

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**F**rom time to time couples come to see me before their wedding. Sometimes they ask me whether I have any advice to give them as to how to make their marriage strong. In reply I give them a simple suggestion. It is almost magical in its effects. It will make their relationship strong and in other unexpected ways it will transform their lives.

They have to commit themselves to the following ritual. Once a day, usually at the end of the day, they must each praise the other for something the other has done that day, no matter how small: an act, a word, a gesture that was kind or sensitive or generous or thoughtful. The praise must be focused on that one act, not generalised. It must be genuine: it must come from the heart. And the other must learn to accept the praise.

That is all they have to do. It takes at most a minute or two. But it has to be done, not sometimes, but every day. I learned this in a most unexpected way.

I have written before about the late Lena Rustin: one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. She was a speech therapist specialising in helping stammering children. She founded the Michael Palin Centre for Stammering in London, and she had a unique approach to her work. Most speech therapists focus on speaking and breathing techniques, and on the individual child (those she worked with were on average around five years old). Lena did more. She focused on relationships, and worked with parents, not just children.

Her view was that to cure a stammer, she had to do more than help the child to speak fluently. She had to change the entire family environment. Families tend to create 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.

But change at that basic level is hard. We tend

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated

לעילוי נשמת סימן בת מוניר

by her son

רמין כהן

to settle into patterns of behaviour until they become comfortable like a well-worn armchair. 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 sincerely. Every member of the family, but especially the parents, had to learn to give and receive praise.

Watching her at work I began to realise that she was creating, within each home, an atmosphere of mutual respect and continuous positive reinforcement. She believed that this would generate self-confidence not just for the stammering child but for all members of the family. The result would be an environment in which people felt safe to change and to help others do so likewise.

I filmed Lena's work for a documentary I made for BBC television on the state of the family in Britain. I also interviewed some of the parents whose children she had worked with. When I asked them whether Lena had helped their child, not only did each of them say 'Yes' but they went on to say that she had helped save their marriage. This was extraordinary. She was, after all, not a marriage guidance counsellor but a speech therapist. Yet so powerful was this one simple ritual that it had massive beneficial side effects, one of which was to transform the relationship between husbands and wives.

I mention this for two reasons, one obvious, the other less so. The obvious reason is that the sages were puzzled about the major theme of Tazria-Metzora, the skin disease known as tsaraat. Why, they wondered, should the Torah focus at such length on such a condition? It is, after all, not a book of medicine, but of law, morality and spirituality.

The answer they gave was that tsaraat was a punishment for lashon hara: evil, hateful or derogatory speech. They cited the case of Miriam who spoke negatively about her brother Moses and was struck by tsaraat for seven days (Num. 12). They also pointed to the incident when at the burning bush Moses spoke negatively about the Israelites and his hand was briefly affected by tsaraat (Ex. 4:1-7).

The sages spoke more dramatically about lashon hara than any other offence. They said that it was as bad as committing all three cardinal sins:

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idolatry, incest and murder. They said that it kills three people: the one who says it, the one he says it about and the one who listens to it.<sup>1</sup> And in connection with Tazria-Metzora, they said that the punishment fitted the sin. One who speaks lashon hara creates dissension within the camp. Therefore his punishment as a metzora (a person stricken with tsaraat) was to be temporarily banished from the camp.<sup>2</sup>

So far, so clear. Don't gossip (Lev. 19:16). Don't slander. Don't speak badly about people. Judaism has a rigorous and detailed ethics of speech because it believes that "Life and death are in the power of the tongue" (Prov. 18:21). Judaism is a religion of the ear more than the eye; of words rather than images. God created the natural world with words and we create or damage the social world with words. We do not say, "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me." To the contrary, words can cause emotional injuries that are as painful as physical ones, perhaps more so.

So Lena Rustin's rule of praise is the opposite of lashon hara. It is lashon hatov: good, positive, encouraging speech. According to Maimonides, to speak in praise of people is part of the command to "love your neighbour as yourself."<sup>3</sup> That is straightforward.

But at a deeper level, there is a reason why it is hard to cure people of lashon hara, and harder still to cure them of gossip in general. The American sociologist Samuel Heilman wrote an incisive book, *Synagogue Life*, about a Modern Orthodox congregation of which, for some years, he was a member.<sup>4</sup> He devotes an entire lengthy chapter to synagogue gossip. Giving and receiving gossip, he says, is more or less constitutive of being part of the

<sup>1</sup> Maimonides, *Hilkhot Deot* 7:3.

<sup>2</sup> *Arakhin* 16b.

<sup>3</sup> Maimonides, *Hilkhot Deot* 6:3. Elsewhere I have dealt with the problem of the passage in *Arakhin* 16a that says that one should not speak in praise of others in case this leads others to disagree. For the different views of Rashi and Rambam on this, see *Covenant and Conversation, Leviticus: The Book of Holiness*, Maggid, 2015, 223-27.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Heilman, *Synagogue Life: A Study in Symbolic Interaction*, University of Chicago Press, 1976, 151-192.

community. Not gossiping defines you as an outsider.

Gossip, he says, is part of "a tight system of obligatory exchange." The person who scorns gossip completely, declining to be either donor or recipient, at the very least "risks stigmatisation" and at the worst "excludes himself from a central activity of collective life and sociability." In short, gossip is the lifeblood of community.

Now, not only Heilman but probably every adult member of the community knew full well that gossip is biblically forbidden and that negative speech, lashon hara, is among the gravest of all sins. They also knew the damage caused by someone who gives more gossip than he or she receives. They used the Yiddish word for such a person: a yenta. Yet despite this, argued Heilman, the shul was in no small measure a system for the creation and distribution of gossip.

Synagogue Life was published 20 years before Oxford anthropologist Robin Dunbar's famous book, *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*.<sup>5</sup> Dunbar's argument is that, in nature, groups are held together by devoting a considerable amount of time to building relationships and alliances. Non-human primates do this by "grooming," stroking and cleaning one another's skin (hence the expression, "If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours"). But this is very time-consuming and puts a limit on the size of the group.

Humans developed language as a more effective form of grooming. You can only stroke one animal or person at a time, but you can talk to several at a time. The specific form of language that bonds a group together, says Dunbar, is gossip – because this is the way members of the group can learn who to trust and who not to. So gossip is not one form of speech among others. According to Dunbar, it is the most primal of all uses of speech. It is why humans developed language in the first place. Heilman's account of synagogue life fits perfectly into this pattern. Gossip creates community, and community is impossible without gossip.

If this is so, it explains why the prohibitions against gossip and lashon hara are so often honoured in the breach, not the observance. So common is lashon hara that one of the giants of modern Jewry, R. Yisrael Meir ha-Cohen (the Chofetz Chaim) devoted much of his life to combatting it. Yet it persists, as anyone who has ever been part of a human group knows from personal experience. You can know it is wrong, yet you and others do it anyway.

This is why I found Lena Rustin's work to have such profound spiritual implications. Her work had nothing to do with gossip, but without intending to she had discovered one of the most powerful antidotes to lashon hara ever invented. She taught people to

<sup>5</sup> Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*, London, Faber, 1997.

develop the habit of speaking well of one another. She taught them to praise, daily, specifically and sincerely. Anyone who uses Lena's technique for a prolonged period will be cured of lashon hara. It is the most effective antidote I know.

What is more, her technique transforms relationships and saves marriages. It heals what lashon hara harms. Evil speech destroys relationships. Good speech mends them. This works not only in marriages and families, but also in communities, organisations and businesses. So: in any relationship that matters to you, deliver praise daily. Seeing and praising the good in people makes them better people, makes you a better person, and strengthens the bond between you. This really is a life-changing idea. *Covenant and Conversation 5778 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2018 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**"**T hen he shall sprinkle [the mixture] seven times upon the person being purified from the tzara'at; he shall purify him and set the live bird free upon the open field" (Leviticus 14:7). One of the strangest and most primitive-sounding rituals of the Bible surrounds the purification of the individual afflicted with "tzara'at," a skin disease that apparently, at least in biblical times, struck those guilty of slanderous gossip (metzora – one who is afflicted with tzara'at derives from motzi-ra, one who spreads evil talk). Because the root cause of the malady was spiritual rather than physiological, it was the priest – the kohen – rather than a doctor who had the responsibility of examining the white spots that appeared on the skin of the individual to determine whether quarantine was necessary, and then – if he was able to declare the person free of the disease – initiating a process of purification.

It is with this particular ritual that our portion of Metzora opens. The kohen commands two birds to be taken; the first to be slaughtered in an earthenware vessel, its blood mingled with the living waters of a spring, and the second – kept alive – to be immersed within the mingled blood waters in the earthenware vessel. The waters are sprinkled upon the person cured of the malady, whereupon the live bird is allowed to fly away, leaving the city limits.

This ritual act of purification is fraught with symbolism. There are few biblical infractions as serious as speaking slander; three different prohibitions recorded in Scripture proscribe such speech. The first is gossip regarding another, which may in itself be harmless, but which is no one else's business and can easily lead to evil talk (the prohibition of rechilut – when, for example, one tells another the cost of a neighbor's new house). The second is lashon hara –

downright slander – reporting the negative action of another which may actually be true but ought not be spread.

The third and worst of all is motzi shem ra – disseminating a lie about an innocent person. From such unnecessary chatter, reputations can be broken, families can be destroyed and lives can be lost ("with the negative turn of their noses, they can become responsible for the death of another").

Hence, three people incur penalty for such talk: the one who tells it, the one who listens to it and the one who spreads it further. And when the Kohen Gadol (high priest) appears once a year before God in the Holy of Holies with the incense sacrifice, it is for this infraction against slander that he seeks atonement on behalf of the Jewish nation.

With this in mind, let us analyze the symbolism of the purification process. In idolatry, the point of offering a sacrifice was to propitiate the gods – idolaters believed that the world was run by the warring gods and humans could only seek to bribe them. In Judaism, by contrast, humans are full partners with God in perfecting this world. Our sacrifices represent the one who brings them, with the sin-offering animal standing in the place of the owner, "telling" him that it is he who deserved to die but for Divine loving-kindness, and the whole burnt offering "telling" him that he ought devote "all of himself" to the service of the Almighty in the perfection of the world.

In the case of the metzora, the slanderous, scandalous chattering twitters are symbolized by the two birds; one is slaughtered as gossip is considered akin to taking a life, and the other is sent off to fly away.

The best way to explain this symbolism is by means of a remarkable hassidic story told of someone who asked his rebbe how he might gain Divine forgiveness for his sin of slander. The rebbe instructed him to confess his sin and beg forgiveness of those whom he had slandered; then he instructed him to take a feather pillow, bring it to the marketplace late in the afternoon when the wind was strongest, to open the covering, allow the feathers to fly, and then set about collecting all the scattered feathers.

The distraught hassid returned to the rebbe that evening, reporting that gathering the feathers was a "mission impossible." "So it is with slander," replied the rebbe; "You never know how far your evil words have spread, since each person you told may well have told his friends..."

Rav Yisrael Salanter explained why the portions Tazria and Metzora follow Shmini, with its laws of kashrut: because what comes out of your mouth is even more significant than what goes into your mouth.

Eleanor Roosevelt is credited with saying this: "Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, small minds discuss people." ©2018 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**T**he human body is subject to all sorts of pressures that affect its health and well-being. Modern medicine has shown how mental moods, stress and psychic disturbances can adversely affect physical health and appearance. As modern technology has exploded in our time, in spite of all of its advantages, and there are many, our lives have become more stressful...and unfortunately psychological disorders abound.

This is especially true here in Israel where the stress level is always high and the pressure of being part of the actual rebuilding process of the Jewish people is felt daily and in myriad ways. To this empiric lesson of societal life, the Torah adds another dimension of activity, which can and did have physical effects at the beginning of our history as a nation.

The plagues that are described in this week's Torah reading and their physical manifestations defy any easy and rational explanation. The rabbis of the Talmud ascribed these ills as being caused by slanderous speech and evil social behavior. Just as driving in traffic – especially Jerusalem traffic these days – will raise one's blood pressure significantly, so to, speaking ill of other people also has a physical manifestation and not only a spiritual sin attached to it.

The Torah spends a great deal of space and detail to outline this physical manifestation and the necessity for purification of the body and the mind, in order to arrest and cure the disease. I do not know how this physical and spiritual connection does occur, but I do not know why mental stress and traffic jams should raise one's blood pressure either. Apparently, our Creator has wired us so that this is the case. And, so it is with the disease and plagues described in this week's Torah reading.

The priest who was involved in the diagnosis and healing process for this plague is not seen or described as a medical expert. He is rather what we would call today a mental therapist, a spiritual and psychological guide who becomes God's agent to lift the diseased person out of his misery. There is a period of isolation and quarantine that becomes part of the process of healing. This is to allow for the introspection and self-analysis that is a necessary component of all psychological and mental healing.

A disease that is caused by spiritual failure as much as by physical malfunction must be cured by repairing the spiritual breach that originally caused it. And that can be accomplished only by a realistic and honest appraisal of one's self... of one's spiritual strengths and weaknesses. Because of this truth, it is the spiritual priest, the defendant of Aaron, who becomes the key catalyst in the process of recovery and rehabilitation.

The Torah is the true practitioner of holistic medicine. It aims to cure not only the mind or the body but rather the soul and the spirit of the human being as well. And this is an important lesson for all of us even in our time. The plague described in this week's Torah reading may not actually be identifiable to us, but its moral lesson and spiritual value remains eternal and constructive in our time as well. ©2018 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**W**hy is there a time of physical separation between husband and wife every month—a law found in one of this week's Torah portions? (Leviticus 15) To be sure, a mandate ought to be observed no matter—but is there a rationale?

Perhaps the separation points to a difference between Jewish and fundamentalist Christian approaches to sexuality. In Christianity the basic purpose of sex is procreation. In Judaism, as important as *pru u'rvu* (procreation) may be, *onah*, that is, sexual pleasure as an expression of deep love, is even more important. Note the words of Ramban: "Speak words which arouse her to passion, union, love, desire and eros." (Epistle of Holiness) Of course, such words and actions should be reciprocated by wife to husband.

It may be suggested that a time frame of separation is mandated to heighten the physical encounter. A kind of pause that refreshes, allowing for the love encounter between husband and wife to be more wholesome, more beautiful.

A second approach comes to mind. Martin Buber speaks of an I-it encounter, where the "I" relates to the other as a thing, an object to be manipulated and used to satisfy the "I." This in contrast to the I-thou encounter where the other is a persona, a subject to be considered and loved.

Hundreds of years before Buber, Rambam in his commentary to the Mishnah (Avot 1:16) wrote about love between husband and wife as empathetic friendship, a camaraderie involving a caring responsiveness, a sharing of innermost feelings...a relationship of emotional rapport rooted in faith and confidence.

Here again, a time frame of separation may be mandated to make sure that spouses can relate in ways other than physical, and then transfer those feelings to the sexual act itself. The separation is intended to teach that I-thou is intrinsic to the sexual encounter.

One last approach. In many ways love is not only holding on but letting go. To be sure, love involves

embracing the other, but in the same breath it allows the other to realize his or her potential. This is the great challenge of harmonization. How can I be one with you while letting you be who you are? On the other hand, how can you be who you are without our becoming distant and alienated from each other?

This could be the meaning of ezer k'negdo (Genesis 2:18) which Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik understands as Adam's "discovery of a companion who even though as unique and singular as he, will master the art of communicating and with him form a community." (Lonely Man of Faith, p.26) In Milton Steinberg's words, real love is "to hold with open arms."

Therefore a time frame of separation is mandated to foster individuality even as the coming together fosters commonality. Each is stressed in the hope that they spill over and become part of the other and forge a balance.

These rationales do not explain why the separation takes place at the time of niddah (menstruation) or why immersion in a mikvah is crucial for purification, but they may offer some understanding of why the Torah sees the separation as a conduit to enhancing love between husband and wife. ©2018 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 DAVID S. LEVIN**

### **Physical & Spiritual**

**T**here are two terms used in the Torah which have various translations based on the situations in which they are found. These two terms are Tahor and Tamei. In many cases the term tahor indicates "pure" and the term tamei indicates "impure". HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that there are different types of impurity and they affect the English word which we use to describe it. Hirsch explains that, "two kinds of tum'ah formed the contents of the previous chapter (dealing with kosher and non-kosher animals): tum'at g'viyut, the actual demoralizing of the body by building up its tissues with food that has a bad effect on the tendencies of the person, and tum'at k'dushot, the disturbing of that consciousness of being complete free master over oneself in all moral matters, as is demanded by and furthered by the Sanctuary-of-the-Torah." We also find tum'at ma'achalot asurot (forbidden foods) and tum'at maga n'veilah v'sheretz (touching a dead body or a creeping living being)." Hirsch describes the impurities found in this week's parasha as, "conditions which are capable of endangering the consciousness of moral freedom to an even higher degree, as they present living Man succumbing to physical necessity, tum'ot hayotz'ot alav migufo (impurity which comes out naturally from one's body)." They are niddah v'zivah (menstrual blood and

other feminine secretions), yoledet (giving birth), m'tzora (a skin disease which comes as a punishment for certain types of sins), zav (male secretions), and ba'al ker (seminal emissions).

As we look at our parasha we see that the first of these special cases of tum'ah is the yoledet, a woman who has given birth: "Speak to the B'nei Yisrael saying, when a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, she shall be impure seven days like during the days of her menstrual infirmity she shall be impure. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. For thirty-three days she shall stay in the blood of purity, she may not touch anything sacred and she may not enter the Temple until the completion of her days of purity. But if she gives birth to a girl, she shall be impure for two weeks as during her menstruation period, and for sixty-six days she shall stay in the blood of her purity."

We can see a shift now in the Torah from the impurities of animals to those of Man. Rashi explains that this follows the order of creation since the creation of Man followed the creation of animals. The ibn Ezra explains that this section begins with childbirth since this is the beginning of Man even though the focus on childbirth here is on the mother not the child. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin, the Aznayim L'Torah, explains that the Creation of the World was not the real creation because Hashem created the world conditionally. The creation was not completed until the receiving of the Torah on Har Sinai. Had the Jewish People not accepted the Torah at Sinai, Hashem would have brought the world back to a state of chaos. The descriptions of the animals which are tahor or tamei only has an application in the realm of Man. These terms when applied to animals only describe Man's permissibility to consume them or use them for an offering. Even a pure animal can become unfit to consume or be offered on the Altar.

In our parasha, we are no longer speaking of animals which are acceptable for consumption by virtue of their type (tahor) and unacceptable by virtue of their type (tamei). Instead we are speaking of a human being who at times is permitted to have marital relations or touch or consume holy foods and at other times is ritually unfit to partake of these foods or to enter the Temple. This is still the same person only his or her status has changed. An animal that is not kosher cannot change its status by going to a mikvah, a ritual bath. We find with a woman who has given birth that her status may change several times as she moves from one stage to another, from one level of impurity to another.

The Torah describes a woman who gave birth to a boy: "Speak to the B'nei Yisrael saying, when a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, she shall be impure seven days like during the days of her menstrual infirmity she shall be impure." Here we see

that the Torah makes a comparison between a woman's menstrual blood and the bleeding which she has after giving birth. The Law here is not suggesting that all aspects of menstrual blood are similar to blood after birth but is instead informing the B'nei Yisrael how we should treat the woman's status during this week of bleeding. In Torah Law as opposed to other stringencies that Jewish women took upon themselves, a woman is impure during the time that she bleeds from her menstrual cycle and may go to the mikvah to purify herself immediately after. Any bleeding that might occur outside of the time of her cycle is not considered menstrual blood. Here the first seven days of bleeding will be considered like menstrual blood and she will be forbidden to have marital relations as well as not be able to eat or come in contact with "holy" food.

HaRav Sorotzkin explains that there are two types of blood which constitute the human body and affect the difference between the days of impurity for a baby boy and a baby girl. One set of blood comes from the body and the other set of blood comes from the nefesh, the soul. The first man was not made from a body but from the dust. When Hashem blew into him his nefesh, that became the source of the blood which filled his body. Woman was made from the body of the man, so her creation was with two sources of blood. This becomes the mystical reason for assuming that a woman bleeds more from the birth of a girl than from the birth of a boy.

We see that the laws which we find in this section have little to do with the physical nature of Man but instead with the spiritual nature of Man. It is not the physical purity of Man but the spiritual purity which the Torah addresses. The Torah is not a book of science, nor does it ever profess to be. The Torah is a source of rules which make us aware that our physical presence in this world is much less important than the spiritual growth that we are to achieve while being here. The Torah becomes our source of life; not physical life but spiritual life which must become the true goal of Man. The Torah is our only guide through this life that can help us achieve that goal. May our efforts in Torah study and analysis guide us to spiritual purity. ©2018 Rabbi D.S. Levin

#### RABBI DOV KRAMER

## Taking a Closer Look

One of the recurring themes in the original Star Trek was the conflict between logic and emotion.

Mr. Spock's Vulcan half was constantly trying to suppress any emotions coming from his Human half, while Captain Kirk would show his first officer how human emotion ultimately triumphs over pure logic. This "battle" between the brain and the heart is very similar to many of the battles between the "yeitzer ha-tov," our good side,



and the "yeitzer ha-rah," our evil inclination. We may want something that the Torah prohibits, but our brain tries to prevent us from "following our hearts" (Bamidbar 15:39).

I was always disappointed that the Star Trek version of this battle left out one very important detail (which I felt prevented the right "side" from winning). Instead of limiting the "logical" side of the argument to "pure logic," real "logic" would always take emotions into account before making a decision-not disregard them as irrelevant. (A mistake, by the way, that was corrected in the persona of Captain Picard, who was able to push aside his emotions during the decision making process, while considering those very same emotions, and those of others, as factors in his decision.)

This idea can be used to explain a difficulty raised by some of the commentators on our Parsha.

When the Torah tells us that after childbirth the mother is "ta-may" (ritually unclean) for a week (after a son) or two (after a daughter), it says (12:2) that she has the same status as when she is a "nidah" (the "tumah" resulting from her monthly cycle). However, as the laws of "nidah" are first given a few chapters later (15:19-24), how can they be used as a reference point for a new mother? Moshe has not yet told the nation that the "nidah" is "ta-may," or what that "tumah" means. Why not just give the law details here, and use the new mother as the reference point for the yet-to-be-described "nidah?"

The Ramban (Beraishis 31:35 and Vayikra 12:4) says that even from the early generations, people knew to leave a "nidah" alone. This is why, he explains, Lavan didn't challenge Rachel when he was searching for his idols. Once she told him her status, he knew to keep away. Under this background, where everyone understood that the different emotions caused by the monthly cycle meant that it was best to give her her space, the Torah was simply comparing the situation after childbirth to the necessary separation from a "nidah." Not (just) that the laws are the same, but that the same underlying reasoning applies. Even though the emotions of having a new baby bring the parents feelings of wanting to celebrate together, the Torah is telling us that just as its best to separate at other times (even if logic would dictate that this is precisely the time to try to help her more), its best to keep some distance after childbirth as well.

In last week's Parsha (Vayikra 10:16-18), even though Nadav and Avihu (Aharon's sons and Elazar and Isamar's brothers) had died just moments earlier (10:2), Moshe came down very hard on Aharon (through Elazar and Isamar) when he thought an halachic error had been made. This might lead one to think that the Torah expects emotions to be completely pushed aside. In reality, though, while emotions need to be held in check, our Creator-who gave us emotions in

the first place-wants us to not only consider them before deciding on a plan of action, but to use them as a motivational vehicle in our pursuit of spiritual growth. Moshe had to correct his nephews because everything must always be done within the framework of Jewish law.



By giving the logic of the intellect the final say, but allowing it to take the effects of emotions into account, we can be assured that G-d will help us live long and prosper.

Now make it so. ©2003 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Immersion in the Mikvah

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**A**nyone or anything that has been defiled (Tamei), whether man or utensils (except for earthenware and foodstuff), may be immersed in the water that is gathered in the ground i.e. a Mikva, and then they become Tahor (spiritually clean). We find this law of immersion of one's body in a Mikva in the Mishna, however when this law appears in the Torah it refers to the washing of oneself (Varachatz) as in the case of a Leper, and cleaning (Vichibes) regarding immersion of defiled clothing, or washing or coming in contact with water with reference to the immersion of utensils. The Rishonim (Rabbis who lived from approximately the eleventh century until the fourteenth century) state that any time there is reference in the Torah to washing or cleaning the intent is to immerse in a Mikvah.

One who is required to immerse in a Mikva must recite the blessing "Al Hatvillah" (who has commanded us regarding immersion). The reason that we use the language "Al Hatvillah" and not "Litbol" (to immerse-which would indicate that immersion is an obligation) is because immersion in and of itself is not an obligation, for one can remain in a state of defilement, "Tumah" (Rishonim). As well, if one did not recite the blessing one still emerges spiritually clean (Tahor) after the immersion in the Mikvah (This is the view of the Geonim who are Rabbis who lived from approximately the sixth through the tenth century).

The edict by Ezra that a man who had a seminal emission had to also immerse in a Mikva, is no longer applicable in our days (though there are views that state, that should a man desire to immerse in a Mikvah after a seminal emission he may do so and may even recite the blessing- for it is still a Mitzvah). Essentially, however, only women who have just given birth (Yoledet) or who has completed her menstrual cycle (Niddah) immerses in a Mikva and recites the appropriate blessing.

There are those who say that though all blessings are recited before the Mitzvah is performed (Over Lasiyatan), with regard to Mikvah this is done

after the actual immersion. Thus even though a woman who is a Niddah or anyone who has other defilements may say a Bracha while they are Tammei (defiled), it is best that they first immerse and then say the blessing for it is better to recite the blessing when one is in a pure state. Others insist however, that the blessing must be recited before the Mitzvah. To fulfill the requirement of both these views, one can first immerse one time (thus the person is reciting the blessing when pure), and then recite the blessing and immerse a second time (which will fulfill the view of reciting the blessing before the action). ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

#### RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

## Perceptions

**"G**od told Moses, 'Tell the Children of Israel that if a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, then she will be ritually unclean for seven days, as if she had her period.'" (Vayikra 12:1-2)

The day before Yosef was supposed to stand before Pharaoh to interpret the king's dreams, he barely knew two languages, Hebrew and Egyptian. The next day, he knew all 70 languages, plus Hebrew. He obviously took one of those online crash courses and learned them all the night before, right?

We read about Yiftach in the Haftarah for Parashas Chukas. There we learn that he did not have the best "yichus," and was basically rejected by even his own family. Then his services were necessary to fight back an enemy nation, and he became a judge overnight. He must have crammed like crazy, no?

He wasn't the only to achieve such quick Torah success. It turns out that the first Sanhedrin was not made up of the biggest talmidei chachamim of that time. At least not at first. Instead, the Jews who had protected their brothers from beatings back in Egypt had the merit to sit on the first Sanhedrin, miraculously gaining the knowledge to do so -- just like that.

To be sure, there is no replacement for learning Torah, and you can be certain that someone who is lazy in that respect will not get any free gifts of knowledge from God. As the Talmud says, only a person who makes an effort to perform a mitzvah and is prevented from doing so for reasons beyond their control gets the mitzvah anyhow (Brochos 6a). Unless history requires otherwise, God does not deny a person success if they did their part of the job to make it happen.

There are countless stories of people who have physically and spiritually succeeded beyond what they should have. Sometimes it can be that the situation around them made them succeed, a function of Divine Providence, and they somehow rose to the occasion in ways they never thought possible, a function of even great Divine Providence.

Kabbalah explains some of the main methods

employed by Heaven to boost a person's ability. The main point is not so much how it happens, but that it does happen, and sometimes in very big ways. And, though it may seem like "cheating," in truth, it is not when one recalls the main purpose of life in this world is free will. We're here to accomplish, but the greatest accomplishment a person achieves in life is mastery over their will. We've see how powerful a person's will can be when it comes to going after the "wrong" thing. The question is, how powerful can a person's will be when it pursues the "right" thing?

People sometimes put their lives at risk to satisfy some physical desire. They are prepared to risk everything just to have what their body desires. They can make what almost seems like a superhuman effort to enjoy a physical accomplishment to which they totally relate. The test in life is in harnessing that same power of will to do what God wants.

We need to remember that the currency of the World-to-Come is "Mesiras Nefesh," which is self-sacrifice. It is not called self-sacrifice when a person risks a lot and makes a great effort to satisfy a "tayva," a personal physical desire. That is called sacrifice FOR the self, and that earns Gehinom instead.

It is called "Mesiras Nefesh" when a person overcomes the desire not to do the moral thing, and does that moral thing anyhow. It is called "Self Sacrifice" when the self would rather indulge in the material pleasures of this world, and a person gives these up for a nobler goal. THAT is what shows a person's loyalty to God and truth, and earns them reward in Olam HaBa -- the World-to-Come.

Such a level of will control is not something that comes overnight to a person. It is something that has to be built up over time. We are born selfish, and sacrificing FOR self is quite natural for us. The process of growing up is a process of LEARNING how to sacrifice for things more important than personal material desires. We're allowed to physically enjoy life, but NEVER at the cost of truth.

We learn Torah in order to learn this, and to build up a commitment to this way of life. We perform mitzvos to train us to such a way of life. And, if a person is able to stay with the program, emotionally as well as intellectually, then they are able to become masters of their own will and to use it in ultimately meaningful ways. Over time, they become what we call "Tzaddikim," (Righteous People).

We've also seen how some people have been able to reach high levels of will in relatively short periods of time. How were they able to do that? It can be because of a number of reasons, including how they were raised as children. It can be that the world around them imposed it upon them, through a war, for example. There's nothing like crisis to make people grow up faster and take life more seriously.

Sometimes it can be that history requires it, as,

for example, in Yosef's case. He was already a tzaddik, but not one that needed to know all the 71 languages of his time. But, God wanted him to become second-in-command over Egypt by a certain time, and that required him interpreting Pharaoh's dreams and, apparently, knowing one more language than Pharaoh. So God gifted it to him the night before his audience with Pharaoh.

Then there is the case of Moshe Rabbeinu. He knew all of Torah, not just what was known in his time, but even the elucidations of Torah that would ever emerge throughout all of history. Was 120 days on Mt. Sinai enough time to learn AND remember all of that? Of course not.

In fact, the Midrash says, God kept teaching Moshe Rabbeinu all of Torah each day, and he kept forgetting it. At the end, the Midrash says, God just gave it to him as a gift. Moshe Rabbeinu all of a sudden didn't just know it, but he never forgot any of it. But then again, as the Talmud and Kabbalah teach, Moshe Rabbeinu was spiritually unique from birth, and yet was the humblest man to ever walk the face of the earth.

Exactly. Moshe Rabbeinu received such gifts because he was so special. Yosef HaTzaddik was supernaturally helped because he was so righteous and devoted to God's plan for history. How can an "average" individual ever hope to be gifted such high levels of knowledge without ever actually learning them? It may be possible for SOME to benefit from such miraculous gifts, but the rest of us?

In the world of humans, if a person gets A+ without trying, he is not only gifted, he is great. As long as a person doesn't cheat, great success is a great accomplishment even if not the result of great effort. We might even admire such a person even more because of their remarkable gift.

In God's world, it works differently. "A" really is for EFFORT, because it is EFFORT that reveals a person's level of will to do something. Effort is self-sacrifice, and when it is for something God appreciates as well, it means the world to Him, even if means little to others. And it is THAT which brings supernatural gifts of knowledge even to "average" people.

What does this have to do with a parsha that begins with the mitzvah of Bris Milah, covers the laws of Tzara'as, and ends with the laws of Niddah? Well, considering that all of them are the result of being banished from the Garden of Eden because of a misuse of will, everything. Furthermore, it was the illicit pursuit of Godly knowledge that was the basis of the sin that led to all the matters of Parashas Tazria and Parashas Metzora. Explaining that however would take at least another page. ©2018 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

