

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**he Sages understood tsara'at, the theme of this week's parsha, not as an illness but as a miraculous public exposure of the sin of lashon hara, speaking badly about people. Judaism is a sustained meditation on the power of words to heal or harm, mend or destroy. Just as G-d created the world with words, so we create, and can destroy, relationships with words.

The rabbis said much about lashon hara, but virtually nothing about the corollary, lashon tov, "good speech". The phrase does not appear in either the Babylonian Talmud or the Talmud Yerushalmi. It figures only in two midrashic passages where it refers to praising G-d. But lashon hara does not mean speaking badly about G-d. It means speaking badly about human beings. If it is a sin to speak badly about people, is it a mitzvah to speak well about them? My argument will be that it is, and to show this, let us take a journey through the sources.

In Mishnah Avot, Ethics of the Fathers (2:10-11), we read the following: 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.

However, the practice of Rabban Yochanan in praising his disciples seems to stand in contradiction to a Talmudic principle: Rav Dimi, brother of Rav Safra said: Let no one ever talk in praise of his neighbour, for praise will lead to criticism. (Arakhin 16a)

Rashi gives two explanations of this statement. Having delivered excessive praise [yoter midai], the speaker himself will come to qualify his remarks, admitting for the sake of balance that the person of whom he speaks also has faults. Alternatively, others will point out his faults. For Rashi, the crucial consideration is, is the praise judicious, accurate, true, or it is overstated? If the former, it is permitted; if the latter, it is forbidden. Evidently Rabban Yochanan was

careful not to exaggerate.

Rambam, however, sees matters differently. He writes: "Whoever speaks well about his neighbour in the presence of his enemies is guilty of a secondary form of evil speech [avak lashon hara], since he will provoke them to speak badly about him" (Hilkhos Deot 7:4). According to the Rambam the issue is not whether the praise is moderate or excessive, but the context in which it is delivered. If it is done in the presence of friends of the person about whom you are speaking, it is permitted. It is forbidden only when you are among his enemies and detractors. Praise then becomes a provocation, with bad consequences.

Are these merely two opinions or is there something deeper at stake? There is a famous passage in the Talmud which discusses how one should sing the praises of a bride at her wedding: Our Rabbis taught: How should you dance before the bride [i.e. what should one sing]?

The disciples of Hillel hold that at a wedding you should sing that the bride is beautiful, whether she is or not. Shammai's disciples disagree. Whatever the occasion, don't tell a lie. "Do you call that a lie?" the Hillelites respond. "In the eyes of the groom at least, the bride is beautiful."

What's really at stake here is not just temperament -- puritanical Shammaites versus good-natured Hillelites -- but two views about the nature of language. The Shammaites think of language as a way of making statements, which are either true or false. The Hillelites understand that language is about more than making statements. We can use language to encourage, empathise, motivate and inspire. Or we can use it to discourage, disparage, criticise and depress. Language does more than convey information. It conveys emotion. It creates or disrupts a mood. The sensitive use of speech involves social and emotional intelligence. Language, in J. L. Austin's famous account, can be performative as well as informative.

The argument between Hillel and Shammai is similar to that between Rambam and Rashi. For Rashi,



Take Control of  
**YOUR MONEY!**  
[tinyurl.com/fitness5](http://tinyurl.com/fitness5)

...probably the best personal  
finance training course I've seen! - CPA

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA  
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL  
AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.  
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

The material presented in this publication was collected from email subscriptions, computer archives and various websites. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any synagogue or organization.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL  
(973) 277-9062 OR EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

as for Shammai, the key question about praise is: is it true, or is it excessive? For Rambam as for Hillel, the question is: what is the context? Is it being said among enemies or friends? Will it create warmth and esteem or envy and resentment?

We can go one further, for the disagreement between Rashi and Rambam about praise may be related to a more fundamental disagreement about the nature of the command, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Rashi interprets the command to mean: do not do to your neighbour what you would not wish him to do to you (Rashi to Sanhedrin 84b). Rambam, however, says that the command includes the duty "to speak in his praise" (Hilkhot Deot 6:3). Rashi evidently sees praise of one's neighbour as optional, while Rambam sees it as falling within the command of love.

We can now answer a question we should have asked at the outset about the Mishnah in Avot that speaks of Yochanan ben Zakkai's disciples. Avot is about ethics, not about history or biography. Why then does it tell us that Rabban Yochanan had disciples? That, surely, is a fact not a value, a piece of information not a guide to how to live.

However, we can now see that the Mishnah is telling us something profound indeed. The very first statement in Avot includes the principle: "Raise up many disciples." But how do you create disciples? How do you inspire people to become what they could become, to reach the full measure of their potential? Answer: By acting as did Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai when he praised his students, showing them their specific strengths.

He did not flatter them. He guided them to see their distinctive talents. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, the "well that never loses a drop", was not creative but he had a remarkable memory -- not unimportant in the days before the Oral Torah was written in books. Elazar ben Arakh, the "ever-flowing spring," was creative, but needed to be fed by mountain waters (years later he separated from his colleagues and forgot all he had learned).

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai took a Hillel-Rambam view of praise. He used it not so much to describe as to motivate. And that is lashon tov. Evil

speech diminishes us, good speech helps us grow. Evil speech puts people down, good speech lifts them up. Focused, targeted praise, informed by considered judgment of individual strengths, and sustained by faith in people and their potentiality, is what makes teachers great and their disciples greater than they would otherwise have been. That is what we learn from Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai.

So there is such a thing as lashon tov. According to Rambam it falls within the command of "Love your neighbour as yourself." According to Avot it is one way of "raising up many disciples." It is as creative as lashon hara is destructive.

Seeing the good in people and telling them so is a way of helping it become real, becoming a midwife to their personal growth. If so, then not only must we praise G-d. We must praise people too. *Covenant and Conversation 5777 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2017 Rabbi L-rd J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." [Lev. 12:3] The mitzvah of circumcision in the portion of Tazria appears in the midst of the discussion of the impure and pure periods immediately following childbirth. Furthermore, our Sages specifically derive from this ordinance that the ritual of circumcision overrides Shabbat: "On the eighth day, [the child's] foreskin shall be circumcised' – even if it occurs on Shabbat" [Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 132a]. Why express this crucial significance of circumcision – its precedence even over Shabbat – within the context of ritual impurity? What is the connection?

Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel links the two issues by interpreting: "And on the eighth day, when [Biblically] she is permitted [to have sexual relations with her husband], on that [day] is [the baby] to be circumcised." He is thereby citing the view of our Sages, who understand that the circumcision must be on the eighth day following the birth "so that everyone not be happy while the parents will be sad" if they cannot properly express their affection toward one another [Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Nidda 31b].

I would like to suggest an additional connection. When a woman is in a state of ritual impurity, she and her husband are forbidden from engaging in sexual relations until she immerses in a mikveh (ritual bath). Obviously this restriction demands a great deal of self-control and inner discipline. The major symbol that graphically expresses the importance of mastering one's physical instincts is the command of circumcision: even the sexual organ itself, the physical manifestation of the male potency and the unbridled id,

must be tempered and sanctified by the stamp of the Divine.

A well-known midrash takes this even one step farther: Turnus Rufus the Wicked once asked Rabbi Akiva: "Whose works are better, the works of G-d or the works of human beings?" He answered him, "The works of human beings..." [Turnus Rufus] said to him, "Why do you circumcise?" [Rabbi Akiva] said, "I knew you were asking about that, and therefore I anticipated [the question] and told you that the works of human beings are better."

Turnus Rufus said to him: "But if G-d wants men to be circumcised, why does He not see to it that male babies are born already circumcised?" Rabbi Akiva said to him..."It is because the Holy One Blessed be He only gave the commandments to Israel so that we may be purified through them." [Midrash Tan?uma, Tazria, 5]

I see in the words of the midrash as well as the context of the commandment a profound message: the human being is part of the physical creation of the world, a world that is subject to scientific rules of health and illness, life and death. The most obvious and tragic expression of our physicality is that, in line with all creatures of the universe, we humans as well are doomed to be born, disintegrate and die. And therefore the most radical example of ritual impurity is a human corpse, *avi avot hatuma*.

However, an animal carcass, a dead reptile, and the blood of the menstrual cycle (fall-out of the failed potential of fertilization) likewise cause ritual impurity. A woman in childbirth has a very close brush with death – both in terms of her own mortality as well as during the painful anguished period preceding the moment when she hears the cry of a healthy, living baby.

G-d's gift to the human being created in the Divine image, however, is that in addition to physicality there is also spirituality, in addition to death there is also life eternal, in addition to ritual impurity (*tuma*) there is also ritual purity (*tahara*). Hence, the very human life that emerges from the mother's womb brings in its wake not only the brush with death, *tuma*, but also the hope of new life, *tahara* – and while the *tuma* is for seven days, the *tahara* is for thirty-three! The human being has the power to overcome his physical impediments and imperfections, to ennoble and sanctify his animal drives and instincts, to perfect human nature and redeem an imperfect world.

This is the message that Rabbi Akiva attempted to convey to Turnus Rufus the Wicked. Yes, the world created by the Almighty is beautiful and magnificent, but it is also imperfect and incomplete. G-d has given the task of completion and redemption to the human being, who has the ability and capacity to circumcise himself, to sublimate his "sub-gartelian" (beneath the gartel, or belt) drives, to sanctify society

and to complete the cosmos. Indeed, the works of the human being are greater! And the command of circumcision belongs within the context of impurity and purity.

And this is also the meaning behind the principle that circumcision overrides Shabbat: the Sabbath testifies to G-d's creation of the world – impressive and inspiring, but deliberately imperfect. Circumcision testifies to the human being's challenge to redeem himself and perfect the world. Indeed, circumcision overrides Shabbat. ©2017 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

## Weekly Dvar

by Dan Lifshitz

**T**he primary subject of Parshat Tazria is *tzara'at*, a supernatural skin disease that, according to the Sages, was a punishment for speaking ill about other people. A person who habitually spoke ill about others would be struck with *tzara'at* and would then be quarantined outside the city as a divine warning to improve their behavior and make themselves more worthy of dwelling within the community. Although the symptoms of *tzara'at* were fairly straightforward, the official diagnosis could only be made by a kohen, who would declare whether a given patch of skin contained *tzara'at* or not. The Torah describes one type of skin lesion called a "*bohak*" that is not *tzara'at*, but is required to be shown to a kohen as well. R' Moshe Feinstein asks about the purpose of this -- if it is not *tzara'at*, why does the Torah trouble people to show it to the kohen?

R' Moshe Feinstein explains based on the insight mentioned earlier. The purpose of *tzara'at* is to cause a person to evaluate their behavior and to make improvements. The trauma of being quarantined outside the city for a week or more is clearly a strong catalyst for such self-examination, similar to the way serious illness or loss of a job triggers self-examination in our day. But we must not wait for such dramatic events to examine our actions. The law of the *bohak* teaches us that even smaller events in our lives should be seen as catalysts for introspection and self-improvement. We can never know for certain what messages G-d is trying to send us, but we should always be listening, whether the message is loud or not. ©2017 *Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.*

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**T**he laws regarding ritual purity and the metaphysical disease of *tzorot*, which by the way is not the medically recognized disease of leprosy, affect three categories of human life and society – the human body, clothing and houses. These three areas of human societal existence are the basic building

blocks of civilization and society generally. They are the most vital and at the same time the most vulnerable areas of our existence. And it is apparent that the Torah wishes us to be aware of this fact.

Health of body is a necessary precedent to most cases of human accomplishment. Not many of us are able to rise over illness, pain and/or chronic discomfort on a regular and permanent basis. Medical science recognizes that our mood and our mind affect our physical state of wellbeing. The Torah injects into this insight that our soul also has such an effect as well.

The rabbis specifically found that the distress caused to one's soul by evil speech, slander and defamation reflects itself physically in the disease of tzsorat. In biblical times, hurting other human beings by the intemperate use of one's tongue, had clear physical consequences that served as a warning of the displeasure of one's soul at such behavior. The human body is our mainstay. It is also the most fragile and vulnerable to decay and discomfort. It is therefore only logical that it is in this area of our existence that the possibility of tzsorat lurks and lingers.

Clothing represents our outer representation of ourselves to the society around us. Originally, as described in the Torah itself, clothing was meant to shelter us from the elements and to provide us with a sense of privacy and modesty in covering our nakedness. As humanity evolved and developed, clothing became a statement of personality and even of the mental and spiritual nature of the person.

Clothing also became an instrument of hubris, competitiveness and even of lewdness. It also became vulnerable to the distress of the soul over its use for essentially negative purposes. And again in biblical times the angst of the soul translated itself into tzsorat that affected clothing directly.

And finally tzsorat was able to invade the physical structure of one's own dwelling place. One is entitled to live in a comfortable and attractive home. All of the amenities of modern life are permitted to us. But the Psalmist warned us that we should be careful not to make our homes our "graves." Homes are by their very nature temporary and transient places.

Our father Avraham described himself as a wandering itinerant on this earth. Again, as in all areas of human life, the Torah demands of us perspective and common sense when dealing with our homes. We gawk with wonder when visiting palaces and mansions of the rich and famous yet our inner self tells us that this really is not the way that we wish to live. The vulnerability of homes and houses to tzsorat is obvious to all.

In Jewish life, less is more. ©2017 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

**L**eprosy, the subject of one of our parshiot this week, is traditionally associated with the sin of slander. Thus, there is a similarity between the Hebrew word for leprosy - metzora - and the Hebrew words for speaking evil about another - motzei shem ra. The Torah reminds us of the danger of bad speech.

The ability to speak has the capacity to raise a human being above the lower animal world. Hence, Rabbi Yehudah Halevi labels the human being as medaber, one who speaks. Speech is what sets the human being apart.

But, the greater the potential to do good, the greater the possibility for that potential to turn into evil. Speech can raise one to the highest level, but if abused, it can sink us to the lowest depth.

Indeed, injurious speech has enormous ramifications. Although when we were kids, we would say "sticks and bones can break my bones, but names can never harm me," it is actually not true. Words and name-calling can actually hurt deeply. It also should be remembered that while a word is a word and a deed is a deed, words lead to deeds. Once a word has been said, it is almost impossible to take back, for a spoken word spreads to others in ways that can never be undone.

A rabbinic tale: A rabbi was once asked, what is the most expensive meat. He responded, "tongue." And the next day the rabbi was asked what is the least expensive meat. Here too he responded, "tongue." Such is the challenge of speech. One that the Torah reminds us about this week, and that we should all take to heart. ©2017 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 DOV KRAMER

## Taking a Closer Look

**O**ne 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 hatov," 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



**RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ**

## Shabbat Shalom Weekly

**T**he Torah writes regarding one who is afflicted for speaking gossip or tale bearing: "All the days the plague is in him... he shall dwell alone; outside the camp shall his dwelling be" (Lev. 13:46).

What lesson can we learn from this?

The Sages said that since the metzora caused the separation of friends and the separation of husbands and wives, he should also be separated from others.

The isolation of the metzora gave him time for introspection. He could now recall the marriages and friendships his malicious gossip has dissolved. Removed from society, he would feel the mental anguish he caused others when his slander caused them to be ostracized.

From here we see that a person should learn from his own experiences the pain that others feel when they suffer. If anyone ever spoke Loshon Hora against you, you certainly did not like it. Remember those feelings and refrain from speaking against others. *Dvar Torah based on Love Your Neighbor by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2017 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

**ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT**

## Blemished Clothing

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**I**n this week's portion we learn that not only can a person be defiled (Tamei) but also a garment as well.

However when a garment is defiled, one becomes forbidden to have any benefit (Hanaah) from it. The source for this is derived from this week's portion where it states the words, "Tzaraat Mameret" 13:51 (The affliction is a malignant Tzaraat) in which our sages comment "Give upon it a curse and destroy it by fire and don't derive pleasure from it". This prohibition is not only applicable to a garment that has been definitely identified as Tzaraat, but even one that was placed in abeyance until the Kohen will give the final pronouncement (during the first week when it is Musgar). This is derived from the same sentence from the juxtaposition of the words Tzaraat with the word Mameret- even if it has not yet formally been labeled as Tzaraat it is still prohibited to derive any pleasure from it.

The Rambam (Maimonides) however states (Nagaim 12:13) that the reason it is Tammei and one cannot derive benefit from it, is because it must be

destroyed by fire. This Rambam is difficult to understand for we know that even during the first week after the Kohen sees the blemish, the garment is considered Tammei and one is forbidden to derive pleasure from it, yet it is not subject to destruction by fire! Also in order for a garment to be Tammei there must be a minimum of a Kazayit (the volume of an olive) however to be forbidden to derive pleasure from it even a minimal amount is sufficient-Thus one can have a garment that is not Tammei (because there was less than a kazayit) but is still forbidden to derive pleasure from it! Hence we see that the reason is not dependent on whether it needs to be destroyed by fire as the Rambam claims!

Additionally one can site examples such as defiled Trumah (tithes to the Kohen) that one must destroy it by fire but can still derive pleasure from it! We are left with this difficulty on the Rambam. Can you offer an explanation?



### Immersion (in the Mikvah)

Anyone 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 women 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

In the end, you suffer alone. That was one of the last Facebook postings of a young mother of six children who took her life this last Shabbos. Her marriage had failed and ended in divorce. After suffering for years, she shot herself while in her parents' home, with five of her children in the house at the time.

Tragic?

A gross understatement.

Shocking?

Incredibly.

The woman had been religious with a Charedi background. She grew up in a world in which suicide is VERY extreme and far more rare an occurrence than in the secular world. Suffering or no suffering, one's life is not theirs to take. Doing so, in most circumstances, is considered a sin.

Therefore, once upon a time, a Jew who committed suicide was not allowed to be buried in the main part of a cemetery. Today, because of all the insanity in the world, the halachah is usually more lenient and people are considered less responsible for the tragic act.

Nevertheless, suicide is still quite taboo, almost on par in Charedi circles with taking someone else's life. For a religious Jew to carry out such an act of finality, they have to have been desperate, VERY desperate.

After all, for a secular person, suicide just means the end of their pain. Suffering terribly, that is more important to them at the time than the family and friends they might end up leaving behind.

I did not understand what that might be like until about 10 years ago when I herniated a disk. The pain was incredible, over my entire body, and relentless. I could not find ANY relief at all, even after taking the strongest pain killers I could get my hands on. I could not imagine living the rest of my life like that.

I could not enjoy any good I had at the time.

Nevertheless I had hope. It could take time, more time than I could handle, but eventually the pain would subside. Eventually I would heal, b"H, even to the point that I would forget about the pain I once had.

What about the people for whom this would not be the case? What about the people who suffer emotionally, something that is much harder to solve and which does not self-heal so easily? How could they be expected to put up with such agonizing pain day-after-day, year-after-year? What hope do they have to carry them until the situation improves?

There is always hope. The problem is not the lack of hope. It is being unable to find it or believe in it when the pain is excruciatingly distracting. We've all seen how our minds can take pain and multiply its negative meaning. We've all blown situations out of proportion, only to find out later that the crisis was not as hopeless as we had been led to believe by our panic center.

For the person suffering, this does not seem the case. They see themselves, in extreme cases, as dying emotionally. Taking their own lives is just a way of bringing the physical reality in line with the psychological one. They are very wrong, but they can't see that while alone and drowning in the darkness.

For the person who suffers alone, there is truly tragic pain.

Someone told me shortly after the news hit Facebook, that he was amazed by the response of those who had seen the woman's previous postings. He was stunned, he told me, at how many people wrote that the "writing had been on the wall" that she would kill herself. Apparently they had seen the potential for her to commit such a desperate act, and were not surprised that she actually carried through.

The person said to me, "If they saw the signs that she was suicidal, why did they not do something about it?"

In all fairness, I do not know who did what when to try and help the woman out. Perhaps some people did respond to her silent scream for help. Perhaps efforts were made to help her cope with her pain and survive her situation. From the fact that she complained about suffering alone makes me wonder if people made enough of an effort to save her life.

What happened represents a failure for mankind. Social media, for all of its attendant ills, provided an opportunity for people to know about someone else's extreme pain and death wish, and to do something about it. It provided a unique window to another person's inner being, and a rare opportunity to save a life. Nevertheless, the life was lost just the same.

Ironically, this happened during the week of THE parsha that address THIS issue. The Torah says: "And the person with tzara'as, in whom there is the

lesion, his garments shall be torn, his head shall be unshorn, he shall cover himself down to his mustache and call out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' All the days the lesion is upon him, he shall remain unclean. He is unclean; he shall dwell isolated; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." (Vayikra 13:45-46)

"And call out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' [This teaches that] one should make his distress known to many, so that many pray for mercy on his behalf." (Moed Katan 5a)

This is amazing. Even though the Metzora spoke loshon hara and brought his suffering on himself, still others must take note of his plight and pray for his mercy! The Torah says that he must live in isolation for his sin, and yet the community must NOT exclude him from their prayers!

If this is true for the sinner, how much more so must others take note of the suffering of the innocent? How much more so must people have mercy on them, and do whatever they can to ease their pain and save their lives, and the lives of all whom they affect.

Only G-d can judge the person who has taken his or her own life. He will also judge, however, all those who let it happen. It may turn out that the sin of those who could have helped but didn't, will be greater than the sin of those who could not have helped themselves. © 2017 Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

### SHLOMO KATZ

## Hama'ayan

**W**e read in our parashah, "On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." The Gemara (Sanhedrin 59b) says that, though this mitzvah was taught earlier in the Torah, it is repeated here to emphasize, "On the eighth day" -- even when it falls on Shabbat.

Why does brit milah supersede the prohibitions of Shabbat?

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) explains: Unlike most mitzvot, brit milah and Shabbat both involve an act of self-sacrifice in the present that creates holiness affecting the person's entire future. When a baby is circumcised, he undergoes self-sacrifice -- a physical operation -- but is instilled with a spirit of kedushah that remains with him for his entire life and that influences his future actions. Likewise, when one observes Shabbat, he undergoes self-sacrifice -- refraining from work -- but is instilled with a neshamah yeteirah / "extra soul" which makes his Shabbat "m'ein Olam Ha'ba" / "a foretaste of the World-to-Come." Because brit milah thus complements the message of Shabbat, it is permitted on Shabbat.

The Gemara says that mitzvot mentioned in the Torah before the Giving of the Torah and repeated after (e.g., the prohibition on murder; see Bereishit 9:6) apply to both Jews and non-Jews. Why then, does brit milah

(which is mentioned in Parashat Lech Lecha and here) not apply to both Jews and non-Jews? The Gemara answers that brit milah does not count as a mitzvah that is mentioned twice because it is repeated here only to teach the detail that it supersedes Shabbat. In light of the above, R' Kook adds, we can say that it is not merely a detail that brit milah supersedes Shabbat. Rather, this fact highlights the very nature of the mitzvah. (Shemuot Ha'Raiyah: Bereishit p.57)

### A Torah Tour of the Holy Land

"Four men, metzora'im, were outside the gate; each one said to his friend, 'Why are we sitting here until we die?'" (Melachim II 7:3 -- from the Haftarah)

R' Akiva Eiger z"l (1761-1837; leading Talmud commentator and halachic authority; rabbi of Posen, Germany) writes: A wise man asked me why these four men with tzara'at had been expelled from the city of Shomron when the Mishnah states that metzora'im must be expelled only from cities that had been walled at the time of Yehoshua bin Nun, who led Bnei Yisrael into Eretz Canaan. Shomron, in contrast, was a new city built by King Omri, as described in Melachim I (16:24): "Then he bought the mountain of Shomron from Shemer for two loaves of silver, and he built up the mountain, and he called the city that he built after Shemer, the master of the mountain of Shomron."

R' Eiger writes: I answered him that the Aramaic translation of Yonatan ben Uziel avoids this question by translating the quoted verse, "Then he bought the small city of Shomron from Shemer for two loaves of silver, and he built up the small city, and he called the metropolis that he built after Shemer, the master of the mountain of Shomron." In other words, according to Targum Yonatan, Omri did not build a new city, but rather expanded an ancient city that apparently was already walled in the time of Yehoshua bin Nun. (Tosfot R' Akiva Eiger: Masechet Kelim 1:7)

R' Meir Simcha Hakohen z"l (1847-1926; rabbi of Dvinsk, Latvia) offers another answer to the above question. Shomron was the capital of the Kingdom of Yisrael, which had seceded from the Kingdom of Yehuda. In an effort to legitimize their reign, the kings of Yisrael applied to their capital the same laws that applied to Yerushalayim. (Meshech Chochmah)

R' Yehuda Cooperman z"l (1930-2016; founder and dean of Michlalah College for Women in Yerushalayim; editor of an annotated edition of the above-mentioned Meshech Chochmah) offers an additional answer:

Our Sages say that these four men were Gechazi, the former servant of the prophet of Elisha, and Gechazi's three sons. We read earlier in Sefer Melachim that the Assyrian general Na'aman came to Elisha seeking a cure for his leprosy. Elisha cured him and refused to take compensation. Gechazi chased after Na'aman and told him that Elisha had changed his

mind, thus obtaining gifts from the general under false pretenses. When Elisha heard about Gechazi's chillul Hashem, he cursed Gechazi (Melachim II 5:27), "Na'aman's leprosy shall therefore cling to you and your children forever!"

Ramban z"l writes that the tzara'at discussed in our parashah is not leprosy or any other medical condition, but rather is the physical manifestation of a spiritual illness. When a person contracted tzara'at, it was because G-d was sending him a message.

Therefore, observes R' Shimon Schwab z"l (1908-1995), there was no public health reason to isolate one who suffers from tzara'at. In contrast, we know that leprosy is considered a very serious public health risk.

Ramban writes further that the tzara'at of our parashah is a manifestation of Hashem's special relationship with the Jewish People. A Jew who has distanced himself from this special relationship may contract tzara'at as a warning. A gentile, like General Na'aman, could never contract tzara'at (as opposed to leprosy).

Thus, concludes R' Cooperman, Gechazi and his sons, who were cursed with "Na'aman's leprosy" -- not tzara'at -- were a public health risk. That is why they were expelled from Shomron, even if Shomron did not have a wall in the days of Yehoshua bin Nun. (Notes to Meshech Chochmah [4th edition, p.252])

Editor's note: The preceding discussion appeared in Hamaayan ten years ago this week. At that time, R' Gedaliah Anemer z"l (Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington and rabbi of Young Israel Shomrai Emunah in Silver Spring, Maryland -- the first shul in which Hamaayan was distributed; his seventh yearzeit was this week) told this writer the following: On Shabbat Parashat Tazria-Metzora in 1951, R' Anemer ate lunch at the home of R' Aizik Ausband z"l (1915-2012; later co-Rosh Yeshiva of the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, Ohio). At the meal, R' Ausband's then-four year old son, Avrohom (now Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva of Telshe Alumni in Riverdale, N.Y.), asked: How could four metzora'im be sitting together when our parashah says (13:46), "He shall dwell in isolation?" Based on the above explanation, R' Anemer observed, the child's question is answered as well:

The four people in our Haftarah had leprosy, not tzara'at, so the verse in our parashah did not apply to them. © 2017 S. Katz and torah.org

