

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### Shabbat Shalom

“Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a woman gives birth to a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days....” (Lev. 12:2).

Not surprisingly, the occasion of childbirth is so momentous that the Torah in this week's portion of Tazria commands sacrifices to be brought after the birth. But what does surprise many people is that the Torah distinguishes, seemingly arbitrarily, between the birth of a male and a female.

If it's a boy, the mother brings the sacrifice after waiting 40 days, the first seven days in a state of impurity (tumah), followed by 33 days of purity (tahara). And if it's a girl, the waiting period for bringing the sacrifice is eighty days, divided into fourteen days of impurity and sixty-six days of purity.

The first question to be asked is why the Torah stresses the sex of the child in regard to the mother's state of being. Is there any record, be it scientific or folklore, that the process of giving birth to a male is different from giving birth to a female, and that the mother feels or experiences something different depending on the child's sex? Indeed, some might even accuse the Torah of patriarchal prejudice in telling the mother to wait one amount of time for the male and a different amount for the female.

There is, however, a more fundamental question. Regardless as to whether the period is seven days for a boy and fourteen days for a girl, why should the woman be tamei -ritually impure- at all? Indeed, what is tumah all about? How, and why, does tumah, biblical ritual impurity, come into existence?

Conceptually, states of impurity treated in the Bible have something to do with the opposite of life - death. Both life and death are mysteries, but the Torah wants us to "choose life," and views the totality of life as good (Genesis 1). Hence anything that mitigates against life and expresses death is declared tamei, ritually impure, the severest form of such impurity being a human corpse.

Not only death itself, but even the unfulfilled potential for life also creates tumah. This is the source

for the tumah of a woman's monthly menstrual cycle. Every month the egg produced in a woman's body is ready for fertilization, the birth of new life. If this process doesn't take place, the blood vessels that would have nurtured the fetus burst, resulting in the monthly flow. Had she become pregnant, her blood would be nurturing the new life growing inside the womb. The appearance of menstrual blood means that the potential for new life was not fulfilled, an indirect encounter with death.

For one to return to a state of purity after the appearance of menstrual blood, one must completely immerse oneself in a mikvah, a pool of water collected from rainwater or a well, as opposed to a bath, water being the symbol for life itself: the mikvah waters are Biblically called "living waters" (mayim hayim).

Now our earlier question is intensified. Why does the Torah speak of tumah in the context of childbirth? Why isn't it conceivable that the creation of new life should result exclusively in tahara, purity, with no reference to tumah at all?

The fact is that childbirth is the moment when death and life come together. I would like to suggest that the mother's impurity comes from the fact that every woman who gives birth has a serious brush with death. During labor, the suffering may become so intense that the mother actually believes she is about to die. If something does go medically wrong, any doctor will testify that all of nature converges to save the child even at the expense of the mother. It wasn't all that long ago that the greatest cause of death among women was childbirth. In fact, a woman who gives birth is required to recite birchat hagomel (the blessing of the thanksgiving) in the presence of a quorum in the synagogue, the same blessing said after successful encounter with death.

But since the act of childbirth was only a brush with death-mother and child emerging intact- the days of purity far outweigh the days of impurity, in a ratio of either 7 to 33 for a boy, or 14 to 66 for a girl, the days of impurity doubled for a girl because it is the female physiology in which the death-life drama is played out.

This juxtaposition between death and life is not at all rare. The two come together, for example, at the "binding of Isaac," demonstrating that only one who is willing to sacrifice his life for a higher ideal actually lives a meaningful life. In Israel, where we'll soon be celebrating the 60th year of the state's re-

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establishment, the juxtaposition life and death is demonstrated each year in the annual calendar, Yom Hazikaron, the Memorial Day for the soldiers who fell in Israel's battles for existence, followed immediately by Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day.

Emerging from the encounter with the death of Yom Hazikaron, Yom Haatzmaut expresses that the painful birth -and existence-of Israel is the result of the continued sacrifices of the soldiers. The virtual contiguous placement of Yom Hazikaron (brush with death and destruction) and Yom Ha'atzmaut (the birth of the state of Israel) parallels the Torah's understanding of childbirth in our portion. Tazria does not only deal with the birth of a child, but it leaves us with an understanding of a relationship between a brush with death and the ultimate gift of life. We come to learn that just as death and life are intimately, painfully and mysteriously connected, so too the states of purity and impurity exist in an eternal dialogue. © 2008 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### **Wein Online**

**F**rom the time of our father Avraham, circumcision has been the cornerstone of Jewish identity. We acknowledge this in our prayer after meals daily "we are grateful to You for your covenant that you have sealed into our flesh."

The rabbis of the Talmud indicated to us that the Jewish people accepted this commandment of circumcision willingly and happily and therefore it has persisted amongst Israel uninterruptedly for all of these many generations since the time of Avraham.

Though many claims of physical health benefits have been made over time for the efficacy of this procedure, the Jewish people have always viewed it as being the supreme symbol of personal Jewish identity and role.

Over the ages the enemies of the Jewish people have attempted to ban Jewish circumcision. The great classical Greeks considered it to be a mutilation of the body and, in that body worshipping culture, it was held to be repugnant and unacceptable.

Much more recently the "progressive, democratic, peace-loving" Soviet Union prevented Jewish circumcision. In all cases, from Antiochus to

Gorbachev, there were Jews who risked all to fulfill the commandment of circumcision.

However, it bears note that the enemies of the Jews saw in Jewish circumcision a spiritual weapon that would help guarantee the Jews survival against the prevailing government, mores and culture. As is often the case, our enemies are more astute in recognizing and identifying our true strengths than we Jews are ourselves.

The commandment of circumcision is that the procedure is to take place on the eighth day of the young boy's life. There are physical circumstances that can allow for a postponement of the actual circumcision but the obligation remains a personal responsibility upon the Jew throughout life.

For instance, the Talmud records that a person who is a hemophiliac obviously should not undergo a possible life-threatening procedure such as circumcision. However, even though that person has more than a legitimate excuse for remaining uncircumcised he is still considered to be uncircumcised according to halacha and is therefore excluded from those rituals that the Torah explicitly requires that only circumcised Jews may participate in.

This is a further indication of the stress and importance that the Torah places upon this commandment and how vital it is to the Jewish being and future.

It is therefore most understandable why the performance of this commandment occasions the necessity for a festive meal and a great gathering of friends and family. It is not only the circumcision of that actual child that is being celebrated as much as it is a celebration of the ceremony itself - an affirmation of Jewish tradition and identity that is millennia old. Over the centuries, Jews have paid with their lives for being circumcised but the ceremony itself is seen as an affirmation of life and holy commitment.

Physical health benefits have been ascribed to the procedure and its result. But, Jews perform this commandment out of belief, joy and conscience and not out of any other considerations. © 2008 *Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).*

#### **RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### **Taking a Closer Look**

**“A**nd the kohain will see it on the second seventh day (i.e. on the seventh day of the 2nd week), and behold the affliction has faded, and the affliction has not spread in the skin, and the kohain shall [declare] him to be ritually clean" (Vayikra 13:6). Rashi understands this to mean that in order for the kohain to declare the afflicted person to be

"tahor," both things are necessary; the affliction fading in color and not spreading any further. If, however, either of these two conditions is not met, so that either it has faded but has spread or it has not spread but did not fade, the person is declared to be "tamay." As many of the commentators point out (e.g. Ramban), this is not really true, as the Mishna (Nega'im 1:3), the Talmud (Megila 8b) and the Sifra (Nega'im, the second 2:8) all say that even if the affliction does not fade (in fact, even if it gets even stronger), as long as it did not spread after the second week, he is declared to be "tahor." There is much discussion about how Rashi could explain this verse in a way that is inconsistent with the traditional literature.

Some (see Rabbeinu Shimshon on Nega'im 1:3) suggest that Rashi is simply explaining the verse in the most straightforward manner, even if it is not the way our sages understood it. (They understand the reference to the affliction "fading" to be teaching us that if it faded but is still within the range of the shades of an affliction, it is not considered a "new" affliction, but the same one, and if it didn't spread after two weeks it is "tahor.") Although it is generally accepted that Rashi will explain a verse in the most straightforward manner even if it goes against "halachah," this is only true when there is another opinion within the traditional literature. Therefore, most commentators are not satisfied with just attributing Rashi's approach to being as straightforward as possible, and numerous approaches have been suggested to allow Rashi to remain consistent with the Talmudic and Midrashic sources. The Taz even suggests that there is a misprint in Rashi, while others suggest approaches that are, quite frankly, hard to accept.

Rashi's explanation is built on a very straightforward assumption; if the Torah says that the affliction needs to meet more than one specification before it can be considered "tahor," then each and every one of those specifications must be met. Therefore, if the Torah mentions "fading" and "not spreading," having only one of these is not enough. Rashi uses this assumption when explaining other types of afflictions as well; if a "nesek" either spread or has yellowish hair it is "tamay," despite not having both (Vayikra 13:32). This is born out by the Sifra (Nega'im 9:12), which says it is "tamay" if it has yellowish hair even if it didn't spread, or if it spread even if it didn't have yellowish hair. The Sifra uses this method of deduction elsewhere as well, telling us that even though the Torah says that one of the symptoms of an affliction is appearing to be underneath the skin (13:20), it can be "tamay" without it, i.e. if its hair is white (see Nega'im Parshesa 4:4). It would therefore seem that Rashi is justified in using this method of deduction on our verse, and, if anything, the question should be how the Sifra could only use it selectively, employing it in some cases but not others.

How do we know that the Sifra does not apply this method of deduction to our verse? "By a garment if it stays the same by [the end of] the first [week] we isolate [it] and by [the end of] the second (if it still hasn't changed) we burn it, [whereas] by a person if it stays the same by [the end of] the first [week] we isolate [him] and by [the end of] the second we excuse him (i.e. declare him to be tahor)." These words (Nega'im, the second 2:8) seem to make it clear that according to the Sifra even if the affliction stays the same it is "tahor," while Rashi says that if it stays the same (and doesn't fade) it is "tamay." However, this understanding of the Sifra is dependent on the expression "staying the same" ("omaid") referring to its color. Just one verse earlier (13:5) Rashi had told us that "staying the same" refers to both color (i.e. not fading) and size (i.e. not spreading). In 13:6, where "spreading" is mentioned explicitly, Rashi obviously is referring to the color when he says it "stayed the same," but otherwise, it can be used to mean that either its color or its size remained unchanged (or both). The Torah uses the word "omaid" (or a form of it) several times where it obviously is referring to its size, not its color (see 13:23, 13:28 and 13:37, where the commentators, including Rashi, say explicitly that it refers to its size).

When the Sifra says that an affliction that is "omaid" after two weeks is "tahor," it can therefore be referring to either its size or its color (or both). Immediately prior to this, the Sifra had discussed an affliction that fluctuates, i.e. fades but then gets brighter or gets brighter then fades, or spreads but then shrinks to its original size or shrinks but then spreads back to its original size. Most commentators understand the fluctuating size to be occurring within the week, i.e. between the kohain's checkups, with the Sifra saying that the fluctuation is irrelevant if the size is the same as it was when the kohain sees it. The fluctuating color, however, is understood to be from checkup to checkup (so that it looks different to the kohain), with the point of the Sifra being that as long as it is one of the four shades that is "tamay," even if it had faded from the previous checkup (or became stronger), the change of color doesn't matter. It follows, then, that when the Sifra continues by saying that if it stayed the same after two weeks he is "tahor" it would mean if the color stayed the same. However, as the Mizrachi points out, it is a bit awkward that the Sifra would shift from talking about fluctuations that occur from checkup to checkup to talking about fluctuations that take place within the week. It would seem more likely that both were dealing with fluctuations that occur within the week, as long as by the time the kohain sees it again it is the same as when he saw it the previous time.

If the Sifra must point out that it is not considered "different" if its color fluctuated during the week, as long as it was back to the way it was by the time the kohain rechecks it, it must be that had it been

considered "different" it would have had a different status. What other status could it have? Either staying the same is "tahor" while changing is "tamay," or vice versa. If the Sifra (in 2:8) means that staying the same shade (and not just the same size) is "tahor," then if it changes shades it must be "tamay." However, since the Torah specifically says (3:6) that if "the affliction has faded" it is "tahor," this can't be true. Therefore, if the Sifra in 2:6 means that changing within the week is irrelevant, in 2:8 it must mean that only if the size remains the same is he "tahor;" if the color remains the same (or stronger) he would be "tamay" even if the size was the same. After the Sifra discusses fluctuations in size (2:7), when it says immediately after that if "it" stayed the same the person is "tahor" (2:8), "it" would have to be referring to its size, i.e. if the affliction did not spread, he is "tahor."

It would seem, then, that even though the overwhelming majority of the commentators understand the Sifra in 2:6 to refer to changing colors from checkup to checkup (not between checkups), and "staying the same" in 2:8 to mean the same size and color, because of its internal inconsistencies (using contradicting methods of deduction when verses list multiple symptoms, and changing from discussing fluctuations from checkup to checkup to fluctuations between checkups), Rashi understood the Sifra differently. And since this approach in the Sifra is the more straightforward to explain the verse, Rashi used it even if it does not fit with the Mishna and Talmud. © 2008 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**T**here are many who believe that Jewish law links a menstruating woman (niddah) with that which is dirty. This because the word tameh, associated with the niddah (see for example this week's portion Leviticus 12:2) is often defined as unclean.

If this were true, taharah, the antonym of tumah, would by implication be synonymous with cleanliness. However, Phinehas ben Jair, in a famous comment which was to contribute the outline of Rabbi Moses Hayyim Luzzatto's "The Path of the Just" (Mesillat Yesharim), said that Torah, precision, zeal, cleanliness, restraint, taharah, saintliness, meekness, and fear of sin in that order lead to holiness. We learn from this statement that cleanliness and taharah are two distinct categories. So too, is physical uncleanliness not synonymous with tumah.

The truth is that there are several terms in the Torah that have no suitable English equivalent. Such terms should not be translated. Leaving them in the original Hebrew makes the reader understand that a more detailed analysis of the word is necessary. Tumah is one of those words that cannot be perfectly translated and requires a deeper analysis.

Rav Ahron Soloveichik suggested that the real meaning of tumah might be derived from the verse in Psalms, which says: "The fear of the Lord is tehorah, enduring forever." (Psalms 19:10) Taharah therefore means that which is everlasting and never deteriorates. Tumah, the antithesis of taharah, stands for mortality or finitude, that which withers away.

A dead body is considered a primary source of tumah, for it represents decay in the highest sense not only because the corpse itself is in the process of decaying, but also because the living individual who comes into contact with the corpse usually suffers emotionally and endures a form of spiritual fragmentation, a counterpart of the corpse's physical falling away.

The metzora (leper) whose body is encompassed with skin lesions is also considered in a state of tumah. The leper is tameh because he is slowly disintegrating, while those who associate with him decline emotionally as they observe the wasting away of another human being.

The ba'al kerit (one who has had a seminal issue) and the niddah may fall into the same framework for they represent in the strictest sense the loss of potential life.

No wonder, then, the process of purification involves immersion in the mikveh, a natural body of water. This because, water is the clearest symbol of life—an appropriate spiritual antidote to tumah, which is nothing, less than what Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik described as "the whisper of death."

As much as we have tried to teach the real meaning of tumat niddah, there are still so many who believe that halakhah links niddah with that which is dirty. This myth must be shattered, a myth that has made it emotionally difficult for many women to accept the laws of family purity. An appropriate understanding of niddah may lead to a greater observance of these important laws. © 2008 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

#### **RABBI SETH NADEL**

### **The Silence in Tzara'at**

**I**magine, after having gone through a trauma, you are asked to leave your family, friends and community.

You are commanded to reside in solitude, all alone. Forced to go to a place where even the Shechinah, G-d's presence is not to be found. The Torah (Lev. 13:46) commands the metzora, the leper to leave the Camp of Israel: "...he shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside the camp."

Later, in Parshat Naso, the Torah (Num. 5:1-4) elaborates that not only is the metzora to leave the camp, but also the zavah, one who experiences an emission, and one who is tamei l'mait, he who comes in

contact with a dead body. But unlike these forms of spiritual impurity, which prevent an individual from entering various parts of the mishkan (tabernacle), or machaneh l'viyim (Camp of Priests), the metzora is forced to leave the entire Camp of Israel.

This seems counter-intuitive. It appears almost cruel: to separate someone so vulnerable; to remove them completely from the camp. Why does the Torah insist on such a separation?

The Torah is teaching us something so profound. The metzora, is asked to pause; to reflect. He must isolate himself and look inward. Our Sages (Arachin 16b) ask: Why is a metzora different [than other types of tumah] that the Torah states, 'He shall dwell alone; outside the camp shall be his dwelling'? He [through his slander] separated a husband from his wife, a man from his neighbor, therefore the Torah says, 'He shall dwell alone.' Because he caused disharmony and perhaps division in the community, he must separate himself from the community. He is forced to leave the camp completely.

The leper's isolation is even more extreme. Rambam (Hilchot Tum'at Tzara'at 10:6) compares the metzora to an aveil, a mourner. Based on the verse, "...His garments shall be torn, the hair of his head shall be unshorn, and he shall cloak himself up to his lips" (Lev. 13:45), the Talmud explains that a metzora must tear his garment and cover his head, as well as refrain from cutting his hair and greeting others just like a mourner (See Moed Katan 15A).

The metzora sits in silence, isolated, contemplating his existence. He can only rejoin the community after he announces to the world that he is, "tamei tamei-impure impure!" He must first come to grips with what he has become. This new found clarity allows him to grow.

Last week we read that at the climax of the inauguration of the mishkan, the celebration is marred by the death of Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aaron. They are consumed by fire after bringing an unwarranted offering (Lev. 10:1-3). Think for a moment about what Aaron might have been feeling. His children are killed serving G-d in the mishkan. Yet Aaron doesn't lash out. Rather, the pasuk says "...vayidom Aharon" (Ibid v. 4). He is silent. Nothing he can say will bring his sons back. Just Silence. Paralysis. Stillness. Aaron finds solace in his silence and he is praised for the way he responds.

We were all silenced by the tragic events that unfolded last month at Yeshivat Mercaz HaTorah in Jerusalem. The attack still resonates with us. As Purim approached we asked questions and sought in the stillness for answers.

Sometimes G-d speaks to us in loud signs and wonders, sometimes in silence and stillness. Sometimes G-d's presence is heard and felt around the world: He reveals himself with such clarity. When the

Jewish People gather at Mt. Sinai they experience thunder and lightening, the sound of the shofar, fire and smoke (Ex. 19:16-19). . Later in history, Elijah the prophet stands on the same mountain but sees something much different: And He said: 'Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord.' And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small voice (I Kings 19:11-12).

This time, G-d was not found in the strong wind, earthquake, nor the fire. G-d chose to reveal Himself in a still, small voice. Sometimes, G-d communicates to us in a subtle way. Like Elijah on Mt. Horeb, sometimes we only hear a kol d'mamah daka, a still small voice. We need only be attuned to it.

After sufficient time for retreat and reflection, the metzora returns to his community, to his friends and family, with a new perspective on life. In that loneliness, that silence, the metzora was able to change his life for the better.

Tefillah, prayer, is a time when we turn inwards. We pause three times a day in silent reflection. The Rav, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik saw this in the minhag (custom) of placing the tallit (prayer shawl) over one's head. One shuts out the world in private contemplation. In a world that is so loud- a world that assails us with stimuli- media, advertising, email, cell phones, blackberries- silence can be golden. Our Torah teaches the power and beauty in taking time to pause, reflect and grow. © 2008 Rabbi S. Nadel

#### RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

## Haftorah

**T**his week's haftorah gives us appreciation for the invaluable benefits of punishment. Surprisingly, it revolves around a pagan general who merited an open miracle from Hashem. Naaman, the highest ranking general of Aram was stricken with a severe case of leprosy. He received advice from an abducted Jewish maid servant to visit the prophet Elisha for a cure. Naaman consulted the king of Aram who sent a personal request to the king of Israel to treat Naaman's leprosy. The prophet Elisha volunteered and summoned Naaman to appear before him. When Naaman arrived Elisha sent him a message to dip seven times in the Jordan waters. Appalled by the disrespect shown to him and infuriated by the mockery of this prescription Naaman decided to return home. However, he reluctantly acquiesced in his servant's plea and consented to try the bath. Hashem miraculously healed Naaman's flesh and returned it to a tender texture. Naaman responded by approaching Elisha and proclaiming Hashem as the exclusive power

of the entire world. Before parting, Naaman loaded his mules with holy earth of Israel to construct an altar in Aram for Hashem.

Naaman's entire episode intrigues us. Why would a pagan general deserve such a miracle and what can be learned from this? In order to properly appreciate this we refer to our Sages' insightful words who reveal to us the cause of Naaman's leprosy. They cite numerous sources for the plague of leprosy listing Naaman's haughtiness amongst them. They draw proof to this from our haftorah that begins, "And Naaman, the general of Aram was a big, distinguished person to the king because Hashem saved Aram through him." Chazal interpret the words, "big person" to refer to Naaman's haughty perception of himself that was far out of proportion. (see Bamidbar Rabba 7:5) Although Hashem saved Aram through Naaman's actions Naaman deserved little credit for this victory. The reality was that Naaman incidentally drew his bow which unexpectedly killed the Jewish king, Achav. This unintentional victory won Naaman the king's favor and gave him a full measure of false pride.

Hashem responded to this haughty attitude and attacked Naaman's ego through a plague of leprosy. This began Naaman's intense program of humility which ultimately led to unparalleled results. The first stage was the powerful general's incapacitated feeling brought about by the illness. His next taste of humility was his desperate need to follow his abducted Jewish maid servant's suggestion for his remedy. The next step was Elisha's impersonal response to Naaman's visit. After reducing himself to approach a Jewish prophet for a remedy Naaman anticipated, at the very least, a royal welcome. He was taken aback when Elisha did not even consider him worthy of a personal welcome. The prophet's absurd prescription made Naaman feel foolish for even going through all this bother. He was even further humbled when he responded to his servants' logical plea to respect the prophet's suggestion. His final dimension of humility was in the bathing process itself, which involved repeatedly lowering himself into natural waters. After this all encompassing lesson in humility Naaman adopted a healthier attitude on life. Now that Naaman rectified the source of his illness Hashem deemed him worthy of His favor and removed the physical illness, as well. Naaman immediately responded to his experience and recognized and proclaimed Hashem's exclusive sovereignty in the world.

But the story didn't end there. Naaman continued his humble path and bent down to collect dirt from under the prophet's feet to erect a permanent altar for Hashem. (see Abarbanel 5:17) He vowed to detach himself from all idolatrous practices and sincerely worship Hashem. Baal Haturim adds that Naaman was true to his word. He continued to develop his relationship with Hashem which resulted in the sincere

conversion of some of his offsprings. Their devotion to Hashem was so intense that they became prominent Torah leaders amongst our people. (see comment to Sh'mos 28:9)

This unbelievable development was undoubtedly due to Naaman's quality of recognizing the full truth. Our Sages teach us that Naaman's statement of recognition exceeded all preceding ones. Yisro recognized Hashem above all other powers, Rachav recognized Hashem as the source of all powers but Naaman proclaimed Hashem of Israel as the only true power. (Yalkut Shimoni 229) Initially, Naaman's victory gave him an abhorrent level of haughtiness. Hashem did not tolerate that attitude and gave Naaman the opportunity of rectifying it. We have seen, however, that this process was quite difficult and demanded enormous levels of subservience. The only way for Naaman to get beyond his predicament was to swallow all of his pride. This meant appreciating the truth and following it at all costs. Naaman faithfully responded to his challenge and painfully respected every dimension of truth sent his way. These truths became so clear to him that he ultimately realized that the entire world was exclusively in Hashem's hands.

We now realize that Naaman was indeed a unique individual who possessed tremendous potential to recognize the truth. Hashem, who knows the potential of every human being, sent Naaman this leprosy as an opportunity for rectification and growth. Although Naaman was not Jewish he was obviously worthy of his lesson and experience. He goes down in Jewish our history as one of the few who agreed to recognize the truth. Although Naaman began as our total enemy priding himself in this he made a total reversal and recognized Hashem in an all encompassing way. Naaman's appropriate response brought tremendous honor to Hashem. We can therefore comfortably suggest that this was Hashem's original intent for bringing Naaman this miraculous experience.

Naaman's leprosy teaches us the value of punishment and its hidden blessing. It served its purpose well as a powerful vehicle to teach humility. Although Naaman began with an abhorrent approach he obediently followed his road signs which eventually attacked the source of his problem. The illness, the many emissaries, his impersonal reception, the degrading prescription and the actual bathing process all contributed towards his humility. This led to his sincere recognition of Hashem which in turn, produced prominent offspring's who became scholarly leaders of our people.

This insight regarding punishment is very helpful when studying the lonely plight of the leper in this week's parsha. Although the leper did not commit any national offense he goes through a tremendous humiliating experience. We now understand that his

predicament is not a punishment, rather, an opportunity for rectification and growth. His illness and all its dimensions force him to reconsider his ways but, also serve as a catalyst for spiritual growth. The leper increases his sensitivity in those areas that created his predicament and removes the blind spots he possessed until this point. His new approach to life fosters a stronger relationship with Hashem and helps him appreciate Hashem's constant favor in all areas of his life. © 2008 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

**RABBI ZEV LEFF**

## Outlooks & Insights

**“R**emember what the Lord, your G-d, did to Miriam on the way when you left Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 24:9)

Almost all of Parshas Tazria and most of Parshas Metzora are concerned with the intricate laws of tzora'as. Tzora'as afflicted people as a consequence of having spoken lashon hara. This is hinted to in Parshas Ki Tetzei, where the Torah warns us to be careful with respect to the laws of tzora'as and immediately thereafter to remember Miriam's punishment in the desert for speaking lashon hara about her brother, Moses. Miriam was immediately afflicted with tzora'as and forced to leave the encampment for seven days. It seems paradoxical that the Torah chose to admonish us not to speak about the faults and shortcomings of others by reminding us of Miriam's sin.

During the entire time Miriam was afflicted, the nation did not travel. The whole nation waited for her as a consequence of the merit she accrued by waiting to see what would happen to her three-month-old brother, Moses, when she placed him into the Nile in a basket (Talmud - Sotah 9b). Again we wonder: What benefit was it to Miriam to have the entire Jewish people delayed for her sake? Did that waiting not highlight the cause of her banishment? Would it not have been better for Miriam if the nation had proceeded, unaware of her sin?

The answer is that Miriam did not sin. Her intentions in speaking about Moses were completely well-intentioned, without any malice. She meant no harm to her beloved brother; nor did she cause Moses any harm, or even ill-feeling. Despite this, she was stricken with tzora'as. Her disease was not a punishment, but rather the inevitable, natural result of lashon hara. Because she had not sinned, Moses did not pray for forgiveness for Miriam-only that she be healed.

The command to remember Miriam does not denigrate her, for she committed no intentional sin. But we do learn from that act of remembrance the devastating effect of lashon hara, even when spoken unintentionally and without malice. Just as it makes no difference if one swallows poison intentionally or

unintentionally, so, too, lashon hara devastates us, even when spoken without deliberate malice.

To highlight the intrinsic devastation wrought by lashon hara, it had to be crystal clear that Miriam did not sin and that her intentions were in fact pure. Miriam exhibited her love for Moses when she waited anxiously to see what would happen to him. The waiting of the nation for her was a reminder of her earlier waiting and, at the same time, the proof that she had acted without malice towards Moses. As Maimonides writes (Tzora'as 16:10): "...Concerning this the Torah warns us to be careful with tzora'as and to remember what G-d did to Miriam, as if to say: 'Contemplate what happened to Miriam the Prophetess when she spoke against her brother who was younger than her, whom she brought up on her lap and for whom she endangered herself when she saved him from the sea and whom she had no intention to harm. She erred only in comparing him to the other prophets, and [Moses] did not care about what she said because [he] was a very humble person- and still [she] was immediately punished with tzora'as.'"

There were two distinct aspects of the Holy Temple which atoned for lashon hara. The Talmud (Zevachim 88b) relates that both the incense and the me'il (the garment of the Kohen Gadol from which bells and pomegranate-like ornaments hung) atoned for lashon hara.

The Gemara explains that the me'il atoned for the lashon hara spoken publicly, and incense for "hidden" lashon hara. The latter is difficult to understand, however, since we learn of the incense's ability to atone for the lashon hara from its use to stop the plague that broke out when the people blamed Moses and Aaron for the deaths of Korach and his entourage. That lashon hara was public.

Perhaps, then, the Talmud is referring to two aspects of the damage caused by lashon hara. According to this understanding, public lashon hara refers to the harm done to the person that it was spoken against. Hidden lashon hara refers to the spiritual damage to the speaker of the lashon hara himself, the destruction of his soul.

What, then, is that spiritual destruction, which is physically manifested by tzora'as? It is the power of speech that distinguishes man from all other creatures. The faculty of speech enables man to fulfill his purpose in the universe. Through speech man attaches himself to his Creator by learning and teaching Torah; through speech man addresses his Creator in prayer; through speech man crystallizes his thoughts, which in turn leads to action, as it says (Deut. 30:14), "for this Mitzvah is close to you in your mouth and heart to do it"; and finally, it is speech that enables man to communicate with others to unite in the communal service of the Almighty.

When man uses his unique power of speech to unite the world in service of G-d, he realizes his

potential as the pinnacle of Creation. The Hebrew word for tongue, *lashon*, is related to *losh*, the process of mixing solids and liquids together. The tongue takes the spiritual inner essence of the soul and expresses it in the physical realm—thereby mixing spiritual and physical together.

Utilizing the tongue for *lashon hara*, to degrade, to defile, to cause strife and dissension, divests man of the very essence of his distinction as a human being by corrupting his most exalted faculty. The Jerusalem Talmud says that there are three sins for which a person is punished in this world and in the next—immorality, murder and idolatry—and *lashon hara* is equal to all three. These three sins represent the destruction of one's physical, emotional and spiritual self.

*Lashon hara* equals them all. For the totality of the human being is destroyed by the corruption of his ultimate distinction, his speech. Thus, one afflicted with *lashon hara* defiles like a corpse. He is banished from society and mourns himself, for the essence of his being has been negated.

At the conclusion of the Amidah we beseech: "My G-d, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully." After we have used our mouths for communicating with our Creator, we can fully appreciate the calamity inherent in corrupting that same wondrous instrument by using it for *lashon hara*.

The laws of childbirth precede the laws of *tzora'as*. Man has the ability to be a partner in Creation, to create a new being, or he can take his own body and divest it of its Divine Image. ©2008 Rabbi Z. Leff & *aish.com*

### **MACHON ZOMET**

## **Shabbat B'Shabbato**

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

**T**his week's Torah portion begins with the laws of giving birth, specifying the differences between the birth of a boy and that of a girl. A woman who has a boy is ritually impure for seven days, and then for thirty-three days she is not allowed to touch anything that is holy or enter the Temple. For a woman who gives birth to a girl the times are doubled: fourteen impure days followed by a prohibition to come in contact with holy material for sixty-six days. Why is the period of impurity after the birth of a girl twice that for a boy?

The commentators explain this difference based on biological factors which are not very clear to us in the modern world. For example, Ibn Ezra writes:

"G-d has decreed ritual impurity for the length of time needed for a boy to complete his final form, and the girl takes twice as long. And this is a matter which is clear and based on fact." [Vayikra 12:5]. The Ramban notes that this is the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael, but that other sages feel that there is no difference between the

time of creation of males of females and he therefore gives a different explanation. "A female is by nature cold and moist, so that the mother's womb gets very white and cold, and therefore a girl is born. She therefore needs greater cleansing, because of the greater moisture and spoiled blood and also because of the cold. It is known that sickness related to cold takes a longer time to cure than that which is related to warmth." Other commentators have different approaches.

Perhaps the difference between the two sexes can be explained in another way. In the midst of the laws of ritual impurity of the woman after giving birth, the Torah writes a verse that at first glance seems to be completely irrelevant to the subject at hand: "And on the eighth day his foreskin shall be removed" [Vayikra 12:3]. However, this may well be the essential difference between the birth of a boy and a girl. Perhaps the times of impurity and staying away from holiness should in principle have been the same for both a boy and a girl, but the circumcision and the corresponding removal of impure flesh leads to a shortened time for the boy. Thus, the mention of the circumcision at this point is an important point in the passage, since it helps explain the difference between the births of a boy and a girl.

The concept that circumcision can help to decrease the time of ritual impurity is related to the link between the foreskin and impurity. This link appears explicitly in the words of the prophet: "An uncircumcised or an impure person will no longer enter into you" [Yeshayahu 52:1]. Halachically, the uncircumcised and the ritually impure are similar in some ways, such as the fact that neither one can participate in the Pesach sacrifice, (see Shemot 12:48 and Bamidbar 9:6). On the conceptual level, removal of the foreskin, both physically and symbolically ("And you shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart" [Devarim 10:16]), is an expression of renewal and mending, comparable to ritual purification. Thus, circumcision might be the factor that speeds up the purification of a woman who has given birth to a boy and makes it shorter.

If the above reasoning is true, then it might have been expected that if the circumcision is delayed for some reason the mother's time of impurity would revert to that of the birth of a female, since we have postulated that the shorter time of impurity is related to the circumcision itself and not directly to the sex of the child.

