

A DIVINE PUNISHMENT? LEPROSY IN THE REFLECTIONS OF MOSES MAIMONIDES

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Abstract: The article aims to examine Maimonides' investigation of leprosy. Re-reading the passages in *Leviticus* in which the issue is dealt with, Maimonides insists in his *Mišneh Torah* on the punitive scope of leprosy: it is simply the punishment that, following a series of warnings, God inflicts on those who have been guilty of the sin of turpitude. The strictly moral dimension is complemented by something else, however, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, in which Maimonides attempts to explain the epidemic phenomenon of leprosy in scientific terms, moving beyond the categories of impurity and recovery of purity that had guided him in his analyses up to that point.

Keywords: Maimonides; leprosy; impurity; punishment; miracle.

In 2020, Il Mulino publishers sent to print one of the last, captivating works by the late Chiara Frugoni – *Paure medievali. Epidemie, prodigi, fine del tempo*.¹ The book, conceived in 2019, tells of a past that, as Frugoni herself writes in the prologue, has become surprisingly, and overwhelmingly, close: with dismay we continue to find ourselves facing (brutal) realities that were thought to have been averted centuries ago, such as a pandemic caused by a virus, and all that is sadly connected to it. In this intriguing journey through the fears that beset the Middle Ages, enriched in Frugoni's unique style with precious images and stories, there appears one which, for more than one reason of interest, I would like to take as my starting point: and that is fear of the Jews.²

1 FRUGONI 2020.

2 FRUGONI 2020, 16–252.

The reference is not so much to the common perception of Jews as pseudo-humans, or beasts lacking in reason, capable of recognising only their own laws, and therefore deserving to be portrayed differently from men in the strict sense of the word (thus with the physiognomic traits that would accompany them for a long time: the hooked nose, the beard, the thick hair, and even, adding racial prejudice to racial prejudice, the black skin).

Rather than such generalised anti-Semitism, the reference is to a specific event that swiftly ended up making Jews the enemies next door. According to the chronicles of the time, in 1321 the people of central France accused the lepers of trying to make the healthy get sick, if not die, by poisoning rivers, fountains and wells, with the complicity of the Jews, who were trying to destroy the Christian population. The conspiracy (obsession) once again exploded in all its drama on the occasion of the plague of 1348: searching for a culprit for the epidemic, it was the Jews who were blamed for spreading it, thus confirming themselves as a serious threat, as the instrument through which the Devil was once again working to subvert the Christian order.³

It mattered little that Pope Clement VI himself intervened against the conspiracy theory, pointing out that Jews were also dying of the plague, and that the epidemic had spread to regions where they were absent:⁴ the wave of violence did not subside and collective hysteria ferociously tortured, even to the point of burning at the stake, thousands of Jews (including women and children), in the hope of stopping the contagion.

This long preamble is simply to state in what relation Jews, leprosy and epidemics stood for those on the outside looking for answers to the emergence of something frighteningly new. Seeking to reverse the perspective,

3 For a reconstruction of the events involving the Jews at the outbreak of the plague in 1348, see also GINZBURG 2017, esp. 41–61.

4 FRUGONI 2020, 283–285, 335–339.

however, what would be the result? What, in other words, was the Jewish idea of leprosy?

The mention of leprosy in Jewish philosophical literature almost exclusively occurs as part of a broader project – that of the meticulous discussion of the causes of impurity. In addition to the better-known causes, of contact with a dead body (whether human or animal), menstrual flow and the blood of women about to give birth, leprosy is, indeed, a cause of impurity.⁵

This is made explicit in chapters 13 and 14 of *Leviticus* (King James Version):

When the plague of leprosy [צרעת] *ṣāra'at* is in a man, then he shall be brought unto the priest; And the priest shall see him: and, behold, if the rising be white in the skin, and it have turned the hair white, and there be quick raw flesh in the rising; It is an old leprosy in the skin of his flesh, and the priest shall pronounce him unclean, and shall not shut him up: for he is unclean. And if a leprosy break out abroad in the skin, and the leprosy cover all the skin of him that hath the plague from his head even to his foot, wheresoever the priest looketh; Then the priest shall consider: and, behold, if the leprosy have covered all his flesh, he shall pronounce him clean that hath the plague: it is all turned white: he is clean.⁶ But when raw flesh appeareth in him, he shall be unclean. And the priest shall see the raw flesh, and pronounce him to be unclean: for the raw flesh is unclean: it is a leprosy. Or if the raw flesh turn again, and be changed unto white, he shall come unto the priest; and the priest shall see him: and, behold, if the plague be turned into white; then the priest shall pronounce him clean that hath the plague: he is clean.

Leaving aside, for the moment, some observations, or perplexities, of a terminological nature, related to the traditional (and perhaps now dated) rendering of the original Hebrew *ṣāra'at* as 'leprosy',⁷ one thing is certain. Not

5 On the seven causes of impurity, see at least SACCHI 2007; FEDER 2013; and now, by the same author, also FEDER 2021.

6 If it is declared to be pure, it is because in all likelihood one is speaking of a freckle, which in itself is not dangerous, since it is not contagious. This confirms the improper translation of *ṣāra'at* with leprosy, as will be explained in the next footnote.

7 According to Wilkinson, translating *ṣāra'at* as leprosy is unacceptable: WILKINSON 1977;

even one of the principal representatives – indeed, we might say without any rhetorical amplification, the principal representative – of the history of medieval Jewish thought, namely the Jewish philosopher, jurist and physician, Moses Maimonides (1135–1205), avoids the use of *Leviticus* to discuss the leper and his uncleanness.

In respect of chronological order, but not only (as we shall explain), we shall begin with what Maimonides states in the *Mišneh Torah* (*Repetition of the Torah*), written between 1170 and 1178, with the aim of summarising and organising the precepts of the Torah in the 14 books of which it consists, as well as showing how each of them is rationally founded.⁸ The work, which earned Maimonides the title of rabbinic authority of his time, includes an entire treatise – Treatise 3 of Book 10 (*The Book of Ritual Purity*) – on leprosy (*The Laws of the Impurity Imparted by Šāra’at*).

“When there is a *šāra’at* affliction of human skin, the skin turns white, becoming as white as the membrane of an egg or whiter.”⁹ Maimonides’ treatise on leprosy begins in these terms, and from this point onward it continues

and mainly, WILKINSON 1978, esp. 153: “In recent years, doubt has arisen about the correctness of the traditional interpretation of this chapter [= the thirteenth chapter of *Leviticus*]. Closer study of the text and closer comparison of its descriptions with what is known of leprosy today have suggested some hesitation before we identify the disease whose features are set out in this passage as leprosy.” The term *šāra’at* would instead indicate all of the “skin diseases affecting human beings”; as a loan word, it would then come to be applied to everything that “present appearances analogous to those described in human skin disease” (157). In order not to run into any problems, or absurd anachronisms, one could avoid the conventional rendering of *šāra’at* as leprosy by resorting either to a simple transliteration of the Hebrew term or to the expression “an unclean skin disease” (163–164). On the topic, now see also BADEN, MOSS 2011; and FEDER 2012, esp. 55–56.

8 Indeed, a first, albeit less complete, or more basic, treatment of leprosy already appeared in the *Book of the Lamp* (*Kitāb al-sirāğ*), a commentary to the *Mišnah*, which Maimonides had written in Judeo-Arabic between 1158 and 1168 with the aim, in some way already implicit in the title itself, of illuminating, or making accessible to the Jewish people, the normative code of the post-biblical Jewish tradition (ZONTA 2011, 56–58): the treatise *Nega’im* (*On diseases*) is wholly a commentary on *Leviticus* chapters 13 and 14.

9 MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, X, 3, chapter 1.

for no less than 16 chapters in a detailed examination, sometimes bordering on pedantry, of the various stages of the disease and what follows. The degrees of intensity of whiteness with which leprosy manifests itself (more or less white spots, up to the case of the snow-white spot, which appears dark on the skin of an albino)¹⁰ imply the rigidity or, on the contrary, the leniency of the rules that must be observed so that one can finally recover the purity that has been lost.

With a certain frequency, as if to remind us of its importance, it is repeated here that one remains impure, without the possibility of freeing oneself from the seal of impurity, when, after an isolation of two weeks and the process of inspection that follows, white spots continue to appear in the hair and on the skin, or when the first spots, instead of shrinking until they disappear, grow in size.¹¹ Nor do things change if the body is covered in spots, with the sole exception of a freckle of healthy skin: the subject who has become almost all white must continue to be considered impure. To decree the cure, and the definitive egress from impurity, is the priest, about whom Mai-

10 To be more precise, there are four shades of white, each one of which has a name, so that the affliction can be recognised and adequately evaluated: see MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, X, 3, chapter 1: "There are four shades of white that appear on human skin that cause a person to be deemed afflicted by *šāra'at*: a) very intense white that resembles snow on human skin; it is called *baheret*. b) a white that is slightly darker than that; it resembles the cleaned wool of a newborn sheep; it is called *si'ait*; c) a white that is slightly darker than *si'ait*; it resembles the lime of the Temple building; it is a derivative of the *baheret* and is called *sapachat*; d) a white that is slightly darker than the lime of the Temple building and which resembles the membrane of an egg; it is a derivative of the *si'ait* and is also called *sapachat*. [...] A *baheret* that is very intense white, like snow, appears dark on the flesh of an albino. And one that is dark appears intensely white on a black man. Therefore, we consider the shade as it would appear on a person of average complexion, neither an albino or a black man."

11 Here, too, Maimonides delves into a series of minute annotations: first, he specifies (perhaps rather unnecessarily) that white hairs in themselves are not a sign of impurity, but become so if preceded by white patches on the skin; and then he insists on what is the minimum number and length of white hairs useful in deciding impurity: see MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, X, 3, chapter 2.

monides is again anything but scant on information.¹² The priest, Maimonides explains, is not authorised to judge a person as imure until he has analysed the spots by comparing them with the skin around them (which is why the sick person – whether male or female – is required to present him or herself naked before him).¹³ To be even more precise, and thereby to follow Maimonides' indications: it is the same priest who inspects the spot at the moment of its appearance who must inspect it at the end of the two weeks of isolation because, being aware of the course of the disease, he will be able to release the leper finally from the process of inspection, or keep him in a condition of impurity. Should he, unfortunately, die or fall ill, the priest called to replace him would have to inspect the spot in question without considering its increase in size, since he had no knowledge of its original size.

The consequences of the priest's deliberations are immediately stated: in a subdivision of genders that purports to be exhaustive and clear-cut, the man stricken with leprosy, in addition to warning anyone who passes by him of his uncleanness, is obliged to cover his head for as long as he is unclean, even to the point of covering his lips, as if in mourning; he must also tear his clothes as a further sign of recognition; and he is forbidden to cut his hair and wash his clothes during the period of his uncleanness.

The prescriptions (which, as we have just seen, are as positive as they are negative) extend to contemplating the leper's movement outside his city; and this is, together with the need to inform others, the only prescription the

12 MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, X, 3, chapter 9.

13 The only thing that changes between the two genders is their position: see MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, X, 3, chapter 9: "How should a person with a blemish stand before a priest to be inspected? If male, he is inspected while naked, standing like one who is hoeing and like one who is harvesting olives. If female, she is inspected while naked, sitting on the ground like one who is kneading dough, like one who nurses her child, or like one who weaves with a standing loom, in which instance she raises her right hand until she reveals her underarm."

man shares with the woman, in recognition of the dangerousness and pervasiveness of the contagion.¹⁴

The case of the *tumtum* (i.e., the person whose genitals are covered by a layer of skin, making their sex indecipherable), on the one hand, and the androgyne, who possesses both male and female sexual organs, on the other, is different: since their status is doubtful, they must follow the rules that apply to both sexes, and they must abide by the rule of covering their heads and tearing their garments.

Three gestures are envisaged for the leper's purification: shaving all visible body hair, including eyebrows, armpits and pubic hair; immersion in 'living' (i.e., sanctified) water; and lastly, sprinkling on the back of his hand the blood of a slaughtered bird.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Maimonides, continuing on the basis of *Leviticus*, adds to the already intricate rearrangement of the topic the fact that *ṣāra'at* does not only affect human beings (Jews, even a new-born baby, or servants, "but not Gentiles or resident foreigners": אָבֵל לֹא עֲבוּדִים וְלֹא אֲבוֹתֵי עַמֵּי אֲרָצוֹת אֲחֵרוֹת):¹⁵ clothing and houses are also affected by the stains, and not because they are contaminated, as we might expect, by the person with *ṣāra'at*. Rather, the process of contamination is the exact opposite.

Starting with the case of garments, whether they are originally white, or both white and coloured, and whether they are made of wool (more precisely, sheep's wool spun with camel's wool), linen, or leather,¹⁶ and do not belong to a Gentile: it may be that dark green stains appear on them, like the

14 A woman afflicted by *ṣāra'at* does not cover her head, rend her garments, or cloak her face: see MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, X, 3, chapter 10.

15 MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, X, 3, chapter 9: "It is exclusively endemic to the people of Israel in order to ward them off slander."

16 The reference, in actual fact, is not only to garments in leather, but also to utensils in leather.

wings of a peacock or the leaves of a date palm, or deep red, like fine scarlet thread.¹⁷ In such cases, the garment is considered impure and, since it can transmit the impurity, it is put in isolation, or even burnt, if in the following two weeks the stain persists, or increases in size. It is instead said to be pure, and therefore can be washed, if the stain fades, becomes another colour or, at best, disappears.

Dark green and deep red are, once again, the stains that can appear on houses (of Jews – it is repeated as if it were still necessary – and not of Gentiles). The procedure envisaged in this case forces one to isolate the building, and to plaster it again, scraping off the stain and purifying the wall on which it had appeared with poultry; or even demolishing the whole building itself, if the stain persists.¹⁸

Dramatically pulling the strings of the discourse is Maimonides, with an explicit reference to the polysemy of the term *ṣāra'at*.¹⁹

Ṣāra'at is a collective term including many afflictions that do not resemble each other. For the whitening of a person's skin is called *ṣāra'at*, as is the falling out of some of the hair of his head or beard, and the change of the colour of clothes or houses. This change that affects clothes and houses, which the Torah described with the general term of *ṣāra'at*, is not a natural occurrence of the

17 See MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, X, 3, chapter 12. The same chapter then deals with the hypothesis of garments that not only are white with dark green or bright red stains, but that are wholly one of those colours.

18 The chapters on the impurity of a house (the last ones in the treatise) are those in which Maimonides arranges laws passed down mainly through oral tradition. He himself makes that clear in chapter 15 when, among other things, he refers to the prolonged isolation of a house. MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, X, 3, chapter 15: "The isolation of a house for three weeks is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah. Similarly, most of the laws applying to blemishes on houses were conveyed by the Oral Tradition."

19 On the polysemy, or equivocal nature of the term, Maimonides had already expressed himself in the Commentary on the *Mišnah*: "these [clothing, houses] are not natural and reason does not account for them at all for material and buildings are inanimate and changes that occur in them are not *ṣāra'at* except that the Torah called them such" (*Neg-a'im* 12:5: our translation from Hebrew).

word.²⁰ Instead it is a sign and a wonder prevalent among the Jewish people to warn them against *lašōn ha-rā'*, 'undesirable speech'. When a person speaks *lašōn ha-rā'*, the walls of his house change colour. If he repents, the house will be purified. If, however, he persists in his wickedness until the house is destroyed, the leather implements in his house upon which he sits and lies change colour. If he repents, they will be purified. If he persists in his wickedness until they are burnt, the clothes he wears change colour. If he repents, they will be purified. If he persists in his wickedness until they are burnt, his skin undergoes changes and he develops *šāra'at*. This causes him to be isolated and for it to be made known that he must remain alone so that he will not be involved in the talk of the wicked which is folly and *lašōn ha-rā'*.²¹

This is an unequivocal, and equally unequivocally bizarre, explanation of leprosy. It appears here as a direct consequence of a sin – that of slander –, which is equal in gravity to the sins that cause man to forfeit the coming world (i.e., idolatry, unlawful sexual intercourse, murder).²² According to the passage just quoted, *šāra'at* is indeed the last, the highest, degree on the path of admonition against evil, which from the outside (from the appearance of the stains on the house) gets closer and closer, touching first the clothes and then that which is even more intimate in each individual, the skin. There is nothing scientific in all this, which cannot be explained in any other way, since

20 In a literal sense, "a custom of the world" מִמְּנֵהוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם. Diamond – perhaps going way beyond Maimonides' intentions – interprets the extraordinary nature of the event in terms of rarity: see DIAMOND 2007, esp. 37–38.

21 MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, X, 3, chapter 16.

22 The discourse on speaking evil covers some of the most impious pages of the Treatise *Hilhot deot* (*The Laws of Personal Development*) contained in Book I (*Sefer ha-madda'* or *The Book of Knowledge*) of the *Mišneh Torah*. See for example, MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, I, 2, chapter 7: "There is a much more serious sin than [gossip], which is also included in this prohibition: *lašōn ha-rā'*, i.e., relating deprecating facts about a colleague, even if they are true. [...] one who speaks *lašōn ha-rā'* is someone who sits and relates: 'This is what so and so has done'; 'His parents were such and such'; 'This is what I have heard about him', telling uncomplimentary things. Concerning this [transgression], the verse [*Psalms* 12:4] states: 'May God cut off all guileful lips, the tongues which speak proud things...' Our Sages said: 'There are three sins for which retribution is exacted from a person in this world and, [for which] he is [nonetheless] denied a portion in the world to come: idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and murder. *Lašōn ha-rā'* is equivalent to all of them'. [...]. In addition, they said: '*lašōn ha-rā'* kills three [people], the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is spoken. The one who listens to it [suffers] more than the one who speaks it'."

ṣāra'at is not one of the “things of the world,” but rather a moral event. The principle that underlies it is, therefore, self-referential, held within the Jewish religious tradition, which Maimonides is taking upon himself to explain here, even ending the treatise with a list of biblical references:

The Torah warns about this, quoting *Deuteronomy* 24:8–9: ‘Take care with regard to a *ṣāra'at* blemish [...] Remember what God your Lord did to Miriam’. Now, this is what the Torah is implying: Contemplate what happened to the prophetess Miriam. She spoke against her brother. She was older than he was; she had raised him; and she had endangered herself to save him from the sea. She did not speak badly of him; she merely erred in equating him with the other prophets. Moses did not object to any of this, as *Numbers* 12:3 relates: ‘And the man Moses was exceedingly humble’. Nevertheless, she was immediately punished with *ṣāra'at*.²³ Certainly, an inference can be made with regard to the wicked and foolish men who speak extensively about great and wondrous matters. Therefore, a person who seeks to structure his course of conduct should distance himself from their gatherings and from speaking to them so that he will not become caught up in the web of their wickedness and foolishness.

This is the path followed by the gathering of wicked fools. In the beginning, they speak excessively about empty matters, as *Ecclesiastes* 5:2 states: ‘The talk of a fool is characterised by a multitude of words’. As a result of this, they come to speak negatively of the righteous, as reflected by the verse in *Psalms* 31:19: ‘May the lying lips be silenced; those which speak falsehood about a righteous man’. As a consequence, they will become accustomed to speaking against the prophets and casting aspersions on their words, as reflected by the verse *2 Chronicles* 36:16: ‘They would abuse the messengers of God, scorn His words, and mock His prophets’. And this would lead them to deny God’s existence entirely, as reflected in the verse *2 Kings* 17:9: ‘And the children of Israel spoke in secret things that were not true against God, their Lord’.

In this vein, *Psalms* 73:9 states: ‘They set their mouths against Heaven and their tongues strut on earth’. What caused them to ‘set their mouths against Heaven’? Their tongues which previously were given free reign on earth. This is the speech of the wicked that is caused by loitering on the street corners, frequenting the assemblies of commoners, and spending time at the parties of drunkards.

In contrast, the speech of proper Jewish people only concerns words of the Torah and wisdom. Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, assists them and grants them merit because of it [...].²⁴

23 On Miriam’s case (and Maimonides’ explanation of it), see GRAETZ 1994, and DIAMOND 2007, 39–45.

24 MAIMONIDES 2000, *Mišneh Torah*, X, 3, chapter 16.

The quotation, intentionally given in its entirety, exhaustively restores the sense of Maimonides' position: the biblical characters and episodes become exemplary of what could, or does, happen to the Jew (and only to the Jew) who, setting out on the road of wickedness and foolishness, remains indifferent to what would have saved him, if only he had paid proper attention. The result is, in such cases, another dramatic kind of indifference – the indifference of God –, who completely removes from his providential gaze those who have decided to make themselves unworthy of it.²⁵

Outside the strictly juridical context, however, things no longer seem to be only (or simply) in these terms: that which in the *Mišneh Torah* receives the – 100% Jewish – mark of deep and widespread impurity, impressed from above, first for corrective purposes, and later for punitive ones, finds a different, 'worldly', we might say, collocation in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Composed between 1180 and 1190 in Judeo-Arabic under the title of *Dālalat al-ḥā'irīn*, the work sets out to interpret the texts of the Jewish religious tradition through the resources made available by Aristotelianism, so that the perplexed evoked by the title (Jews who, firm in their observance of the Law, have come across knowledge that now paralyses them), discover the substantial convergence between Jerusalem and Athens.²⁶ Within this complicated project of rationalising Judaism, appear rhapsodic, yet no less significant, references to leprosy. To be precise, there are three places in the *Guide* where Maimonides, almost accidentally, introduces the topic.

One is where we would expect to find it, so to speak. We are in the last of the three parts of which the work is composed – the part devoted to the

²⁵It is no coincidence that, in reference to progressive warnings and the providential question, Diamond evokes the figure of Job, abandoned to his fate for failing to achieve intellectual perfection: DIAMOND 2007, 38–39.

²⁶We will confine ourselves here to mentioning only some of the most important introductory studies of the *Guide*: STRAUSS 1963; ZAMBRANO 1996, 53–78; ZONTA 2003.

purposes of the main biblical precepts. And here, in Chapter 47, on the precepts that establish what the conditions of purity must be in order to have access to the temple “with a feeling of awe and of fear,” we find – in the most classic of collocations – the mention of leprosy.²⁷ There are – Maimonides explains at once – many kinds of impurity, to such an extent that it becomes almost impossible to come across a pure person. Among those who touch a carcass, and those who touch crawling animals, among menstruating women, and women and men who have a venereal disease, there is also the leper. For him, as for the others, it is prescribed to keep away from the Sanctuary at all times (both day and night) until purity is redeemed. Now, it is precisely at this level, at the level of liberation from impurity, that a distinction can be made between the various kinds of impurity and purity.

The statistical-frequency criterion used by Maimonides is clear: “To the extent that a certain kind of uncleanness was more frequent, purification from it was more difficult and was achieved at a later moment.”²⁸ What remains unclear, however, is why in Maimonides’ grid (between impurities that are more frequent than others, which are considered rarer), the leper is strikingly excluded, appearing only in the list of what is contaminating and unclean:

²⁷ As Maimonides himself explains, as an introduction to the chapter, these are the precepts already enumerated in the *Sefer tohorah* (*Book of Purity*) of the *Mišneh Torah*, of which the cause is now discussed in order “to facilitate the actions of worship and to lighten the burden.” See MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 2, 593: “We have already explained that the whole intention with regard to the Sanctuary was to affect those that came to it with a feeling of awe and of fear [...]. Now if one is continually in contact with a venerable object, the impression received from it in the soul diminishes and the feeling it provokes becomes slight. The Sages [...] have already drawn attention to this notion, saying that it is not desirable that the Sanctuary should be entered at every moment, and in support quoted its dictum: Let thy foot be seldom in thy neighbour’s house, lest he be sated with thee, and hate thee.”

²⁸ MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 2, 594.

Being under the same roof as dead bodies, more especially those of relatives and neighbours, is more frequent than any other kind of uncleanness. Accordingly, one is purified from it only by means of the ashes of a [red] heifer, though these are very rare, and after seven days. Running sores and menstruation are more frequent than contact with an unclean individual; hence these require seven days for purification, and whoever approached someone who was unclean requires one day. The purification of a man or a woman having running sores, and of a woman after childbirth was only completed by means of a sacrifice, for such cases are rarer than menstruation. Also, all these things are disgusting – I mean a menstruating woman, a man or a woman having a running sore, a leper, a corpse, a carcass of a beast, a creeping animal, and spilling of semen.²⁹

Similarly unclear – this time by Maimonides' own admission – is the ultimate reason for the method used for deliverance from leprosy: understanding what actually lies behind the choice of using cedar wood, hyssop, scarlet thread, and two birds for the purification to take place – which is the main purpose of this part of the *Guide* – eludes Maimonides.³⁰

What remains throughout is that, according to an explanation already given in the pages of the *Mišneh Torah*, *šāra'at* is a 'miracle' that is renewed among the Jewish people, since it is a punishment for turpitude, which from the walls, unless there is immediate repentance, spreads to the beds and furniture of the house, as well as to the clothes, until it afflicts the Jew's body, should he persist in disobedience. It is clear that the argument provided in this chapter of the *Guide* again places leprosy beyond the world, in a space with a hint of the miraculous, implying on the one hand divine punishment,

29 MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 2, 594.

30 MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 2, 597: "The utility of this belief is manifest, there being also the fact that leprosy is contagious and that, almost by nature, all men find it disgusting. The reason why purification from it was effected by means of cedar wood, hyssop, scarlet thread, and two birds, is given in the *Midrashim*; but it does not fit in with our purpose, and up to now I do not know the reason for any of these things; nor why cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread were used in the ceremony of the red heifer nor why a bunch of hyssop was used for the sprinkling of the blood of the paschal lamb. I cannot find any reason whereby I could account for these species having been singled out."

and on the other the impurity of the Jew or, in the hypothesis of repentance, his purification, which will be both purification from *ṣāra'at* and, even deeper, purification from an obscene tongue. Incidentally, we might perhaps add that the mention of 'speaking evil' confirms for Maimonides a subject which is anything but irrelevant, or accessory. Still in Part III of the *Guide*, to be precise in Chapter 8, which focuses on the ethical status of matter, Maimonides draws up a list that leaves little room for the imagination about the evils that follow from it (the excesses of eating, drinking, copulating), and ends by admonishing the improper, or foul, use of speech. The grace of language has been given to man to learn and teach; certainly not to be wasted, as do the ignorant and depraved among the Gentiles, extolling in their songs and tales what is traditionally the lowest sense of all, the sense of touch.³¹

From the legal sphere, obscene language thus filters into the highly intellectual context of the *Guide* to remind us of the nobility of speech, and the impurity, or corruption, into which Jews and Gentiles, respectively, fall by violating it.

Though important, the reference to obscene language does not, however, exhaust the explanation of leprosy within the *Guide*. Leprosy is indeed a

31 MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 2, 435: "You know the severe prohibition that obtains among us against obscene language. This also is necessary. For speaking with the tongue is one of the properties of a human being and a benefit that is granted to him and by which he is distinguished. As it says: Who hath made man's mouth? And the prophet says: The Lord God hath given me the tongue of them that are taught. Now this benefit granted us with a view to perfection in order that we learn and teach should not be used with a view to the greatest deficiency and utter disgrace, so that one says what the ignorant and sinful Gentiles say in their songs and their stories, suitable for them, but not for those to whom it has been said: And ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. And whoever has applied his thought or his speech to some of the stories concerning that sense which is a disgrace to us, so that he thought more about drink or copulation than is needful or recited songs about these matters, has made use of the benefit granted to him, applying and utilising it to commit an act of disobedience with regard to Him who has granted the benefit and to transgress His orders."

punishment for slander and obscene speech, but there is not only this. There is also something else, which is stated in Chapter 72 of Part I, devoted as a whole to a discussion of the unity and incorporeality of God, as well as to the controversial question of the origin of the world (whether it is eternal, as in Aristotle, or created, as Genesis teaches). In these pages, Maimonides has the constitution of the heavens and the sublunar world correspond to the constitution of the human body, according to the well-known model of man-microcosm,³² and ends by clarifying the corruption of natural things and the corruption of the human body through a parallelism so stringent as to have a scientific character. Indeed, we read:

And just as the forces of man that necessitate his generation and continued existence for the time in which he continues to exist are identical with those necessitating his corruption and passing-away, so are the causes of generation in the whole world of generation and corruption identical with those of corruption. To take an example: if it were possible that the four faculties that are to be found in the body of every being that nourishes itself – namely, the attractive faculty, the retentive faculty, the digestive faculty, and the repellent faculty – be like the intellectual faculties and not act except as is proper, in the time in which it is proper, and in the measure in which it is proper, man would be preserved from many very great afflictions and from a number of diseases. However, as this is impossible and these faculties carry out natural activities without reflection and discernment and do not apprehend in any respect the activities they carry out, it follows necessarily that grave disease and affliction occur because of them, even though these faculties are at the same time the instrument through which living beings are produced and have a continued existence during the time in which they have it. This can be made clear as follows. If, to take an example, the attractive faculty would draw to the human body only things that are suitable in every respect and only to the extent needed, man would be preserved from many diseases and afflictions. But, as this is not so, and it draws to the body any matter that happens to belong to the genus it attracts, even if that matter diverges slightly from the norm in its quantity and quality, it follows necessarily that it draws to the body matter that is warmer or colder, coarser or finer, than is needed, or more of it than is needed. Consequently, the veins are plugged up with this matter, sclerosis and putrefaction occur, the quality of the humours is corrupted and their quantity changed; whereupon diseases appear such as

³² In actual fact, it is a model that is widely shared in medieval Jewish philosophical literature (and before that in Arabic) see on the topic, at least ALTMANN 1963 and KRINIS 2016.

scabs, itches, and warts, or great afflictions such as cancerous growths, leprosy,³³ and cankers, so that the form of one or several parts of the body is corrupted. This is the case also with regard to the other four faculties in question. And this is also the case with regard to all that exists as a whole.³⁴

Maimonides' words are incontrovertible. Diseases now find a different explanation – far from the moral order in which they had previously been placed: it is rather the nature of the faculties, or their instinctiveness (the fact that the four elementary faculties are devoid of thought) that determines afflictions of various kinds – from scabs and warts, to leprosy, and cankers. On the basis of Galen's teaching, what is, in short, being said here is that the mixing of elements according to qualities and quantities that should not be mixed together is at the origin of a series of phenomena harmful to the microcosm.

It matters little (or nothing) that the same discourse is made to apply to the macrocosm, which is its model, and that therefore the heavenly forces can move and mix the elements determining the formation of damaging causes – such as torrents, impetuous rains, snow, hail, tempestuous winds, thunder, lightning, and the putrefaction of the air – or of causes so destructive that entire geographical areas disappear – the sinking of land, earthquakes, hurricanes, and water overflowing from the seas and the depths.³⁵

Rather, what counts is the fact that none of the concepts repeated so far, and taken up again in the *Guide* itself, enters into this chapter, in which leprosy is relegated to an entirely natural, human, elementary horizon.

33 In the translation used here – by Pines – the term *šāra'at*, which we find in the Hebrew version of the *Guide of the Perplexed* translated in 1204 by Samuel ibn Tibbon, is not rendered as leprosy, as I have chosen to do, adhering to a principle of linguistic consistency. The term is instead translated as elephantiasis (which also appeared in the older commentaries: see WILKINSON 1977, 153); and this is how Gerrit Bos translates it in Maimonides' *Medical Aphorisms*, about which we will have more to say shortly (see the recent MAIMONIDES 2021).

34 MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 1, 190.

35 MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 1, 190.

Along the same horizon, another place in the *Guide* – Chapter 12 of Part III – seems to fit perfectly. The context is that of making evil relative, not absolute, and Maimonides is careful to define it through a detailed list of the species (three in all) in which it occurs. Here, then, the initial recognition of a very common error – imagining that evils in the world are more numerous than good things – provides an opportunity to discuss the insignificance of evil in relation to the fullness and absoluteness of good from the genuinely ‘quantitative’ perspective of the frequency with which types of evil occur. In the classification proposed by Maimonides, very rare are evils resulting from matter, i.e., chronic illnesses of a congenital nature, or illnesses caused by alterations in the elements (such as corruption of the air, lightning, or lunar eclipses) – on the whole, not even ‘a hundredth or a thousandth part’ of perfect births.³⁶ In Maimonides’ reconstruction, this is both a clear and an inevitable departure from a Galenic principle that is explicitly referred to: “Everything that is capable of being generated from any matter whatsoever, is generated in the most perfect way in which it is possible to be generated out of that specific matter; the deficiency attaining to the individuals of the species corresponds to the deficiency of the particular matter of the individual.”³⁷ The species, therefore, brings deficiency along with it as a necessary, but insignificant, concomitant of individual matter, with the implication – obvious at this point – that chronic illnesses do not compromise at all, and indeed make possible, in the general economy of grace and emanation of good, wisely passed on from above, the perpetuation of a specific perfect generation. More fre-

36 MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 2, 444: “Withal you will find that the evils of this kind that befall men are very few and occur only seldom. For you will find cities, existing for thousands of years, that have never been flooded or burned. Also thousands of people are born in perfect health, whereas the birth of an infirm human being is an anomaly, or at least – if someone objects to the word anomaly and does not use it – such an individual is very rare.”

37 MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 2, 444.

quent are the evils that men inflict on one another, for instance “when one individual surprises another, and kills him or robs him by night,”³⁸ or again, extending the discourse to the most catastrophic consequences, when great wars break out: not even in this case, Maimonides concludes, are we dealing with evils that are given in a major measure.³⁹

Compared to these first two species, one of which is statistically rarer than the other, the majority are evils belonging to the species that interests us most – the evils that man inflicts on himself, both on a psychic level (habituating his soul to desire what is not necessary either for his own survival or for the survival of the human species),⁴⁰ and on a physical level (over-eating, drinking, or copulating). The problem is that, compared to the few who have never allowed themselves to be trapped by bad habits, the others foolishly and stupidly complain, even to the point of blaming God for what they have brought upon themselves:

If someone has eaten bad food and consequently was stricken with leprosy, they [the ignorant] are astonished how this great ill has befallen them and how this great evil exists. They are also astonished when one who frequently copulates is stricken blind, and they think it a marvellous thing the calamity of blindness that has befallen such a man and other such calamities. Now the true way of considering this is that all the existing individuals of the human species and, all the more, those of the other species of animals are things of no value at

38 MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 2, 444.

39 וזה גם כן אינו ברב מה שבישוב – we read in the Hebrew (“and such events too do not form the majority of occurrences upon the earth taken as a whole”: MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 2, 444). The proposition makes clear that this kind of evil shares with the first the fact that ‘most’ is not necessary, but only ‘in a minority of cases’.

40 Perhaps we should specify, along with MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 2, 445–446, that the desire for what is unnecessary is an evil because it “is something infinite. For whereas all necessary things are restricted and limited, that which is superfluous is unlimited [...]. The error of the multitude has arrived at the point where they impute to the Creator deficiency of power because of His having produced that which exists and endowed it with a nature entailing, according to their imagination, these great evils [...].”

all in comparison with the whole that exists and endures. This has been made clear in the sayings: 'Man is like unto vanity, and so on'; 'Man, that is a worm, and the son of man, that is a maggot'; 'How much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, and so on'; 'Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and so on'.⁴¹

Leprosy results here from having eaten bad food. The reference is certainly curious, but it allows us to return to the insignificance of evil and, more generally, to the insignificance of the existence of the individual: evil, at least in the higher percentage in which it manifests itself (of which leprosy represents one of the most eloquent expressions), does not affect the specific constitution, which is the direct and immediate object of the wisdom of divine intention; rather, it affects the particular level, on which the unimportant weight of individual choices bears down.

One last area remains to be investigated, and that is the field of medicine, in which the treatment of leprosy, though not systematic, becomes – as is easy to guess – somewhat more analytical and technical. According to our (limited) knowledge of Maimonides' medical production, it appears that he speaks of leprosy in a series of aphorisms, scattered throughout the twenty-five treatises of the *Medical Aphorisms* (in Arabic *Kitāb al fuṣūl Mūsā fī al-ṭibb*), which he wrote for didactic purposes in a still undefined period of time, essentially collecting material from Galenic (and pseudo-Galenic) works.⁴²

Rather than attempting to review these places individually, we shall limit ourselves to noting two elements. The first – of a strictly lexical nature – is that, in the two known medieval Hebrew translations of the aphorisms by

41 MAIMONIDES 1963, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 2, 442.

42 ZONTA 2011, 38, points out that "according to an account in a manuscript note, possibly in the hand of Maimonides' nephew, David, the work would have been composed over at least ten years, either from 1188 onwards or by 1185; however, the last treatise would have been circulated only after the death of the author, who would have written it in the last years of his life and not had time fully to integrate it into the rest of the work."

Nathan ha-Me'ati and Zeraḥyah ben Isaac ben Še'altiel Hen, both dating to the last decades of the thirteenth century,⁴³ the original Arabic *جذام* is rendered as *šāra'at*, consistently translated by Gerrit Bos (who curated the invaluable edition of Maimonides' aphorisms) as *elephantiasis*, indicating a skin disease, or to be more precise, a disease of the most superficial layer of the skin.⁴⁴ The second, more radical element concerns the causes and possible remedies of this disease. Elephantiasis (like cancer, mange, the peeling of the skin, quartan fever, delusion, and thickness of the spleen) originates from an excess of black bile,⁴⁵ which, spreading in the blood, implies that the sufferer has a foul odour, that ulcers appear, and the complexion changes⁴⁶. A strict dietary regime, which produces good blood, is all that is needed so that the melancholic humour can finally be expelled.⁴⁷ It is no coincidence – adds Maimonides – that “in the land of the Scyths, who feed themselves with milk, we

43 The edition of these versions in Hebrew of the aphorisms was also edited by Gerrit Bos in 2020: MAIMONIDES 2020(1), *Medical Aphorisms* and MAIMONIDES 2020(2), *Medical Aphorisms*.

44 MAIMONIDES 2004, *Medical Aphorisms*, III, 94, 56: “It is, above all, the outer layer of the skin in which humours arriving at it are retained and become stuck – namely, those humours which are thick and earth-like. This results in mange, the disease in which the skin peels off, and elephantiasis.”

45 On the relation between black bile and elephantiasis, see MAIMONIDES 2004, *Medical Aphorisms*, II, 16, 31. As well as MAIMONIDES 2017, *Medical Aphorisms*, XXIII, 47, 8 (in which Maimonides explains: “All cancerous tumours especially develop from a melancholic superfluity. If that superfluity tends to the lower part of the body and the expulsive faculty in the vessels expels it from the openings [of the vessels] in the anus or vagina, then [the parts from which] this evacuation [takes place] are called haemorrhoids, and blood flows from them. Sometimes those superfluities are forced to the legs and cause varicose veins, and sometimes they are forced to the skin of the entire body, and from this elephantiasis develops”).

46 MAIMONIDES 2007, *Medical Aphorisms*, IX, 98, 80.

47 The diet to follow is suggested in more than one aphorism. MAIMONIDES 2007, *Medical Aphorisms*, IX, 108, 82: “The nutrition of patients with elephantiasis or cancer should consist of barley gruel and whey, both of which should be consumed in abundance.” MAIMONIDES 2015, *Medical Aphorisms*, XX, (68) 138, 87: “Boiled chicken soup balances the temperament. It is the best medicine and foodstuff for the beginning of elephantiasis.” MAIMONIDES 2017, *Medical Aphorisms*, XXII, 59, 17: “Hedgehog meat, if dried and imbibed in oxymel, is beneficial for pains in the kidneys, elephantiasis, and dropsy of the flesh.”

have never seen anyone afflicted by this disease,” while many people in Alexandria “are stricken by elephantiasis because of their bad diet and the heat of their place.”⁴⁸

Nevertheless, still in the medical field, there are explanations of leprosy bordering on the fanciful, which Maimonides uses, even though he recognizes their scant scientific value. In the treatise *On Poisons and the Protection against Lethal Drugs* (83–84), Maimonides turns to senior physicians to understand why in every city he passed through some men suffer from suppurating elephantiasis, which results in the limbs falling off. The answer, which puzzles Maimonides, calls into play their adulterous wives: these men had been poisoned by their adulterous wives by means of menstrual blood, which they took at the beginning of the menses and put into the food, causing the observed afflictions.⁴⁹

Trying, then, to hold together the different spheres covered by Maimonides (juridical, philosophical, and medical), and concluding, it seems we can say without any inconvenience that leprosy is for the most part systematically treated as a moral issue: it is all too evident, almost to the point of nausea, the insistence with which certain concepts pertaining to the sphere of morality are taken up in order to redefine, in a Jewish sense, the leper’s space. Nevertheless, an explanation of leprosy that goes beyond morality insinuates itself here – at least for those who are prepared (i.e., for those who have the instruments to understand it) –, becoming physiological, or pseudo-scientific, to the point of being of interest to Gentiles as well as Jews.

In spite of this, there is one point at which several areas considered so far intersect, generating the impression that the circle can be squared; and

48 MAIMONIDES 2007, *Medical Aphorisms*, IX, 107, 82.

49 MAIMONIDES 2022, *On Poisons*, 102.

that is the statistical frequency with which *ṣāra'at* occurs: if it ranks among the most common things (or evils), it is because it is difficult to find a perfect man, who has never deviated in word or deed.

One last point remains to be made, which has little (if anything) to do with Maimonides, but takes us right back to what we were saying at the beginning in our modest homage to Chiara Frugoni.

Even today, there is no shortage of those who, when the epidemic was spreading, thought it was God who had sent it by way of punishment; nor is there any shortage of those who have spoken of conspiracies. In one case, as in the other, once again it was the Jews who were called into question: Florida pastor Rick Wiles attracted a great deal of attention when he proclaimed that Jews were struck down by Covid for opposing Christ;⁵⁰ and a number of conspiracy theories have traced the origins of the epidemic back to the Jewish people, who allegedly sought the collapse of the global economy for financial gain.⁵¹ The *longue durée* of a sad story.

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50 Chiara Frugoni concludes her book on medieval fears with pastor Rick Wiles; FRUGONI 2020, 340.

51 To cite but a few examples: EDMUNDS, TERCATIN 2020; GERSTENFELD 2020; COLAROSSO 2021.

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