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תשפ"ה – Tazriah – Metzorah

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a community.**

## תשפ"ה Tazriah – Metzarah

This coming Shabbat, two portions – *Tazriah and Metzarah* - will be read in Shul. The main topic of these two portions is the מצורע - “*metzarah*,” one who is stricken with the malady - צרעת “*tzaraat*” (or *tzaraas*). The usual translation of *tzaraat* is leprosy, a translation that is completely erroneous. From a clinical standpoint, the *tzaraat* described in the Torah does not in any way resemble leprosy, more properly known as Hansen’s Disease. Most significantly, the Torah commentaries explain that *tzaraat* was a physical manifestation of a spiritual malaise.

*Tzaraat* presents itself as colored blemishes that could appear on a person’s house, clothing, or various places on his skin, including the parts of his head and face that are covered with hair. These blemishes can occur in women as well.

The blemish originates on the stones of the house or the fabric of a person’s clothing. The rabbis emphasize that *tzaraat* is not a living entity such as mold that grows on a house or garment, but, rather, constitutes a spiritual malady, which necessitates a “spiritual” cure. Since the house and garment are themselves the source of the blemish, and they are inanimate objects, there is no natural process through which *tzaraat* can grow in them. Only living organisms grow. Therefore, the blemish, which has suddenly appeared, is a miracle from Hashem.

The Talmud (ערכין ט"ז) says:

א"ר שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן: על שבעה דברים נגעים באין-על לשון הרע ועל שפיכות דמים ועל שבועת שוא ועל גילוי עריות ועל גסות הרוח ועל הגזל ועל צרות העין

*Rabbi Shmuel ben Nachmeini said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: Tzaraat comes for seven things: 1. Lashon hara – saying something*

*negative about someone, 2. Murder, 3. A false oath, 4. Sexual immorality, 5. Haughtiness, 6. Robbery, and 7. Selfishness.*

A derogatory statement about someone may be *lashon hara* even when it is true. One transgresses the sin of *lashon hara* when he says something negative about someone, thus lowering that person's status in the eyes of another. The statement's "truth" is irrelevant; one is not allowed to diminish a fellow Jew's status in the eyes of others. Only the Torah has such a law. In American civil law, truth is a perfect defense. Freedom of speech allows one to say the most embarrassing, devastating, negative information about another, that will cause irreparable damage to that person's career or family, and, if the statement is true, the damaged party has no redress. The perpetrator can print it in the newspapers or broadcast it on the radio and, as long as it is true, the victim must endure the embarrassment and consequences of the information.

Is it ever permissible to relate something negative about someone else? The answer is yes: A *constructive purpose* for revealing the information removes it from the category of *lashon hara*. For example, if someone consults with you about taking a particular individual as a business partner knowing that you were once his business partner, you could say, "I wouldn't advise it" to help him avoid a problem. However, you are permitted to say only what is absolutely necessary to protect the inquirer; you may not proceed to tell him irrelevant negative information that you know about the person in question.

If a person relates false information about someone, it is not called *lashon hara*, it is a violation of a different prohibition called "מוציא שם רע" - *giving a person a false bad reputation*. Obviously, this is worse than *lashon hara*.

The appearance of a *tzaraat* blemish is cause for major concern. It is the sign from Heaven that something is wrong with this person, and prompt correction is required. Being afflicted with *tzaraat* causes a major upheaval in life, as the process for getting rid of it may be long and difficult.

The *tzaraat* blemishes come in four shades of white. They are, snow white, white like limestone, white like the washed wool of a one-day old sheep, and white like an eggshell, in descending order of brightness. If the blemish is less white than any of these, it is not considered *tzaraat*. The Torah mandates that a Cohen - a descendant from the Priestly family of Aharon - make the judgment-call if a blemish is ***tamei*** (a problem) or ***tahor*** (no problem).

When a person finds a blemish on some stones of his house for example, before calling the Cohen to examine it, he would first empty the house of its contents. The reason for this is that if the Cohen pronounces the blemish *tamei*, everything in the house would then become *tamei*, and would require spiritual purification – a major hassle. So, to avoid this, he first empties the house of its contents, and then calls the Cohen to examine the blemish. There is poetic justice in this law. Reason #7 for *tzaraat* stated above - selfishness, includes being unwilling to lend items to friends and neighbors. When people asked him to borrow his blender, he said, “I don’t own one.” When they asked him to borrow his vacuum cleaner, he again said, “I don’t have one.” Upon getting the blemish on the stones of his house requiring him to empty the house, out came the blender, and out came the vacuum cleaner for all to see. This will teach him not to be selfish in the future!

The Cohen then enters the house to examine the blemish. If it qualifies as a bona fide blemish (satisfying certain color and size criteria), the Cohen seals the house and renders it off limits for seven days,

requiring the owner to find a place to live and store his stuff for at least a week. On the seventh day the Cohen returns to the house to look at the blemish. If its color has paled or its size has diminished, he scrapes off the blemish and the house is *tahor* - “clean” and everything returns to normal. If, however, the blemish has remained the same in color and size, the house must be closed up for another week. On the other hand, if the blemish has grown in size, the Cohen declares it definitively *tamei*, and he must remove the blemished stones from the house and replace them with new ones. He then closes up the house for a second week. After the second week, the Cohen returns to the house, and if the new stones are without a blemish, the house is again *tahor*, but the owner will have to bring a sacrifice of two birds for atonement. If, however, the blemish returned to the new stones, the house must be razed. There is a lot at stake here.

In each case, the blemish is closed up for a week at a time to give the victim time to think about his actions and figure out what is causing the problem. If he has successfully repaired his folly, the blemish will shrink or fade, and, upon return, the Cohen will pronounce it *tahor*. However, should the person not take his situation seriously and remain the “same person” or has perhaps gotten even worse, the blemish, too, remains. Staying the same requires a second seven days; obviously, more time is necessary. If it has worsened, the person needs some really strong medicine, and if he doesn’t shape up, he may lose his house.

This is just one scenario relevant to *tzaraat* of a house. There are similar protocols for *tzaraat* of a garment or *tzaraat* on a person’s skin.

When the blemish affects a person’s skin, he is sent out of the city for seven days to a special place where he sits alone. He may not be together with any other person, even someone else with *tzaraat*. Not

only that, but if someone approaches him, he must call out to warn the person, “I am *tamei*, I am *tamei*, stay away!”

Rashi explains the correlation between lashon hara and being in solitude with no option for camaraderie as follows (Leviticus 13:46):

ואמרו רבותינו מה נשתנה משאר טמאים לישיב בדד? הואיל והוא הבדיל  
בלשון הרע בין איש לאשתו ובין איש לרעהו אף הוא יבדל

*Our Sages have said, “Why is this spiritually unclean person different than all the others, that he must sit in solitude? Because his lashon hara caused a separation between a man and his wife or one Jew and his fellow, his fate is that he must sit alone.”*

The Midrash (Tanchuma Tazriah 10) tells us:

(ו) אדם כי יהיה בעור בשרו (שם יג). קשה לפני הקב"ה לפשוט ידו באדם הזה. ומה הוא עושה? מתרה בו תחלה ואח"כ מלקה אותו שנא' (שם יד) ונתתי נגע צרעת בבית ארץ אחוזתכם בתחלה מלקה ביתו חזר בו מוטב ואם לאו מלקה בגדיו שנאמר (שם) והבגד כי יהיה בו נגע צרעת חזר בו מוטב ואם לאו באים בגופו שנא' אדם כי יהיה בעור בשרו

*Hashem hates to inflict a person directly, so what does He do? He gives him warnings, then He punishes him directly. First Hashem puts the blemish in his house. If he repents, fine, but if not, Hashem inflicts his garment. If he repents, fine, if not, then Hashem inflicts his body.*

This is very serious! If a person doesn't repair his ways, he could spend months involved in *tzaraat*.

Interestingly, *lashon hara* is first in the list of reasons for *tzaraat*. The commentaries explain that not only is it the most common cause of *tzaraat*, it is also the most heinous of all its reasons.

In today's world, where communication – the spoken word - is so ubiquitous and has advanced to the point where it permeates every

aspect of our lives through smartphones and social media, this claim sounds ridiculous. How could a simple spoken word be worse than murder? Isn't talk cheap? Remember, *"Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me!"*?

The Torah's perspective on the matter is completely different. Words are our most potent tools, both for good and for bad. When used for good, in prayer or in praise or in complementing another, they are our most powerful instruments of good and can change the world in an instant. When used for bad, they are the most destructive of devices and can destroy an entire world in a second. How is that?

When Hashem created man, the Torah tells us (Genesis 2:7):

וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפִּיו נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה

*And Hashem blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.*

Onkelos, translates this verse into Aramaic as:

והות באדם לרוח ממללא

*As the soul was manifest in Adam, he became a **speaking spirit**.*

Our Sages learn from Onkelos's addition that man's power of speech is what defines a human being and is what elevates him above all other creatures. The power of speech, which allows a person to articulate for the consideration of others the thoughts of his mind, and the feelings in his heart, epitomizes man's ability to reason and make moral choices. Before speaking, he must first carefully consider the words that he will utter and decide if they are appropriate or not. If they are appropriate, he must then decide how he wishes to say them because there are many ways to say the same thing. We can say them with sensitivity and care, or with intent to hurt.



Because the power of speech is where man's spiritual nature is manifest, man's words have the power to penetrate and touch the very essence and soul of another person. Have you ever been moved to tears by something that someone has said? Those words touched your soul so deeply that they evoked the deepest reaction from you; your whole being was affected. Have you ever listened to a lecture that excited and inspired you to change something about yourself, or to take action where you never thought you would? Those words affected you so profoundly, they absolutely changed you! Words enter our souls, and they can also destroy us from the inside.

The Talmud (Bava Metziah 59a) relates:

אמר דוד לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, רבוננו של עולם גלוי וידוע לפניך שאם היו מקרעים בשרי לא היה דמי שותת לארץ ולא עוד אלא אפילו בשעה שעוסקין בנגעים ואהלות אומרים לי דוד הבא על אשת איש מיתתו במה ואני אומר להם מיתתו בחנק ויש לו חלק לעולם הבא אבל המלבין את פני חבריו ברבים אין לו חלק לעולם הבא

*King David said to Hashem, "Master of the Universe, You know that if they would cut my flesh (when I am embarrassed) my blood wouldn't flow out of my veins (because it has been displaced out of embarrassment). Not only that, when we are studying ... they would say to me, "David, what is the punishment for one who has an affair with a married woman?" (This was a deliberate attempt to embarrass King David about the incident with Bat Sheva, who was actually completely divorced at the time). I would respond to them, "He is executed by the court, but he still has a portion in the World to Come. On the other hand, one who embarrasses another in public, has no share in the World to Come."*

When a person embarrasses someone in public, he has killed the person (the soul) inside the body, the real person, and therefore he has no place in the world to come. When one actually murders someone,

however, he has killed only the body; the victim's soul remains intact. This illustrates how words are more powerful than actions.

When speaking disparagingly about a fellow Jew, two factors make the matter so grievous:

1. When a person says, "So and so is so cheap; he never gives any money to charity!" he means to imply, "*But I am not like that! I am a much better person than he is! I give charity.*" What he has attempted to do here, is to make himself look better at the expense of the other person. By denigrating the other and implying that he is perfect in that regard, he has built himself up falsely at the expense of the other fellow.

Imagine a person in a library who is too short to reach the book that he wants. He needs about 6 more inches. What does he do? He grabs the guy next to him, throws him on the floor and steps on his head to lift himself up the extra few inches. This is what is so abhorrent about *lashon hara*. One who speaks *lashon hara* is using the other person's shortcoming to make himself look better. This, is what makes *lashon hara* so alluring. It gives a person a quick fix- the illusion that he is better than the person he has spoken ill about. The reality, though, is that he is the same person that he was before he spoke the *lashon hara*. He hasn't grown a bit. That someone else has done something wrong doesn't make him any better at all. He hasn't grown six inches; he has only put the other person down.

2. The Jewish nation is considered one unit. We are like one-person, joined at the heart.

The prophet Yechezkel said (34:31):

לֹא (אֶתְּךָ) צֹאֲנִי צֹאֵן מִרְעִיתִי אָדָם אַתֶּם אֲנִי אֱלֹקֵיכֶם

31) *And you are My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, **you are Man**, and I am your G-d.*

The Talmud Yevamot (61a) derives from this passage that only the Jewish nation is called *Adam* (man), and the other nations of the world are not called *Adam*. The understanding of this is, that the word *adam* has no plural form, whereas all the other names for nations have a plural form. This indicates that the other nations are comprised of separate, fragmented individuals.

The entire Jewish nation comprises one unit, similar to a human being. Just as the human body comprises more than 37 trillion cells - heart cells, muscle cells, brain cells, etc. – all of which have the identical DNA and work tirelessly together to give life to the body, similarly, each Jewish person is like one cell in the *Adam* - the Jewish nation- doing his part to keep the Jewish nation alive and well.

When one Jew speaks *lashon hara* about another Jew, lessening him in the eyes of his audience, he has driven a wedge between Jews and has weakened the structure of the Jewish nation. Just as when one part of the body is sick and not functioning properly, it negatively affects the rest of the body, so, too, when the Jewish nation is not united and is at odds with each other, it weakens the entire “body” of the nation. Every Jewish person must have the utmost respect and regard for every other Jew. They must consider every other Jew their ally, their friend and their brother. One who speaks *lashon hara* has committed a national crime by creating a fissure in the nation.

Understanding the allure of *lashon hara*, and its devastating effect on the Jewish nation, it would behoove us to put forth great effort to refrain from it completely. It is hard for us to comprehend a society in which no *lashon hara* was spoken, and where, if spoken, it would cause an immediate response- *tzaraat* - to serve as a warning to the perpetrator. What a great thing it would be if we could once again be *lashon hara* free. There is no time better than the present, when the

Jewish people need so much help from Hashem, to strengthen ourselves in proper speech, and avoid *lashon hara*. When the Jewish people are unified, they are invincible.

We could do this by studying the laws of *lashon hara*, as rendered by the Chofetz Chaim in his great book: Chofetz Chaim: A Lesson a Day; The Concepts and Laws of Proper Speech. (Available at your local Hebrew bookstore or at Amazon.com.) This would clearly define what is permissible to say, and what is not, and we can all become experts in the laws of *lashon hara*.

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The Mishna in Tractate נגעים Negaim, (2:5) says: (*Negaim* is the plural form of the word *nega*, which means “a blemish.” This is the tractate that deals with the laws of *tzara’at*, *blemishes*.)

(ה) כָּל הַנִּגְעִים אָדָם רוֹאֶה, חוּץ מִנִּגְעֵי עַצְמוֹ. רַבִּי מֵאִיר אֹמֵר, אֶף לֹא נִגְעֵי קְרוֹבָיו

*A Cohen is permitted to examine anyone’s tzaraat other than his own. Rabbi Meir says, “he may also not examine the tzaraat of his relatives.”*

Although the source for this law stems from a hint in the Torah, there is a logical reason for this result. The difference in whether a blemish is *tamei* (impure) or *tahor* (pure) depends on its degree of whiteness, viz, white like snow, or limestone, or wool, or eggshell. These several degrees of white are not absolute and depend completely on the Cohen’s assessment. But when it comes to the Cohen’s own blemish, and, according to Rabbi Meir, even to the blemish of a relative, our Cohen may see things a little less white than he would when looking at a stranger’s blemish.

This is why a Cohen cannot examine his own blemish. Knowing the dire consequences to the examinee of a *tamei* decision, the Cohen will be unable to see the colors clearly and will surely err in his judgment and decision.

It is interesting to note how Rabbi Judah the Prince worded the Mishna.

(ה) כָּל הַנִּגְעִים אָדָם רוֹאֶה, חוּץ מִנִּגְעֵי עַצְמוֹ

A literal translation renders: *“All the blemishes (of others) a man sees, except for his own.”*

This echoes the expression, “A fly on the other person, but not an elephant on yourself!” When it comes to another’s flaw, we are sharp to pick up on even the tiniest flaw, the size of a fly. But when it comes to us, we may indeed have a flaw the size of an elephant yet we can’t see it at all. And even if we did the exact same thing, we often (if not always) will be able to come up with an explanation of why it wasn’t *really* so bad, or even why it was the proper thing to do under the circumstances. The other person, on the other hand, is always wrong. We never give him the benefit of the doubt and he is guilty as charged, no matter what.

In a sense, this mirrors the crime that one who speaks “lashon hara” commits. We are all prone to see ourselves as perfect and the other as flawed. This is the lesson of the “*nega*” the *tzara’at blemish*. Just as we inevitably give ourselves the benefit of the doubt and judge ourselves favorably, we need to do the same for others and not pass judgment on their faults and blemishes.

If we were all to take this lesson to heart and actively practice it, we would bring unity to the Jewish people. This would strengthen us and fortify us against all those who wish to destroy us, and bring the Mashiach, may he come speedily in our times.

