his wife and to good deeds should be an inextricable part of him.

# Q & A

## Questions

1. When does a woman who has given birth to a son go to the *mikveh*?
2. After a woman gives birth, she is required to offer two types of offerings. Which are they?
3. What animal does the woman offer as a *chatat*?
4. Which of these offerings makes her *tahor* (ritual purity)?
5. Which of the sacrifices does the woman offer first, the *olah* or the *chatat*?
6. Who determines whether a person is a *metzora tamei* (person with ritually impure *tzara'at*) or is *tahor*?
7. If the *kohen* sees that the *tzara'at* has spread after one week, how does he rule?
8. What disqualifies a *kohen* from being able to give a ruling in a case of *tzara'at*?
9. Why is the appearance of *tzara'at* on the tip of one of the 24 "limbs" that project from the body usually unable to be examined?
10. On which days is a *kohen* not permitted to give a ruling on *tzara'at*?
11. In areas of the body where collections of hair grow (e.g., the head or beard), what color hair is indicative of ritual impurity?
12. In areas of the body where collections of hair grow, what color hair is indicative of purity?
13. If the *kohen* intentionally or unintentionally pronounces a *tamei* person "*tahor*," what is that person's status?
14. What signs of mourning must a *metzora* display?
15. Why must a *metzora* call out, "*Tamei! Tamei!*"?
16. Where must a *metzora* dwell?
17. Why is a *metzora* commanded to dwell in isolation?
18. What sign denotes *tzara'at* in a garment?
19. What must be done to a garment that has *tzara'at*?
20. If after washing a garment the signs of *tzara'at* disappear entirely, how is the garment purified?

## Answers

1. 12:2 - At the end of seven days.
2. 12:6 - An *olah* and a *chatat*.
3. 12:6 - A *tor* (turtle dove) or a *ben yona* (young pigeon).
4. 12:7 - The *chatat*.
5. 12:8 - The *chatat*.
6. 13:2 - A *kohen*.
7. 13:5 - The person is *tamei*.
8. 13:12 - Poor vision.
9. 13:14 - The *tzara'at* as a whole must be seen at one time. Since these parts are angular, they cannot be seen at one time.
10. 13:14 - During the festivals; and ruling on a groom during the seven days of feasting after the marriage.
11. 13:29 - Golden.
12. 13:37 - Any color other than golden.
13. 13:37 - He remains *tamei*.
14. 13:45 - He must tear his garments, let his hair grow wild, and cover his lips with his garment.
15. 13:45 - So people will know to keep away from him.
16. 13:46 - Outside the camp in isolation.
17. 13:46 - Since *tzara'at* is a punishment for *lashon hara* (evil speech), which creates a rift between people, the Torah punishes measure for measure by placing a division between him and others.
18. 13:49 - A dark green or dark red discoloration.
19. 13:52 - It must be burned.
20. 13:58 - Through immersion in a *mikveh*.

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

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# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

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by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## BIRKAT HAMAZON (PART 21)

### BLUEPRINT OF JEWISH DESTINY

*“Anyone who recites Birkat HaMazon is blessed through it.”*  
(Zohar HaKadosh to Parshat Terumah)

Birkat HaMazon continues: **The Compassionate One, may He make us worthy of the days of the Mashiach and the life of the World to Come.**

On Weekdays we say: **He Who makes great – *magdil* – the salvations of His king**

On Shabbat, Yamim Tovim and Rosh Chodesh we say: **He Who is a tower – *migdal* – of salvations to His king and does kindness for His anointed, to David and to his descendants forever. He who makes peace in His heights, may He make peace among us and upon all Israel. And let us say: Amen.**

Both *magdil* (used during the week) and *migdal* (used on days when Mussaf is recited) appear in Tanach. *Magdil* appears in Tehillim (18:51) and *migdal* is found in the Book of Shmuel 2 (22:51). The midrash on Tehillim, *Shocheh Tov* (ibid.) explains in the name of Rabbi Yudin the difference between the two versions. The Final Redemption will not happen suddenly rather, it will be a gradual process. The inference of the word *magdil* is that it is something that grows steadily until it reaches its goal. According to Rabbi Yudin if the redemption were to happen instantaneously it would be too much for many people and they would not survive the enormous upheaval and trauma that would immediately precede it. That is why the Jewish People have experienced troubles throughout this seemingly endless exile. Each persecution, each pogrom, each ruthless decree, each barbaric massacre that has been inflicted upon us brings us one step closer to the moment when the Mashiach will reveal his identity to the world – may it be very, very soon. That is why the Final Redemption is compared by the prophet Yeshayah (58:8) and our Sages to the breaking of the dawn. In the same way that the dawn occurs gradually and steadily so, too, the path to the Final Redemption is unfolding gradually and steadily.

But there is another factor as well, as our Sages teach, the darkest moment of the night is immediately prior to the dawn. So, too, immediately before the advent of the Messianic Era our reality will look its bleakest. However, slowly but surely, the “dawn” will break and the world will be flooded with the purest most exquisite light ever – the light of the Mashiach. As Rabbi Shulem Moskowitz (1877-1958) the Shotzer Rebbe was wont to say, “When it is dark, that means there is light behind the darkness. The thicker the darkness, the greater the light.”

If so, if the word *magdil* has such powerful connotations, why is the word *migdal* used on Shabbat and Yom Tov? Why isn't *magdil* used every time we recite Birkat HaMazon? The commentaries explain that King Shlomo in *Mishlei* (18:10) refers to Hashem as a *Migdal*, “The Name of Hashem is a Tower of Strength.” Subsequently, on Shabbat, it is more fitting to use the word

*migdal* because Shabbat is “*Me’ein Olam Haba’ah* – a taste of the World to Come.” On Shabbat we connect to Hashem in a more direct and obvious way and, therefore, experience dimensions that belong to the Messianic Era. That is why the word *migdal* and not *magdil* is used, because it alludes to the eternal closeness that we feel to Hashem

The Avudraham offers a beautiful insight by pointing out that the word *magdil* and the word *migdal* are both used by King David but at very dissimilar junctures in his life. When King David composed chapter eighteen of Tehillim he was describing the seemingly insurmountable difficulties and struggles that he experienced throughout his life. He uses the word *magdil* to convey the idea that his monarchy was not always accepted. That there was a need for it to grow and to be accepted by everyone. Later in his life, after his monarchy was established, King David uses the regal term *migdal*. Hence, it is very fitting that we also use the word *migdal* on Shabbat because Shabbat is the ‘king’ of all the days of the week.

And finally, we ask Hashem to bless us with peace. Rabbi Moshe Met (1550-1606), in his brilliant and indispensable work *Mateh Moshe*, writes that Hashem declares (*Vayikra* 26:6), “I will provide peace in the land...” Rashi cites the midrash, *Torat Kohanim*, that it is possible that a person will say, “Behold there is food and behold there is drink; but if there is no peace, there is nothing.” Therefore, explains Rabbi Met, the last request that we make before we conclude Birkat HaMazon is that there be peace. Peace so that we can appreciate all of the wondrous blessings that Hashem has bestowed upon us. And to thank Him accordingly.

*To be continued*

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POB 18103, Jerusalem 91180, Israel · Tel +972-2-581-0315 · Email. [info@ohr.edu](mailto:info@ohr.edu)

Contributing authors, editors and production team: Rabbi Nota Schiller – Rosh HaYeshiva, Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz - Rav of Kehillos Ohr Somayach, Avi Kaufman, Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein, Rabbi Reuven Lauffer, Rabbi Yaakov Meyers, Mrs. Rosalie Moriah, Rabbi Moshe Newman, Rabbi Shlomo Simon, Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair, Rabbi Yehuda Spitz, Mrs. Helena Stern.

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## 5784 – The Year of the Rare *Haftarah* Part II

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

As discussed in the OhrNet to *Parashas Vayigash*, our current year, 5784, is quite a rare one indeed. Over the course of this special year, not just one, but **three** out of the six rarest *haftaros* are *leined*. The next time this will occur is in another seventeen years, in 5801/2040. But first, a bit of background is in order.

According to the *Abudraham* and *Tosafos Yom Tov*, the *haftaros* were established when the wicked Antiochus IV (infamous from the *Chanukah* miracle) outlawed public reading of the *Torah*. The *Chachamim* of the time therefore established the custom of reading a topic from the *Nevi'im* similar to what was supposed to be read from the *Torah*. Even after the decree was nullified, and even prior to the *Gemara's* printing, this became *minhag Yisrael*.

Most *haftaros* share some similarity with at least one concept presented in the *Torah* reading. The *Gemara Megillah* (29b-31a) discusses the proper *haftarah* readings for the various holidays throughout the year, which are rather related to the holiday and generally trump a weekly *haftarah*. But it is not just *Yomim Tovim* that may “knock off” a regular *haftarah*, but special *Shabbosos*, and usually, even if *Rosh Chodesh* falls out on Sunday. Hence, practically speaking, there are several *haftaros* that almost never get a chance to be *leined* publicly.

But, as mentioned previously, this year, three out of the six rarest *haftaros* are *leined*. They are the *haftaros* of *Parashas Mikeitz* (at the end of *sefer Bereishis*), *Parashas Tazria*, and *Parashas Kedoshim* (both in *sefer Vayikra*).

As discussed in Part 1 of this series, this year, the *haftarah* of *Parashas Mikeitz* was actually *leined*. In fact the next time “*Vayikatz Shlomo*” (*Melachim I* Ch. 3:15), discussing the wisdom of Shlomo HaMelech - ordering to cut the disputed baby in half in order to determine his real mother, is the second rarest *haftarah Ashkenazim* read, averaging being read only once in ten years. The next time this *haftarah* is slated to be read is in another 17 years in 5801/2040.

This week, *Parashas Tazria*, the second rare *haftarah* “*V'ish ba,*” (*Melachim II* Ch. 4:42) will be read. Although statistically speaking, it is on average read every 6 years (16.32% of the time), nevertheless, it practically has not been *leined* in 21 years - since 5763/2003! There are several reasons for this. The common *minhag* is that when the *Parshiyos* of *Tazria* and *Metzora* are read together - which they are in a standard year; they are only *leined* separately in a leap year - only the *haftarah* of the latter *Parashah* is read.

Although there is some debate about this among the *Rishonim*, this position is codified as the proper ruling by both the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 284:7) and *Rema* (*Orach Chaim* 428:8),

and as far as this author knows, this was accepted by all of *Klal Yisrael*. The main reason this is so is to enable reading a *haftarah* similar to what was just concluded in the Torah *leining*, which translates to the second *parashah* that was just finished, and not the first *parashah*. So we see that generally speaking, whenever there is a double *parashah*, the *haftarah* of the second *parashah* is read, as that is the Torah reading that we just concluded. However, this means it is only possible for *Tazria's haftarah* to be read in a leap year, which occurs only 7 out of 19 years.

Moreover, *Tazria* can also be *Parashas HaChodesh*, which as a special *haftarah* reading, would also trump its *leining*. That, plus the preponderance of Shabbos Rosh Chodesh or Rosh Chodesh falling on Sunday, both of which would preclude it from being *leined*, make this year's *Tazria's* stand-alone *haftarah* quite a rare read, indeed.

However, the calendrical-minded among us who appreciate rarities and statistics need not fret, as we will thankfully not have to wait another 21 years to hear *Tazria's haftarah*. In fact, in the upcoming leap years, *Tazria's haftarah* will be read somewhat often – in 5787, 5790, 5793, and then, after an 8 year break, again in 5801.

The remaining rare *haftarah*, and the reasons detailing why it will be specifically read this year, will be IY”H be discussed closer to the time it will be read.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch famously wrote that “the Jew’s catechism is his calendar.” It is this author’s wish that by showcasing the uniqueness of our calendar year and its rare *haftaros*, this article will help raise appreciation of them and our calendrical customs.

This author wishes to thank R' Yosef Yehuda Weber, author of ‘*Understanding the Jewish Calendar*,’ for originally ‘tipping me off’ as to the rare *haftaros* being *leined* this year, as well as for being a fount of calendrical knowledge.

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

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The Torah commands a woman to bring a *korban* after the birth of a child. A son is to be circumcised on the eighth day of his life. The Torah introduces the phenomenon of *tzara'at* (often mistranslated as leprosy) – a miraculous affliction that attacks people, clothing and buildings to awaken a person to spiritual failures. A *kohen* must be consulted to determine whether a particular mark is *tzara'at* or not. The *kohen* isolates the sufferer for a week. If the malady remains unchanged, confinement continues for a second week, after which the *kohen* decides the person's status. The Torah describes the different forms of *tzara'at*. One whose *tzara'at* is confirmed wears torn clothing, does not cut his hair, and must alert others that he is ritually impure. He may not have normal contact with people. The phenomenon of *tzara'at* on clothing is described in detail.

# INSIGHTS INTO HALACHA

## Seder Insights: Comprehending *Karpas*

by Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

The *Gemara* in *Pesachim* (114b) asks why at the *Pesach Seder* we perform two dippings, i.e. first *Karpas* into saltwater and later, the *Maror* into *Charoses*. The *Gemara* succinctly answers ‘*Ki Heichi D’lehavai Hekeira L’Tinokos*, in order that there should be a distinction for children.’ Both *Rashi* and his grandson, the *Rashbam*, as well as the *Rokeach*, explain the *Gemara*’s intent, that this act is performed in order so that the children should ask why we are performing this unusual and uncommon action on *Leil Haseder*, as this action serves as a ‘*hekeira tova*,’ an excellent distinction. Meaning, the children will ask “Why is this night different than all other nights?” – a.k.a. ‘*The Mah Nishtana*’ – and we respond with “*Avodim Hayinu*” (Our ancestors were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt) and the retelling of our nation’s origins. This is one of the ways we ensure that the *Seder* Night’s Mitzvah of ‘*Vehigadta Le’vincha*,’ retelling the story of our ancestors’ exile, enslavement, and ultimate redemption and exodus from Egypt, is properly performed.

This is in line with the Torah’s referring to the *Seder* as “*Ki Yishalcha Bincha*” – when your children will ask, “*Vehigadta Le’vincha*,’ – you will tell your child, meaning, recite the *Haggada*.

### All About the Children

Yet, we can ask, well, if this is the question that children ask, then what is the actual answer that dipping the *Karpas* vegetable shows? The *Bach* cites three diverse solutions: 1) That we are showing *Derech Cheirus*, that free men dip before a *Seudah* to whet the appetite. 2) It serves as a small taste, as the *Seder*’s *Seudah* is much later, after *Haggada* and *Hallel*, so we should not sit so long without eating anything. 3) Citing the Maharal M’Prague that the first dipping before the *Seudah* shows that the second dipping by *Maror*, is performed exclusively for the *Seder* Night’s special Mitzvah of eating *Maror*; otherwise, as many people dip during their meals, it would not appear out of the ordinary.

The *Taz* offers an alternate approach, that the fact that the first dipping is performed prior to the *Seudah* shows that it is not actually performed as part of the *Seudah*, so too, it proves that the second one, *Maror* is also not performed as part of the *Seudah* but rather for its unique Mitzvah. On the other hand, the *Pri Chodosh* raises the point that everyone knows that there is a different Mitzvah of dipping and eating *Maror* that is performed much later on in the *Seder*, well after the ‘answer’ of ‘*Avodim Hayinu*.’ He therefore suggests that perhaps the main purpose of *Karpas* is for the children to ask questions, irrelevant of the answer or whether it actually answers that exact question. Once the children realize early on in the *Seder* that there are actions out of the ordinary being performed on *Leil HaSeder*, they will notice and ask the purpose of all of them, and thus enable the Mitzvah of ‘*Vehigadta Le’vincha*’ to be performed in the optimal manner.

But a question remains. Which exact action is the one that is meant to evoke the children's questions? The answer may surprise you. The *Bartenura* and *Tur* specify that it is **the timing** of the dipping. They assert that it is unusual to dip food items at the beginning of a *seudah*. Most other days we also dip, but in the middle of the meal. In other words, the only change we do to evoke children's questions is to perform the dipping right then. Interesting, no?

### **How Do You *Karpas*?**

Now that we explained the "Why" of *Karpas*, this leaves the "What," as in which vegetable should be used. It is interesting that the Mishnah in *Pesachim* did not tell us a specific vegetable, with the Gemara explaining that if stuck, we may even use the *Maror* for *Karpas* as well.

Although *Rashi*, the *Rambam*, and *Tur* tell us that any vegetable may be used for *Karpas*, and conversely the *Maharil*, *Arizal*, and seemingly the *Shulchan Aruch*, understanding "*Karpas*" to be referring to a specific vegetable with that name, yet, many *sefarim* cite "Petrozil" or "Petreshka" (presumably parsley, as "Petrozilia" is called in modern Hebrew) as the vegetable of choice, with the *Aruch Hashulchan* commenting that "we don't know what it is."

Other popular options used over the generations include onions, radishes, scallions, and even cucumbers. The main point is that its proper *brachah* be a "*Borei Pri Ha'adama*" so that it should exempt repeating this *brachah* again when it is time for *Maror*.

### **Strictly Celery**

However, it seems that the two most prevalent vegetables, at least nowadays, are celery and potatoes. Celery is considered an excellent choice, as the *Chasam Sofer* relates, his *rebbe*, Rav Nosson Adler, did much research in tracking down the *Maharil's* elusive "*Karpas*" vegetable, and his findings were that it is none other than celery. The *Chasam Sofer* writes that therefore that is what he used as well for *Karpas*. The *Machatzis Hashekel* writes similarly, that he was told by a "Great Man" (presumably Rav Adler) that after much research in Medical books, "*Karpas*" is truly none other than celery. The word he uses to identify it - "*ipiya*" or "*ipuch*," is also cited as such in earlier *sefarim*, including the *Bartenura* in classifying "*Karpas*."

Rav Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky, in his annual *Luach Eretz Yisrael*, writes that in Eretz Yisrael the "*Mehadrin*" use "*Karpas*" that is known by its Arabic name. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach fills us in that he was referring to celery. The *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* cites a preference for celery as well, and this is the *minhag* of many, including the *Mareh Yechezkel*, and later, Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer.

### **Pontificating a Perchance for Potatoes**

The other common "*Karpas*", perhaps the most common, is potatoes. Cited by the *Aruch Hashulchan* and *Misgeres Hashulchan*, it is the *minhag* in Belz, Skver, and Spinka, and many *Gedolim*, including Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, and Rav Moshe Sternbuch, were known to use potatoes as *Karpas*.

Yet, there are those, including *chassidim* of Sanz, Bobov, and Kamarna who will not use potatoes for *Karpas*. This can be traced back to the famed *Yismach Moshe*, Rav Moshe Teitelbaum, *rebbe* of the *Divrei Chaim* of Sanz.

In his *Tehillah L'Moshe*, the *Yismach Moshe* writes that he used to use potatoes for *Karpas*, but then heard that the great Rav Naftali of Ropschitz made a *Shehakol brachah* on it (and hence would not be fitting for *Karpas*). He writes that he found that the *Aruch*, Rav Nosson M'Romi (literally, of Rome; d. 1106), when referring to the proper *brachah* of mushrooms and other food items that do not actually get their nourishment from the earth and consequentially their *brachah* being *Shehakol*, translates them as “*Tartuffel*.” Not familiar with the archaic word, the *Yismach Moshe* maintained that the *Aruch* must have been referring to “*Kartuffel*,” colloquially known as the potato.

Although there are different rationales for this, this idea is also found in several other *sefarim*, and there are prominent authorities who therefore made a *Shehakol brachah* on potatoes.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the facts do not seem to corroborate that potatoes should be classified in the same category of mushrooms, as potatoes not only grow and root in the ground, but they also get their nourishment from the ground, as opposed to mushrooms and their ilk. Several contemporary authorities point out that it is highly unlikely, if not outright impossible, for the *Aruch*, who lived in Europe in the eleventh century, to have been referring to “*Kartuffel*” (potatoes) as the proper translation for mushrooms, as tubers were unknown on that continent until almost five hundred years later!

In fact, according to the *Tiferes Yisrael*, this act of Sir Francis Drake's, of introducing potatoes to the European continent in the 1500s, merited him to be classified as one of the *Chassidei Umos Ha'Olam*, as over the centuries, potatoes have saved countless lives from starvation.

Moreover, in modern Italian, “*tartufo*” still translates as “truffle,” the prized underground fungus/mushroom variety that is “worth its weight in gold,” and not a potato. Therefore, taking all of this into account, the vast majority of authorities rule that the proper blessing on the potato is indeed “*Borei Pri Ha'adama*,” and hence, it is still the preference for many as “*Karpas*.”

One final Seder-related thought. The *Rosh* explains that the *Afikoman matzah* is eaten in place of the *Korban Pesach*. Accordingly, one can suggest that at the *Pesach Seder* we not only remember the *Korban Pesach* as a historical event last practiced 2,000 years ago. Rather, when we eat the *Afikoman*, at the Seder, we replicate the experience and feel the excitement of eating the *Korban Pesach*. May this year be the one we merit having the real *Korban Pesach* in Yerushalayim in the close proximity of the *Beis Hamikdash*.

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<sup>1</sup> This topic is discussed at length in this author's recent English *halacha sefer* ‘[Food: A Halachic Analysis](#)’ (Mosaica/Feldheim), in a chapter titled ‘The Halachic Adventures of the Potato.’

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# WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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## Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

### The Cutter

The Torah commands that when a Jewish boy is born, he should be circumcised on the eighth day (Lev. 12:3). The verb used in that passage to denote “circumcising” the child is yimol, and similar words for the act of “circumcising” appear approximately 30 times in the Bible, mostly in the Books of Genesis (Gen. 17, 21:4, 34:15–22), Exodus (Ex. 12:48, 12:44), and Joshua (Josh. 5). Those words are derived from the root MEM-(VAV)-LAMMED, as is the word milah in the phrase Brit Milah. That said, this essay focuses not on the act of “circumcision,” but on the person performing that act – the “circumcisor.” In this essay, we will explore several terms used to denote the “circumcisor,” namely, mohel, gozer, umana, and rofeh. In doing so, we will trace the etymologies of these various terms and attempt to show how they differ from one another.

The most common term in use nowadays for a practitioner of circumcision is mohel. While the term mohel does not appear in the Bible or the Mishnah, an Aramaic form of this word already appears in the Babylonian Talmud: The Talmud (Shabbat 156a) states that while a person born under the astrological influence of Mars (the Red Planet) may be destined to serve in an occupation where he will shed blood, the individual himself retains the freewill to decide whether this means he will be a professional bloodletter (umana), robber, butcher, or circumcisor (mohala). Cognates of the word mohel appear twice in the Mishnah (Shabbat 19:2, 19:5) in reference to the act of circumcision (mohalin).

It is tempting to say that the words mohel and mohalin derives from the same Biblical root MEM-(VAV)-LAMMED as the Biblical verbs for “circumcising” mentioned above. However, this is somewhat problematic because mohel has an extra HEY that seems to be part of the root, while the Biblical root has no HEY in the middle. The presence of this extra HEY suggests that the root of mohel is actually MEM-HEY-LAMMED, not MEM-(VAV)-LAMMED. Interestingly, in one case the Mishna uses the more abbreviated verb mal (Shabbat 19:6) to denote “circumcising.” That word actually appears already in the Bible (Deut. 30:6, Josh. 5:4, 5:7), and does not have the elusive HEY that we are discussing. I do not know why this particular Mishna uses a different verb for “circumcising.”

But there is another approach which bridges the gap between these two roots and sees them as interrelated. Even though I already mentioned that cognates of mohel in the sense “circumcising” do not appear in the Bible, the root MEM-HEY-LAMMED does appear once in the Bible in a context that seemingly has nothing to do with circumcision. When Isaiah criticizes the Jewish People for engaging in questionable business practices, he accuses, “your wine is diluted [mahul] in water” (Isa. 1:22), charging that wine merchants would regularly dilute their wine in water, but would continue to sell it as though they were hawking unadulterated wine. The word mahul here is a hapax legomenon that refers to “diluting,” and is thus the only

instance of the root MEM-HEY-LAMMED in the Bible. [In the Mishnah there are comparable terms, like *Michal* (Demai 7:4) or *Mochal* (Taharot 9:3, Mikvaot 7:3-4, Machsirin 6:5), and some versions actually read *mohal*. All of these refer to “diluted, watery liquids.” Similarly, the reddish liquids that comes out of a piece of meat after it had been salted according to Halacha is called *mohal*, and does not have the Halachic status of blood (see Shach to Yoreh Deah §69:79).]

In discussing the Biblical word *mahul*, Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzatto (1800–1865), known as *Shadal* (in his commentary to Isa. 1:22) connects that word back to the concept of “circumcising/cutting.” He explains that in both Arabic and Latin idiom, when one dilutes wine by mixing it into water, one can be said to “kill,” “slaughter,” “wound,” or “cut” the now-adulterated wine. This is because one essentially “cuts” the sharpness/potency of wine by watering it down. Based on this thematic affinity, *Shadal* understands that it makes sense to say that the roots for “circumcising/cutting” and the roots for “diluting” are etymologically-related to each other, as “diluting” is just another form of “cutting.” This approach is also accepted by other language scholars like the German linguist Wilhelm Gesenius (1786–1842) and Dr. Alexander Kohut (1842–1894).

\*For more about the Hebrew terms for “circumcisor” —including *mohel*, *gozer*, *rofeh*, and *umana* — check out the full version of this essay on the Ohr Somayach website at: [http://ohr.edu/this\\_week/whats\\_in\\_a\\_word/](http://ohr.edu/this_week/whats_in_a_word/)

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## TAAMEI HAMITZVOS

### Reasons behind the Mitzvos

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by Rabbi Shmuel Kraines

*“Study improves the quality of the act and completes it, and a mitzvah is more beautiful when it emerges from someone who understands its significance.” (Meiri, Bava Kama 17a)*

### ***TZARAAS***

Mitzvos #169, #172, #173, and #177

Our *parashah* specifies the signs and discusses the laws of *tzaraas*, a supernatural disease that resembles natural diseases, but which can be told apart by signs described in the Torah. *Ramban* (v. 47) explains that when the Jewish people are righteous and the Divine presence rests amongst them, their bodies, clothes, and houses have a good appearance. If, however, the Jewish people are unworthy and the Divine presence leaves them, its absence is manifest in the form of ugly *tzaraas*. *Tzaraas* can only come when the Jewish people dwell in Eretz Yisrael because then the Divine presence rests to a greater degree and the effects of sin are more evident. The Kabbalists explain that *tzaraas* comes about when inner Divine energies depart from a body that is no longer worthy to host them (*Shem MiShmuel*, *Tazria* 5671; see also *Rabbeinu Bachaye* to 13:2).

Hashem finds it difficult to smite a person. He first inflicts one's house with *tzaraas*, and if that warning does not suffice, He proceeds to inflict garments, and only if that measure fails He inflicts the body (*Tanchuma* §10). For the same reason, an infliction usually requires weeks of quarantine before it can be identified as *tzaraas*, to give the inflicted person time to repent and avoid the *tzaraas*. Even once a person has already been stricken with *tzaraas*, if he repents it will immediately become healed (*Tanna D'vei Elyahua* §16). Since *tzaraas* is a means of helping the Jewish people to rectify their ways, we find that Hashem announced to the Jewish people that He would inflict them with *tzaraas* as if He were sharing good news (*Midrash HaGadol* 14:34).

*Ramban* explains that when Hashem wants to mark the clothes of a sinner with *tzaraas*, He will specifically do so upon a white garment where the mark is clearly *tzaraas*, and not upon a colored garment, where the mark might be attributed to a discoloration caused by the dye within the fabric. Thus, a colored garment is not subject to the impurity of *tzaraas*.

*Tzaraas* has many varieties. There are numerous shades of paleness, which indicate the loss of spiritual life and the severity of the sin. Some create restrictions that last for a week, some for two, and some for a lifetime. Some are revealed and some are hidden beneath clothing. Sometimes the inflicted person must leave the city and live in solitude, and sometimes he may remain. Hashem created the possibility for different levels of stringency corresponding to different levels of sinfulness (*Hagahos Rabbi Elyashiv* to *Arachin* 16a).

A person may be inflicted with *tzaraas* due to a severe violation of any one of the following sins: *Lashon hara* (evil speech), bloodshed, false oaths, sexual immorality, arrogance, theft, and miserliness (*Arachin* 16a; see also *Tanchuma* 14:2). Hashem rebukes a person by inflicting him with a type of *tzaraas* that alludes to the fault that he needs to correct (*Maharsha* to *Arachin* 16a). It is therefore possible for a person to infer the cause of his *tzaraas* based on its characteristics, as follows:

1. *Miserliness*: *Tzaraas* on one's house corresponds to miserliness. As the Sages expound, when a person avoids lending items to others by claiming that he does not possess them, Hashem reveals that man's miserliness by smiting his house with *tzaraas*, compelling him to remove all his possessions out to the street so that they will not become contaminated along with the house (*Tanna D'vei Elyahu* §16; see also *Tanchuma* §10).
2. *Theft*: *Tzaraas* on one's clothing alludes to theft (*ibid.*; see also *Arachin* *ibid.*), for it suggests that he does not deserve to wear his own clothing as a punishment for taking away the property of others.
3. *Lashon hara*: *Metzora* is an acronym for *motzi shem ra*, a slanderer (*Vayikra* 16:1). This reflects the idea that the main cause of *tzaraas* is *lashon hara* (*Sefer HaChinuch*). Since a slanderer creates disunity and separation in society, he is inflicted with *tzaraas* on his body and becomes separated from society. The purification process involves chirping birds to remind the *metzora* to be careful even regarding chirp-like chatter since it often leads to harmful gossip.

4. *False oaths*: A person who cannot be trusted even when he takes an oath undermines the quality of society, which is built on trust, so he is stricken with bodily *tzaraas* as well (see *Tanna D'vei Eliyahu* *ibid.*). Gechazi's skin was smitten with snow-white *tzaraas* when he swore falsely to Naaman. The Torah states that Hashem will not cleanse someone who swears falsely in His name (*Shemos* 20:7), and this may explain why Gechazi's *tzaraas* lasted permanently.
5. *Arrogance*: One who acts arrogantly is stricken with bodily *tzaraas* (*Tanna D'vei Eliyahu*); he must live in solitude until he learns how to relate to others. *Maharsha* suggests that *Karachas v'Gabachas*, a type of *tzaraas* that appears on the scalp (the highest point of the body), corresponds to arrogance. King Uziah was smitten this way when he brazenly sought to take up the role of Kehunah and offer incense. The purification ritual for *tzaraas* involves wood from a cedar tree, which is tall, as well as hyssop and a thread, which are small, to indicate the penitent must henceforth humble his arrogant nature.
6. *Bloodshed*: When Yoav killed Avner, David cursed that *tzaraas* should fall upon "his head." *Maharsha* sees this as an allusion to the type of *tzaraas* called "nesek," which involves hair loss and skin discoloration that is not related to natural causes. We may note that one of the signs of a *nesek* is a pair of short reddish hairs (*Onkelos*), which may symbolize the redness of blood and a life cut short.
7. *Sexual immorality*: There is a type of *tzaraas* that appears on a burn or a boil. *Alshich* sees burn-*tzaraas* as an allusion to sexual immorality, because a verse states that anyone who sins in this matter will invariably suffer burning (*Mishlei* 6:28), presumably because it is caused by unbridled burning passion. We may suggest that boil-*tzaraas* alludes to the same sin, for we find that Pharaoh was punished with *tzaraas* of boils when he abducted Sarah, which also served to prevent him from sinning (*Yalkut Shimoni* §69).

*\*Nowadays, we are no longer worthy of Hashem rebuking us through tzaraas. Nevertheless, the Sages teach that if a person notices troubles coming upon him, he should scrutinize his deeds. Hashem is speaking to him (see Berachos 5a).*

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Bava Metzia 44-50

*"He (Hashem) Who punished the Generation of the Flood, the Generation of the Tower of Babel Dispersion, the people of S'dom and Amorah and the Egyptians in the Sea – He will also in the future punish a person who does not keep his word."*

This teaching in the *mishna* on our *daf* is discussed in greater detail in the *gemara* that follows (47b), detailing whether in Torah law a buyer acquires the item when he gives money for it, or if the buyer must take actual physical possession of the item ("*meshicha*") in order to acquire it.

If a transaction was agreed upon verbally, and money changed hands for the purchase, but no act of the buyer taking physical possession occurred, the sale is not concluded according to halacha and either party may back out of the transaction. However, there are consequences and repercussions for the one who backs out and does not keep his word, as taught by the strong curse in the *mishna*.

Why is the person who fails to keep his word punished by Hashem in this manner, with a curse that mentions these specific historical Heavenly punishments? The Maharsha explains that "faithlessness" was the common denominator of all the wicked people mentioned in the *mishna*, whereas faithfulness is considered an inherent, basic Jewish trait.

I once heard from a great rabbi in Jerusalem that punishments mentioned in the *mishna* are not only of an epic nature, but also miraculous in nature. Likewise, a person who does not keep his word is guilty of failing to recognize the extraordinary power of human speech that Hashem breathed into Mankind, a power that can even bring miraculous and supernatural positive results when used in the correct manner.

*Bava Metzia 44a*

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POB 18103, Jerusalem 91180, Israel · Tel +972-2-581-0315 · Email. [info@ohr.edu](mailto:info@ohr.edu)

Contributing authors, editors and production team: Rabbi Nota Schiller – Rosh HaYeshiva, Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz - Rav of Kehillos Ohr Somayach, Avi Kaufman, Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein, Rabbi Reuven Lauffer, Rabbi Yaakov Meyers, Mrs. Rosalie Moriah, Rabbi Moshe Newman, Rabbi Shlomo Simon, Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair, Rabbi Yehuda Spitz, Mrs. Helena Stern.

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