

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The sages were eloquent on the subject of lashon hara, evil speech, the sin they took to be the cause of tsara'at, the subject of this week's parsha. But there is a meta-halakhic principle: "From the negative you can infer the positive" (Nedarim 11a) So, for example, from the seriousness of the prohibition against Chillul Hashem, desecrating G-d's name, you can infer the importance of the opposite, Kiddush Hashem, sanctifying G-d's name.

So there must in principle be a concept of lashon hatov, good speech, and it must be more than a mere negation of its opposite. The way to avoid lashon hara is to practise silence, and indeed the sages were eloquent on the important of silence. (See for example Mishnah Avot 1:17; 3:13.) Silence saves us from evil speech but in and of itself it achieves nothing positive. What then is lashon hatov?

Lashon hatov -- one of the most important tasks of a leader, a parent or a friend -- is focused praise. The classic text on this is a Mishnah in the tractate of Avot, "The Ethics of the Fathers":

"Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had five (pre-eminent) disciples, namely Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi Joshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yose the Priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh.

"He used to recount their praise: Eliezer ben Hyrcanus: a plastered well that never loses a drop. Joshua ben Chananya: happy the one who gave him birth. Yose the Priest: a pious man. Shimon ben Netanel: a man who fears sin. Elazar ben Arakh: an ever-flowing spring." (Avot 2:10-11)

The Mishnah is doing more than telling us that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had disciples. Every rabbi had disciples. The imperative, "Raise up many disciples" (Avot 1:1) is one of the oldest rabbinic teachings on record. What the Mishnah is telling us is how to create disciples. It is easy to have students who are uncritical devotees but never become creative intellects in their own right. It is not difficult to create followers. It is far harder to create leaders. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was a great teacher because five of his students became giants in their own right. The Mishnah is telling us how he did it.

He did it by focussed praise. He showed each

of his pupils where their particular strength lay. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, the "plastered well that never loses a drop," was gifted with a superb memory -- an important gift in an age in which manuscripts were rare and the Oral Law was not yet committed to writing. Shimon ben Netanel, the "man who fears sin," may not have had the intellectual brilliance of the others but his reverential nature was a reminder to others that they were not mere scholars but also holy men engaged in a sacred task. Elazar ben Arakh, the "ever-flowing spring," had a creative mind constantly giving rise to new interpretations of ancient texts.

I discovered the transformative power of focused praise from one of the more remarkable people I ever met, the late Lena Rustin. Lena was a speech therapist, specialising in helping stammering children. I came to know her through a television documentary I was making for the BBC about the state of the family in Britain. Lena believed that the young stammerers she was treating -- they were, on average, around five years old -- had to be understood in the context of their families. Families tend to develop an equilibrium. If a child stammers, everyone in the family adjusts to it. Therefore if the child is to lose its stammer, all the relationships within the family will have to be renegotiated. Not only must the child change. So must everyone else.

By and large, we tend to resist change. We settle into patterns of behaviour until they become comfortable like a well-worn armchair or a comfortable pair of shoes. How do you create an atmosphere within a family that encourages change and makes it unthreatening? The answer Lena discovered was praise. She told the families with which she was working that every day they must catch each member of the family doing something right, and say so, specifically, positively and thankfully.

She did not go into deep explanations, but watching her at work I began to realise what she was doing. She was creating, within each home, an atmosphere of mutual regard and continuous positive reinforcement. She wanted the parents to shape an environment of self-respect and self-confidence, not just for the stammering child but for every member of the family, so that the entire atmosphere of the home was one in which people felt safe to change and help others to do so.

I suddenly realised that she had discovered a solution not just for stammering but for group dynamics

as a whole. My intuition was soon confirmed in a surprising way. There had been tensions among the television crew with which I had been working. Various things had gone wrong and there was an atmosphere of mutual recrimination. After filming a session of Lena Rustin teaching parents how to give and receive praise, the crew started praising one another. Instantly the atmosphere was transformed. The tension dissolved, and filming became fun again. Praise gives people the confidence to let go of the negative aspects of their character and reach their full potential.

There is in praise a deep spiritual message. We think religion is about faith in G-d. What I had not fully understood before was that faith in G-d should lead us to have faith in people, for G-d's image is in each of us, and we have to learn how to discern it. I then understood that the repeated phrase in Genesis 1, "And G-d saw that it was good," was there to teach us to see the good in people and events, and by so doing, help to strengthen it. I also understood why G-d briefly punished Moses by turning his hand leprous -- as mentioned in the last Covenant and Conversation -- because he had said about the Israelites, "They will not believe in me." Moses was being taught a fundamental lesson of leadership: It does not matter whether they believe in you. What matters is that you believe in them.

It was from another wise woman that I learned another important lesson about praise. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, in her book *Mindset*, (Ballantine Books, 2007) argues that it makes a decisive difference whether we believe that our abilities are innate and determined once and for all (the "fixed" mindset), or that talent is something we achieve through time by effort, practice and persistence (the "growth" mindset). The former tend to be risk-averse, afraid that if they fail this will show that they are not as good as they were thought to be. The latter embrace risk because they take failure as a learning experience from which we grow. It follows that there is good praise and bad praise. Parents and teachers should not praise children in absolute terms: "You are gifted, brilliant, a star." They should praise effort: "You tried hard, you gave of your best." They should encourage a growth mindset, not a fixed one.

Perhaps this explains a sad aftermath in the life of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's two most gifted pupils. The Mishnah immediately following the one quoted above states:

"He [Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai] used to say: If all the sages of Israel were in one scale of a balance and Eliezer ben Hyrcanus in the other, he would outweigh them all. However, Abba Saul said in his name: If all the sages of Israel, including Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, were in one scale of a balance, and Elazar ben Arakh in the other, he would outweigh them all." (Avot 2:12)

Tragically Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was eventually excommunicated by his colleagues for failing

to accept the majority view on a matter of Jewish law. (Baba Metsia 59b) As for Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh, he became separated from his colleagues. When they went to the academy at Yavneh, he went to Emmaus, a pleasant place to live but lacking in other Torah scholars. Eventually he forgot his learning and became a pale shadow of his former self. (Shabbat 147b) It may be that praising his students for their innate abilities rather than their effort, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai inadvertently encouraged the two most talented of them to develop a fixed mindset rather than engage with colleagues and stay open to intellectual growth.

Praise and how we administer it is a fundamental element in leadership of any kind. Recognising the good in people and saying so, we help bring people's potential to fruition. Praising their efforts rather than their innate gifts helps encourage growth, about which Hillel used to say: "He who does not increase his knowledge, loses it" (Avot 1:13). The right kind of praise changes lives. That is the power of *lashon hatov*. Bad speech diminishes us; good speech can lift us to great heights. Or as W. H. Auden said in one of his beautiful poems: "In the prison of his days. Teach the free man how to praise." © 2014 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**T**his shall be the law of the leper in the day of his cleansing, he shall be brought unto the priest" (Lev. 14:2) In the opening of this week's portion of Metzora, the Torah introduces us to the law commanding a person to go to the priest who determined the nature of his 'plague of leprosy' (*nega tzara'at*). If the scab was diagnosed as qualifying, the development of the disease required the constant inspection of the priest. Our portion of Metzora opens with the complex details of the purification process once the disease is over. This ritual requires two kosher birds, a piece of cedar, crimson wool, and a hyssop branch. One bird is slaughtered while the other is ultimately sent away. But this is only the beginning of a purification process that lasts eight days, culminating in a guilt offering brought at the Holy Temple.

Only after the entire procedure was concluded could a person be declared ritually clean. But if this all sounds foreign, complicated and involved, the Biblical concepts appear even stranger when we discover that this "plague of leprosy" is not limited to humans: "G-d spoke unto Moses and Aaron, saying: 'When you come to the land of Canaan, which I give to you as an inheritance, and I put the plague of leprosy in a house of the land of your possession, then he that owns the house shall come and tell the priest.'" (Lev. 14:33-35).

How are we to understand that the very same malady - *nega tzara'at* - that describes what is generally referred to as a leprous ailment of a human being, has

the power to also afflict the walls of a house—a person is one thing, but a house suffering a plague of leprosy?

When we examine the text we find an interesting distinction between these two species of tzara'at. "The plague of leprosy" that strikes people is presented in straight-forward terms: "If a person shall have in the skin a swelling, a scab, or a bright spot, and it be in the skin of his flesh the plague of leprosy." (Lev. 13:3)

But the plague that strikes houses is introduced by an entirely different concept: "When you come to the land of Canaan, which I am giving to you as an inheritance, I will put the plague of leprosy." (Lev. 14:34).

Why is the commandment of the plagued house placed in the context of the Land of Israel? If indeed the disease can descend upon houses, why only the houses in the Land of Israel?

A third element to consider are the differences in the visible aspects of these two diseases. Regarding the person himself, the Torah speaks of a white discoloration, but as far as the house is concerned, if a white spot appeared on the wall nothing would be wrong.

"Then the priest shall command that they empty the house... and he shall look at the plague and behold, if the plague be in the walls and consists of penetrating streaks that are bright green or bright red...." (Lev. 14:36-37)

We must keep in mind that the translation a "plague of leprosy" is inadequate. Biblical commentaries ranging from the 12th century Ramban to the 19th century Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch claim that nega tzara'at cannot possibly be an illness in the classic sense, for if that were true, why does the Torah assign the 'medical' task of determining illness to a priest? Priests were teachers and keepers of the religious tradition, not doctors or medical experts.

If nega tzara'at is a spiritual illness, a metaphor for the state of the soul, then just as one soul is linked to one body, the souls of the members of a family are linked to the dwelling where they all live together. And the walls of a house certainly reflect the atmosphere engendered by its residents. A house can be either warm or cold, loving or tense. Some houses are ablaze with life, permeating Jewishness and hospitality: mezuzot on the doorposts, candelabra, menorahs and Jewish art on the walls, books on Judaism on the shelves, and place-settings for guests always adorning the table. But in other homes, the silence is so heavy it feels like a living tomb, or the screams of passionate red-hot anger which can be heard outside frighten away any would-be visitor, or the green envy of the residents evident in the gossip they constantly speak causes any guest to feel uncomfortable.

Why should this "disease" be specifically connected to the Land - or more specifically, to the

people - of Israel? To find the unique quality of Israel all we have to do is examine the idea of Beit Yisrael, the House of Israel. The nature of a household is that as long as there is mutual love and shared responsibility, then that house will be blessed and its walls won't be struck with a plague of leprosy. To the extent that the covenant of mutual responsibility is embraced by the people, then the house of Israel will be blessed. We must act toward each other with the same morality, ethics and love present in every blessed family. If not, a nega tzara'at awaits us. And our holy land of Israel is especially sensitive to any moral infraction. ©2014 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Those who seek reasons for Jewish ritual (ta'amei ha-mitzvot) by and large view such observances as a conduit to better feel the presence of G-d. But ritual can also have an alternative goal - to teach ethical lessons in accordance with G-d's will.

A good example is the laws of family purity found in this week's reading (Leviticus Chapter 15) which can be viewed as teaching the Torah ethics of love. The laws include immersion in a mikveh (a natural pool of water) which permits husband and wife to re-engage in sexual relations. This can be seen as a tool through which couples can learn basic lessons about love.

On its simplest level, water is associated with birth. Consider the following: the world begins as G-d hovers over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:2) We become a people as we march through the split sea. (Exodus Ch. 14) We enter Israel as a Jewish people, after crossing the Jordan River. (Joshua Ch. 4) Bearing in mind that marriages too often become monotonous and even boring, can it be argued that immersion is an attempt to inspire husband and wife to rekindle their love—as if it was reborn?

No wonder, water in the Bible, is often associated with the exciting onset of love. Yitzhak's (Isaac) wife, Rivka (Rebecca) is found at the well. (Genesis Ch. 24) Yaakov (Jacob) meets Rachel as flocks gather around the water. (Genesis Ch. 29) Moshe (Moses) comes in contact with his wife to be, Zipporah, after saving her and her siblings at the river. (Exodus Ch. 2) From this perspective, immersion may be understood as an attempt to mystically bring husband and wife back to those Biblical moments suffused with beautiful romance. The moments surrounding mikvah should evoke memories of the first natural bodies of water mentioned in the Torah—those in Paradise, in the Garden of Eden. (Genesis 2:10-14)

Not coincidentally, water and love have much in common. Without water, one cannot live. Without love, life is virtually impossible.

But, as my dear friend Dr. Bob Grieff pointed

out, water, like love, can be fleeting. As water can slip through one's fingers, so can love, if not nurtured, easily slip away.

Ritual requires meticulous Halakhic observance; but this external observance should be a manifestation of a deep internal message. In the case of mikvah, the immersion can remind us that relationships must be nurtured, and that each and every day couples ought strive to love each other more deeply than yesterday - as if their love is born anew. ©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 BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Talmud derives from this week's Torah reading the basic halachic principle of chazaka -- the presumption that what was before is now as well. The Talmud inferred this from the fact that the kohein/priest, when declaring a house to be impure because of plague or pure because the plague had not spread along its walls, did so only upon leaving the house and standing outside of its premises. How can the kohein/priest be certain that there was no change in the mark or size of the plague during the instant that he left the house -- outside of its premises?

From this, the Talmud infers the concept of chazaka -- what was just before is now as well -- which is binding in halachic issues. The Talmud goes so far as to say that this concept of chazaka is "great" and necessarily logically strong. Yet the Talmud itself recognizes that life forces upon us the realization that circumstances do change and that what was may no longer be what is.

How to square this circle has been a matter of halachic debate and consideration in all scholarly rabbinic works over the ages. But in a broader sense, this discussion applies even outside of the realm of rabbinic halachic discussion. There are certain norms in Jewish life and practice that are immutable and never subject to change. Their chazaka is "great" and powerful and whatever was is what it is today and will be in the future as well.

But there are norms that are basically only societal mores and may no longer apply in different social settings and under different circumstances of life. How to decide which norms fall into which category is part of the ongoing debate that exists within the Jewish world today.

Perhaps the area of greatest contention in today's world regarding these matters relates to what is generally called "women's issues." There is no doubt that the status of women in today's society -- even in the most rigorous and conservative Orthodox society -- is far different than what it was in eighteenth century Eastern Europe. But after all of the sloganeering and

current political correctness is removed from the equation, the basic fact remains that Judaism recognizes and legislates gender equality in human terms but does not favor gender sameness.

The differences in the psychological and emotional makeup between men and women are innate -- part of their biological and mental nature. This is a chazaka that is strong and "great." It teaches us that what was before is now as well, and will also be in the future. One of the great failures of the feminist movement over the last 50 years, in my opinion, is that it tried to make women not only the equal of men in the work place and society but it also tried to make them the same as men.

This flew in the face of human nature. This same error is repeated in many Jewish circles today. Almost all of the feminist demands made upon Judaism today are based on the fallacious idea that women are the same as men. These efforts have not resonated within the broader observant Jewish community and have only led to disappointment and eventual alienation from Judaism itself. One must be wary of the power of chazaka. ©2014 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

Seeing and speaking play a pivotal role in the process of evaluating tzora'as. The phrase, "v'ra'ah hakohen -- and the kohen will see", appears in both Tazria and Metzora numerous times. A metzora can only begin his purification when the kohen sees that the tzora'as has healed. The kohen seeing the tzora'as is so integral to ascertaining its status that the one cannot report to the kohen with certainty that he himself has seen tzora'as, rather the Torah insists that he merely state "k'negah nirah li b'bayis -- what seems like tzora'as is in my house."

The second critical component in deciding an issue of tzora'as is the kohen's speech. Even if the kohen is convinced that it is tzora'as that he is seeing, as long as a formal declaration hasn't been made the person's clothing or house remains pure. Thus the procedure for declaring the house to be impure is delayed until its contents have been emptied to avoid their becoming tamey as well, thereby avoiding an unnecessary loss of possessions for the homeowner.

What message is being sent to the metzora as he observes the eyes and mouth of the kohen deciding his future? He is being taught the lesson that he most needs for his spiritual improvement: it was his eyes and mouth that brought the metzora to this state.

Chazal speak of the deficiency of the "eyes" of the metzora. His jealousy upon seeing others' successes caused him to speak evil. There is a direct

correlation between these sins of sight and speech, and as such the metzora must now learn the power of sight and speech. Just as he caused harm by looking and speaking evil about others, his home, clothing, and even his body are being scrutinized by the eyes and mouth of the kohen.

Our eyes and mouths are not only capable of harm, but can also be utilized for great good. The central theme of the seder night is v'higadeta l'bincha. The telling of yetzias Mitzrayim to our children is accomplished by using our eyes and mouths properly. "Ba'avor zeh", one sees the korban Pesach, matzoh and maror and formulates the story around these visual reminders. Chazal instituted many practices at the seder so the children will see and ask.

Not only is the annual mitzvah of sippur yetzias Mitzrayim done through the power of sight and speech, but our entire mesorah is transmitted using these two powerful vehicles. We must show our children what a life of Torah is. They must see with their own eyes what Torah means to us. The image of how we learn, daven and observe mitzvos must accompany them throughout life. Even Yosef had to conjure up the image of his father from his youth to enable him to withstand the challenge of an alien environment. We teach our children by transmitting the words of Torah from our mouths to theirs. Accompanying this oral transmission are the powerful images we show our children.

Our potential to use sight and speech is so great, therefore we must always assure that our eyes and mouths are fit for this monumental task. We must be certain that we and our children look with an ayin tov a and our mouths utter lashon tov to enable us to use the gifts of sight and speech for the wonderful tasks for which they were created. ©2014 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & The TorahWeb Foundation, Inc.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"**A**nd I (G-d) will put an affliction of tzora'as in a house in the land that you possess" (Vayikra 14:34). Ramban says that the expression "and I (G-d) will put the affliction" is used to indicate that the "tzora'as" of houses is not a natural occurrence, but is specifically "placed" there by G-d to indicate that His presence has departed because of their actions (see his commentary on 13:47). Although this applies to the "tzora'as" of materials as well, there was no need to indicate this there as well, since, as I discussed last week (<http://tinyurl.com/qyqd998>), first G-d afflicts the sinner's house and then He afflicts his garments. The expression "that I will put" can therefore apply to both houses and garments, stated before the former because He puts "tzora'as" there first.

If each of the three kinds of "tzora'as" (on structures, on materials and on people's skin) only occur in succession, i.e. only if the sinner does not

repent after his house gets "tzora'as" does his garment get "tzora'as," and only if he still doesn't repent will his skin become afflicted, it must have been the same sin that caused all three (or at least started the process, with his not repenting adding "sin upon sin"). However, when the Talmud (Arachin 16a) lists several different sins for which "tzora'as" is a punishment, Maharsha explains that each type of "tzora'as" (including each of the different types of skin "tzora'as") corresponds to a different sin, and included in these different types of "tzora'as" for different sins is the "tzora'as" that afflicts houses and garments. If some sins correspond to the "tzora'as" of a structure, others to that of material, and still others to the different variations of skin "tzora'as," there must not be a progression from house to garment to skin because of the same sin. Did the same sin, and not repenting for it, bring all three categories of "tzora'as," as the Midrashic sources (Tosefta Nega'im 6:6, Vayikra Rabbah 17:4, Tanchuma Tazriya 10/14 and Metzora 4/12, Midrash HaGadol Vayikra 14:32) indicate, or were the different types of "tzora'as" the result of having committed different sins, as Maharsha (and the sources he cites) indicate?

A closer look at some of Midrashic sources (e.g. Tanchuma on Parashas Metzora) provides a specific context for the progression of the "tzora'as" from structures to materials to the human body: "When Israel sinned, [G-d] wanted to exile them before the other nations were exiled, but that would have been too degrading. What did He do [instead]? He brought the wicked Sancherev on all the [other] nations and exiled them so that Israel would see that [He] exiled the nations that were amongst them (i.e. in the same area) and repent. [G-d wanted that they should] see the complete judgment that [He] does with the nations of the world, [so that] maybe they will [learn from it] and repent. Since they did not repent they were immediately exiled." The Midrash then goes into the specifics of buildings being stricken, then, if there was no repentance, materials being stricken, and then, if there was still no repentance, the body being stricken. Was the exile of other nations first by Sancherev mentioned just as an example of G-d trying to teach us a lesson by striking others (in this case neighboring nations) first, similar to His striking a house and then a garment before striking the human body? Is exiling others similar to having our own property affected, sending a similar message that we better make a correction if we don't want something worse to happen? Or is the Midrash telling us that the "warning system" of having houses then garments then bodies stricken was designed specifically for when we are living autonomously in our own land?

Aside from this Midrash, there are other indications that this is the context within which the "tzora'as" warning system was meant to be activated. First of all, it only applies "in the house that you possess," which means after the land was conquered

and divided, and each person knew exactly which tract of land was his (see Yoma 12a). Once we were exiled from the land before (and during) the destruction of the First Temple, this situation was never really repeated. Additionally, Rashi (Vayikra 14:34), quoting Vayikra Rabbah (17:6), tells us that having one's house stricken by "tzora'as" was (at least partially) good news, as the prior inhabitants of the land had hidden their valuables in the walls of their houses to hide them from the Children of Israel (whom they knew were coming, and to whom the land really belonged); tearing open the walls because of "tzora'as" revealed these hidden valuables. Here too, taking over fully built houses containing hidden treasure was really only relevant when the land was first conquered. The implication is that the whole notion of houses being afflicted with "tzora'as" only applied until we were exiled from the land. True, we learn from it the concept that when G-d punishes those He loves he first strikes their possessions in order to get them to repent, but the specific progression of houses then garments then the body seems to have been directed specifically at the nation after they settled the land until they were exiled.

One of the questions I have heard many ask about the order of house->garment->body is why they appear in the Torah in reverse order. Numerous answers have been suggested; Midrash Tadshay (17) simply says that the Torah started with skin "tzora'as" because in the desert they didn't yet have houses and their clothes were miraculously maintained, so the only "tzora'as" that was relevant was the kind that affected the skin. Obviously, this type of "tzora'as" is possible even if there are no houses to afflict first and afflicting clothing wasn't an option. Nevertheless, that doesn't necessarily mean that when houses and garments are an option they won't be stricken first, only that it is not a prerequisite for skin "tzora'as." It would follow, though, that when afflicting a person's house or garment first is not appropriate, either because they don't fit the criteria for being afflicted or because the level of divine providence is not great enough to warrant the "miraculous" affliction of structures or materials, a message that repentance is needed can still come via the more "natural" skin "tzora'as."

S'fornu (Vayikra 13:47) discusses, at length, how a person must be able to receive the message G-d sends for a divine message to be sent. There is no point in using sign language to communicate with someone who is completely blind, nor to speaking, even very loudly, to someone who can't hear at all if they cannot see your lips. Similarly, if being afflicted with "tzora'as" has no chance of being understood by the sinner as a message that he must repent, there is no point in sending it. Therefore, S'fornu says, only those who can take the message of "tzora'as" to heart will be sent such a message. [That doesn't preclude a naturally occurring "tzora'as" from afflicting a sinner who won't get the message, as being affected by naturally

occurring harmful things (including choices made by others) is a general message built into creation that we need to be connected with G-d in order to be protected by Him from such things (see <http://tinyurl.com/p5n5pub>.) It follows, then, that if "tzora'as" is meant as a message to correct a specific shortcoming, the type of "tzora'as" used as the message will correspond to the sin the message is trying to make the person aware of. And there is no reason to limit the range of the message to the various types of skin "tzora'as"; if having one's house or garment develop "tzora'as" will convey a more precise message, that's what will occur.

It would seem, then, that when the nation as a whole is worthy of G-d's divine presence, such as before the first Temple was destroyed (the era most relevant to the generation the Torah was given to), G-d would send a message that improvement was needed in progression (first the house then a garment then the skin). When it is just the individual who was worthy of divine intervention, though, the message was tailored specifically to alert him or her what needs correcting. And that message didn't necessarily start with the house being afflicted, although, as we see from the progression used elsewhere, G-d will often first send the message by smiting a person's possessions. ©2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

It was, Like, Negah!

Like adjective 1. Possessing the same or almost the same characteristics; similar: on this and like occasions. 2. Alike: They are as like as two siblings. 3. Having equivalent value or quality.

Ah, the good old days, when the word meant something. Today, the kids have found a new interpretation for the word.

"So I was, like, hello?" "So I was on the checkout counter, and the girl in front of me had, like, some apples."

I am wont to interject, "were they like apples? You mean, that actually they were not apples, but rather they were really oranges disguised by a shiny red coating?"

But just as our parents learned to realize that the word cool was no longer a setting on an air-conditioner, or a description of current climate conditions, I decided to accept that like has also metamorphosed into just another expression. I guess it's, like, cool.

But maybe there was more than etymological benefit to this exercise in social adaptation. I began to adjust my thought process and applying the fact that the word like has taken on new meaning. And I applied that thinking to this week's Torah reading.

The parsha tells us this week that just as the concept of an irregular blemish can appear on one's

body or hair, it can also appear on the walls of his home. And when a negah appears in his home, he goes to the kohen and declares, "like a negah appeared to me in my home." The afflicted sounds like a child of the new millennium. Why does he not say I may have a negah? Why use the words "like a negah." After all if it looks like a negah and acts like a negah than it must be a negah! Why then does he use the word like in describing it?

Rabbi Paysach Krohn loves to tell the beautifully haunting story of the woman who left Rusk Institute with her child who was in a wheelchair. It was a wintry day and the chill that pervaded the young boy's fragile bones declared its chilling presence with the icy frosting it left on the exposed metal of his wheelchair.

Waiting at the bus stop on the corner of 34th and 2nd Avenue, three large city busses whizzed by, unable to accommodate the mother and the child and his special chair. It was only after a half-hour wait that the mother flagged down a bus and insisted to the driver that he allow them to board.

As the poor woman struggled to lift the wheelchair into the narrowly impatient doors that waited to slam like the jaws of a tiger, the driver shouted at her, "Lady you'll have to wait for a bus with a lift! I gotta go!"

Immediately a few passengers jumped to her defense! "It's freezing out there. We will wait!"

Embarrassed into submission, the driver acquiesced. As the mother and child settled in their place on the bus, one said to her, "Your child is not handicapped. It only seems that way. In truth it is the driver that has a handicapped mind!"

The Torah is telling us an important foundation in negativity. When one seemingly has a blemish or sees a blemish in his own home, he has no right to declare it as such. He may have a problem but should never declare it until seeking spiritual confirmation. One may think it is a blemish, it may even appear as a blemish yet until confirmed by the compassionate kohen, it is only like a blemish. However, until confirmed with counsel, it is not. If one goes to the kohen and learns to utilize the impairing experience to grow, to become more patient, more understanding, and perhaps more sensitive to others, then the hindrances that he or she experience may be troublesome, they may even be disheartening, they may even be like a handicap -- but they are truly not. Because the handicap is only in the mind; and what is on the body is only like a blemish that can fade away like the whiz of a speeding bus on 34th Street. ©2014 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah tells us of the miraculous defeat of the camp of Aram. In the merit of King Yehoram's retraction from assassinating the

Prophet Elisha, a prediction was made for an indescribable surplus of food during a most severe famine. Although the camp of Aram had laid a heavy siege against Israel, Hashem came to their rescue and produced deafening sounds which overtook the entire camp of Aram. Aram interpreted these sounds as coming from powerful armies who had come to the assistance of the Jewish people in their siege. Aram was so overtaken by this fear that they immediately abandoned their tents and fled for their lives, leaving behind all their provisions and possessions.

During this very same night four lepers decided to surrender to Aram in desperate hope of sparing their own lives. They were pleasantly surprised when they discovered a completely deserted camp, replete with all the needs for the famine-stricken Jewish nation. The lepers initially hoarded some of the loot but after brief consideration rushed over to the Jewish camp and informed them of their discovery. After a brief investigation of the authenticity of the story, the Jews ran to the scene and returned with an enormous surplus of food.

It is interesting to note that the heroes of this incident were lepers. The haftorah begins with, "And four men were lepers at the entrance of the city's gate." They were situated outside of the city's wall in fulfillment of the Torah's obligation of ostracizing lepers from their entire community. More interesting is our realization that this imposition became quite advantageous to them., Because they were outside of the city they had free access to the camp of Aram. This led to their attempted surrender which yielded their unbelievable findings. All of this ultimately brought the greatest benefits to the Jewish people. This chain of events seems to suggest that the punishment of leprosy can at times be a blessing. If one properly learns his lesson, his painful experience of leprosy can prove to be a real favor from Hashem, a blessing in disguise.

Our Chazal teach us that Hashem sends leprosy to one who is stingy with his possessions and greedy for money. The four lepers in our Haftorah had a previous record of seeking and obtaining possessions in most inappropriate ways. Rashi points out that they were the family of Gechazi who had previously misrepresented the prophet Elisha in pursuit of a handsome reward. When the prophet discovered this atrocity he severely admonished his servant with strong words of rejection. After this family had been ostracized for some time they began realizing their fault and were open to rectifying it. Through Hashem's response in their darkest moment of despair they began appreciating kindness and the virtue of sharing. Their willingness to reconsider their ways resulted in a most unique opportunity to rescue the entire Jewish nation from starvation and death. They put their newly learned virtue to work and shared with everyone their unbelievable treasure. Yes, punishment is sent to us for the good and if we respond properly it can yield

indefinable favor from Hashem.

This very same thought is found in today's Parsha regarding the appearance of a leprous spot on the wall of a home. The Torah says, "And I will give you a leprous spot in the house of your inherited land." (Vayikra 14:34) Our Chazal draw focus to the peculiar word, "give" rather than "send" which suggests that leprosy is some form of gift. They explain that in fact this leprous spot was a hidden blessing. Over the past forty years the Emorites buried treasures inside the walls of their homes. Knowing that the Jewish people were soon to occupy the land they permanently concealed their wealth to insure that the Jews never benefit from it. Chazal continue that Hashem sent this "gift" of leprosy to appear on the walls of these homes. During one of the purification stages the homes were torn down and a hidden treasures discovered.

This bizarre experience taught the leper a most meaningful lesson. As mentioned earlier one of the main causes of leprosy is stinginess. During the painful demolition of his contaminated home the leper began to realize and understand the extent of his inappropriate behavior. And in the midst of contemplating and reconsidering his wrong doings a treasure suddenly appeared. Hashem reminded the leper that wealth truly comes from above and inspired him to graciously share this gift with everyone in need. Although initially the leprosy was punishment for his stingy and greedy behavior it actually became a blessing in disguise. Once the leper learned to appreciate and share Hashem's wealth with others, his punishment was transformed into a heaven-sent present. Through his leper spot, untold treasures were discovered and after properly learning his lesson the leper was eager to share his wealth with everyone he knew. © 2014 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

DAN LIFSHITZ

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Metzora discusses the subject of a supernatural discoloration of the walls of a house that renders the house and its contents ritually impure. An individual who suspects such a problem in his house must go to a kohen and say "it appears like I have a nega in the house". They must go themselves, and cannot send an agent. The Ktav Sofer points out that the phrase "the house" is somewhat inappropriate in this context, especially given the fact that the owner must go himself. We would have expected the phrase to read "in MY house" not "THE house."

The Ktav Sofer explains the choice of words: The Sages teach that house discolorations is a punishment intended to help make stingy people more generous. Many details of its laws serve this purpose. Even the choice of words reinforces this message. To a stingy person, it is MY house, MY car, MY money. The Torah requires this person to say "in THE house" to begin teaching them that their possessions are not truly

theirs, but rather gifts from G-d with which to do good. © 2014 D. Lifshitz and LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah portion (Shemini) preceding the laws concerning proper speech, delineated those animals which are tamei (unclean) and which may not be eaten. The Midrash states that after discussing unclean animals, the Torah then cites conditions which render a person tamei. Rashi says that just as animals preceded man in creation, the law pertaining to animals preceded those pertaining to man.

There is also a Midrash that states that if a person lives a proper life as befits a human being, he is considered the first of creation, because the Divine idea of creation was that there should be a human being that would recognize and worship G-d. If, however, man fails to develop his unique abilities, he is told, "The lowly insect preceded you in creation."

Precisely because a human being has a physical body that has many animalistic drives, a person who subdues these drives in the interest of drawing closer to G-d actually surpasses angels in spirituality. Angels are holy because they were created holy, whereas man becomes holy through his own effort.

However, man may descend to a level beneath that of animals. Animals have inborn limitations to their bodily drives. They eat to provide the necessary nutrients for the body, and then they stop. They mate to preserve the species, and then they stop. Even predatory animals kill only for their food, but when they are not hungry, they will not kill unless provoked. Animal drives are in the interest of survival.

Man, on the other hand, is not bound by such limitations. Man may indulge far in excess of bodily needs, and man may pervert his urges. Indeed, man may indulge himself to the point of self-destruction. Furthermore, whereas predatory animals kill only for self-survival, man's aggressiveness can be totally senseless. When a person corrupts his bodily drives, he sinks to a level lower than animals.

When a person fulfills himself spiritually, he becomes the primary goal of creation, and he not only precedes animals, but also precedes angels, who were not created until the second of the six days. However, if he fails to live a spiritual life, he deteriorates to a level beneath an insect.

Although the human ego-drive may lead a person astray, there is one aspect of the ego-drive that is constructive. We should be proud to be the goal of creation. *From Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. © 2014 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

