

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS Z"L

Covenant & Conversation

Rabbi Sacks zt"l had prepared a full year of Covenant & Conversation for 5781, based on his book Lessons in Leadership. The Office of Rabbi Sacks will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah.

The Sages were eloquent on the subject of lashon hara, evil speech, the sin they took to be the cause of tsara'at. But there is a meta-halachic principle: "From the negative you can infer the positive"¹ So, for example, from the seriousness of the prohibition against Chillul Hashem, desecrating God's name, one can infer the importance of the opposite, Kiddush Hashem, sanctifying God's name.

It therefore follows that alongside the grave sin of lashon hara, 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 importance of silence.² Silence saves us from evil speech but in and of itself it achieves nothing positive. What then is lashon hatov?

One of the most important tasks of a leader, a parent or a friend is focused praise. We first discussed this idea in parshat Vayeshev, where we examined the classic text on this – a Mishnah in Tractate Avot (2:11) in which Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai enumerates the praises of his five beloved students: 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 Arach: an ever-flowing spring.

Every Rabbi had disciples. The imperative, "Raise up many disciples"³ is one of the oldest rabbinic teachings on record. What the Mishnah is telling us here is how to create disciples. It is not difficult to create followers. Often a good teacher will, over time, notice that they have developed a large following, students who are uncritical devotees – but how to encourage these followers to become creative intellects in their own right? It is far harder to create leaders than

to create followers.

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: with 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 ability 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 merely scholars but also holy men engaged in a sacred task. Elazar ben Arach, 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 children who struggled with stammers. 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 children 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 their 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 as they become more and more comfortable, like a well-used armchair or a well-worn 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 whom she was working that every day they must notice 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

¹ Nedarim 11a.

² See for example Mishnah Avot 1:17; 3:13.

³ Mishnah Avot 1:1.

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 Lena 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 likewise began 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 too. We think religion is about faith in God. What I had not fully understood before was that faith in God should lead us to have faith in people, for God'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 God 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 that goodness. I also understood why God briefly punished Moses by turning his hand to tsara'at – because he had said about the Israelites, "They will not believe in me." (Ex. 4:1) 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*⁴, 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 whether we may assume that talent is something we achieve through time by effort, practice and persistence (the "growth" mindset). People who take the former approach 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 group embrace risk because they take failure as a learning experience from which they can 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, and I can see the improvement!" They should encourage a growth mindset, not a fixed one.

Perhaps this explains a sad aftermath in the life of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's two most gifted pupils. The Mishnah immediately following the one quoted above states: He [Rabban Yochanan 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 Arach 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.⁵ As for Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, 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.⁶ It may be that praising his students for their innate abilities rather than their effort, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai inadvertently encouraged his two most talented students 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" (Mishnah 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.⁷ *Covenant and Conversation 5781 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2021 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." (Leviticus 12:3) The mitzva 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?

⁵ Bava Metzia 59b.

⁶ Shabbat 147b.

⁷ W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," *Another Time* (New York: Random House, 1940).

⁴ Carol Dweck, *Mindset*, Ballantine Books, 2007.

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 further: Turnus Rufus the Wicked once asked Rabbi Akiva: "Whose works are better, the works of God 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 God 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 Tanhuma, 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.

God'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. God 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 God'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. ©2021 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah indirectly, but softly and clearly, speaks to the continuity of the Jewish people and the human race generally, through the idea of having children. It has been statistically shown that as prosperity rises in certain sections of society, the birthrate in that section of society declines. For me, this was always counterintuitive, because if one is prosperous, then one can certainly support more children. If one is almost impoverished, the difficulty of raising and supporting children is much greater.

The statistics regarding this matter are borne out by much empirical evidence that we also see in our own personal experience. For some reason, the affluent amongst us wish to retain their affluence by not having to spend money on raising and educating children. Children, to a great extent, impose themselves on the lifestyle, comfort, and wealth of their parents.

Having and raising children is a positive act of faith in the future, and the unlimited generosity towards others. The amount of selfishness and narcissism that unfortunately characterize many in our society today accounts, in a great measure, for the large decrease in

the birth rate in many westerns cultures and countries. Europe is shrinking population-wise, and it is only the migration of millions from Africa and other parts of the world that keep its labor supply constant and allow it to function. Eventually this phenomenon causes many other societal problems, and many of those problems are already apparent in France, Germany, Italy, and other parts of Europe where there had been an absorption of many immigrants who have not been able to integrate themselves successfully into European society. The United States is not far behind in this critical problem, regarding the numbers and dimension of immigration and its integration, and the shrinking birthright amongst the well-educated and the well-heeled.

Judaism has always been pro-family... and pro-large family. King Solomon pointed out to us that the future is unknown, and no parent can predict the success and life of one's child. Yet what is hidden from us by Heaven, the Talmud says, need not concern us as far as our duties to obey and perform God's commandments. The future is always inscrutable, and try as we may, and we certainly do, we are unable to guarantee lives and fortunes of the next generation.

The variables in life are so enormous that there is no certainty possible. Having and raising children is a matter of faith and belief that somehow there is a future, and that the children that we bring into this world will be able to manage and benefit from that future.

The Torah emphasizes that women have a strong maternal instinct that drives them to wish to have children, despite the immediate discomfort and long-range problems that all children bring to their parents. It is this life force within the woman that guarantees the survival of the Jewish people, and, in effect, the entire human race. In this week's reading the Torah concentrates on the purity of the woman and her relationship to the Creator through childbirth, for she is "the mother of all life." ©2021 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Tazria begins with the law "if a woman be delivered and bears a child" (Leviticus 12:2). The words "be delivered" seem redundant. Isn't "bears a child" enough?

Rashi, based on the Talmud, points out that "be delivered" refers to an early termination of pregnancy – "even if she gave birth to a shapeless mass, the laws of normal birth apply" (Niddah 27b).

The similarity stands, even though Jewish law posits that life begins at birth – with the emergence of the head, or in case of breech, the majority of the body

(Ohalot 7:6). In utero, the fetus does not have the status of life, but of potential life. The further along the gestation period, the greater potential life, reaching just before birth the status of "virtual" life. Thus, if at birth, only the mother or fetus can be saved, mother takes precedence – life comes before potential life.

Notwithstanding this difference, Rashi reminds us that a miscarriage in Jewish law has similarities to a live birth (in terms of the resulting impurity and sacrifices that are brought afterwards). The fetus may be potential life, but it is precious. For parents, a fetus is – emotionally and psychologically – their little boy or girl.

With this in mind, modern rituals have been developed to allow parents to mourn and grieve a stillborn or miscarriage. Indeed, parents are now encouraged to spend time and to lovingly hold their miscarried or stillborn baby.

One of the challenges of the laws of birthing is why, after delivering life, a mother is declared *teme'ah* (impure)? While there are religio-legal and conceptual reasons explaining this law, our observation yields another possibility.

Perhaps, just perhaps, the *tumah* can also be seen as an expression of empathy by the birthing mother for couples who are struggling to conceive or couples who have had losses before birth. Such an approach is in sync with Jewish ritual, most famously a wedding, where bride and groom, at the most joyous time, break a glass to recall the Temple's destruction and shattered lives that need fixing.

In recent years, we've become much more sensitive to the challenges of pregnancy. Today, it has become a widespread custom to recite prayers in synagogue for couples struggling to conceive, and for halachic guidance to be given to single people who yearn to become parents. And today, it is common for a fetus to be buried, accompanied by a ceremony of spiritual, godly meaning. Today also, it is common practice for women after birth to recite *birkat hagomel* (a blessing of thanksgiving), as built into birth is potential danger for mother and child.

Parashat Tazria teaches that within the laws of birthing is the recognition that potential life lost is emotionally devastating, requiring "listening ears" who understand and friends and family and community who sympathize, empathize, and offer their love.

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RABBI AVROHOM LEVENTHAL

Simple Hakarat HaTov

Many years ago, while living in the US, I had a wonderful neighbor, a *rav*, who would be considered "Haredi" even according to Israeli

standards.

His mode of dress, speech and the manner in which he raised his children would be acceptable in any neighborhood of Jerusalem, Bnei Brak, Beitar or Kiryat Sefer.

Each and every July 4th, this neighbor would adorn his home with an American flag of such proportions that even the sports stadiums were envious.

Upon first witnessing this display, I complemented (not without a bit of cynicism) my neighbor on the degree of his patriotism.

His reply was to chastise me for not flying my own flag (of any size) and to set the record straight. He said: "I grew up in a neighborhood populated by immigrants. Although my own parents were born in the US, as religious Jews they appreciated the freedom granted to them to live as Torah observant Jews with persecution or prejudice. Don't take things for granted. Who runs the government doesn't matter. The ability to live in such a country requires from us as Jews, at the very least, simple hakaras hatov (appreciation)."

While not inspired to run out and buy a flag, his words did give me additional insight into Hakaras Hatov.

Several years later, our family merited to realize our dream of Aliyah. While always having an appreciation for the modern miracle of the Jewish state, actually living here elevated it to something much more personal. Without question the 5th of Iyar took on new meaning.

Our observance of Yom Ha'atzmaut included, among everything else, displaying a flag.

Several weeks later, on Erev Shavuot, I was surprised to receive a phone call from our former neighbor. By that point we had been in Israel for almost a year and I had not heard from him. After some pleasantries, he asked about my wife and children and how we were adjusting.

Then came the question that I most certainly wasn't expecting....

"Did you celebrate "that day"(5 Iyar)?"

I replied "of course".

"With a flag?"

"Yes, a real big one!"

At that point he gently berated me for giving credence to the "anti-Torah state" and all the implications of what "that flag" represents. "As a yeshiva educated rabbi how could I give any legitimacy to such a state", etc.

I waited for him to finish and replied as follows:

I told him that "I had learned from the best" about having appreciation for living in a "medina shel chesed" (a benevolent country). I relayed to him that I was grateful to be able to live not only in a land of Jews but

the land of the Jews, our eternal homeland as promised to us by God Himself.

He heard from me that there has been no greater state sponsored support of Torah growth and Judaism in our history. I reminded him that for 2,000 years we have prayed for the return to this land and by the Grace of HaShem we are here. Shabbat and Chagim are recognized by the entire population in some degree and we don't feel self conscience when wearing a kippa or doing mitzvot in public.

My former neighbor heard that with all of the financial and material challenges, there is no better place to live and to grow as a Jew.

I ended our conversation with the wishes for a Chag Sameach, Gut Yom Tov and a verbatim quote. A quote that I heard once before... from him. A quote that I think left him, for the first time in many years of friendship, utterly speechless...

"Don't take things for granted. Who runs the government doesn't matter. The ability to live in such a country requires from us as Jews, at the very least, simple hakarat hatov." ©2021 Rabbi A. Leventhal. Rabbi Leventhal is the Executive Director of Lema'an Achai lemaanachai.org

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Infected Clothing

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Not only can *tzara'at* (a skin disease often translated as leprosy) make a person impure, it can make clothing impure as well. However, there is something unusual about an impure item of clothing. Once it becomes impure, no benefit may be derived from it. The source for this is *Vayikra* 13:52, which refers to "*tzara'at mam'eret*" ("a leprous malignancy") which must be burned. Our Sages expound: "*Ten bo me'erah* (destroy it) – do not derive benefit from it." The prohibition applies not only to an item of clothing that has been definitely identified as infected, but even to one that has been put aside as suspicious and is awaiting the *Kohen's* pronouncement. Whether or not it is prohibited to derive benefit depends on whether or not the clothing is considered to be leprous. An item which has been put aside is already defined as infected, even though it does not yet have to be burned.

In light of what we have written, the opinion of the Rambam in his Commentary on the Mishnah (*Nega'im* 11:12) is surprising.

The Rambam states that it is forbidden to derive benefit from an infected item of clothing because one must burn it. However, as we have seen, even during the time the garment is merely set aside, it is forbidden to derive benefit from it, even though it is not liable to destruction by fire! Furthermore, in order for a piece of clothing to be declared impure, it has to be at least the size of an olive. Yet one is forbidden to derive pleasure from an infected item of clothing even if it is



smaller than an olive. Thus, one can have an infected item which is not technically impure. Nevertheless, it is forbidden to derive benefit from it! It would seem then that despite the Rambam, it is not the obligation to burn the clothing which is responsible for the prohibition of deriving benefit from it.

There is an additional difficulty with the Rambam. For it is not prohibited to derive benefit from every item which must be burned. For example, *terumah* which has become impure must be burned, but in the meantime one may derive benefit from it. We are left with a question. It's not a big deal, but it is a challenge. Maybe you can come up with an explanation. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Kohein & the Metzora

The Tanchuma lists eleven different sins which could be one of the reasons for being stricken with *tzara'at*, a skin affliction often mistranslated as leprosy: (1) *avodah zara*, serving a strange god, (2) *chilul Hashem*, profaning Hashem, (3) *gilui arayot*, inappropriate sexual misconduct, (4) *g'neivot*, stealing, (5) *lashon hara*, speaking evil (gossiping), (6) *hamei'id eidut sheker*, causing lying testimony, (7) *dayan ham'kalkeil et hadin*, a judge confusing the law (perverting justice), (8) *sh'vuot shav*, a false or unnecessary oath, (9) *hanichnas b'tchum she'eino shelo*, trespassing, (10) *hachosheiv machsh'vot shel sheker*, one who thinks false thoughts, and (11) *ham'shalei'ach madanim bein achim*, one who causes strife between brothers. Some of these need more complete explanation but the ideas are similar. They are caused by arrogance and haughtiness and are highly unsociable behavior. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that these sins are the most serious that are spoken of in the Torah. Each is a sin between Man and his fellowman, a sin which causes extensive damage, and a sin which can cause lifelong regrets.

The Torah tells us, "If a person will have on the skin of his flesh a *s'eit* or a *sapachat* (shades of white discoloration), or *baheret*, spots, or a cloudy mark, and it will become a *tzara'at* affliction the skin of his flesh, he shall be brought to Aharon the Kohen or to one of his sons, the Kohanim. The Kohen shall look at the affliction on the skin of his flesh; if hair in the affliction has turned white, and the affliction's appearance is deeper than the skin of the flesh, it is a *tzara'at* affliction; the Kohen shall look at it and make him impure." There is a unique connection between the Kohanim and the person who is afflicted. HaRav Sorotzkin states that it would make more sense to consult a doctor since this is a disease of the flesh, yet the fact that this does not happen is proof that this is not a physical disease but a spiritual one. It is for that reason that a Kohein is consulted as this disease can only be cured by a

purification of the soul. This understanding answers another question of HaRav Sorotzkin. He asks why it was necessary to state Aharon's name and then "one of his sons the Kohanim." The Torah should have included him with his sons and simply said to bring the afflicted one to a Kohein. Aharon is the Chief Kohein, the expert "doctor" of the soul.

The Torah requires that the person who is afflicted be brought to the Kohein. Our Rabbis explain that the afflicted is even brought against his will. Later, in parashat Metzora, when the Torah discusses *tzara'at* in a house, still the owner of the house is the one who must appear before the Kohein. This may seem somewhat puzzling as it is the house which appears to be afflicted, not the owner of the house. HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that it is only the verdict of *tahor*, pure, or *tamei*, impure, which requires a Kohein. "(The afflicted) only becomes *tamei* or *tahor* when a Kohein ... proclaims the word *tamei* or *tahor* over him. But the examination and recognition of the affliction, if the Kohein is not experienced in such diagnosis, can be made by anybody who is sufficiently expert, and then the Kohein has to make the appropriate declaration *tamei* or *tahor* in accordance with such diagnosis." This emphasizes the importance of the Kohein in the entire procedure as his declaration is necessary and required even if he is inexperienced in such matters. At the same time, we should note that it does not require a doctor to be the one who advises the Kohein. The consultant can be anyone who is an expert in the colors and the size of the affliction which require a declaration of impurity.

It should also be noted that this declaration is not a judgment of law. The individual is not brought before a *Bet Din*, a Jewish Court. Many of the sins which are listed as part of the eleven sins which can cause *tzara'at* are punishable offenses in court. No witnesses are called, no testimony is taken, no references are present. In fact, the "trial" and the "judgment" have already taken place in the Heavenly Court. What is taking place before the Kohein is a confirmation of that judgment. The declaration will require an isolation period where the afflicted one will need to reflect on his flaws which caused him to sin and determine to correct those flaws which could cause him to continue such behavior. No damages are assessed and no fine is determined as many of these sins cause an infinite amount of damage which would make them impossible to calculate. One such sin is *lashon hara*, gossip, and its corollary *motzi shem ra*, defamation of character. Both cause damage far beyond our ability to measure.

The Or HaChaim discusses the difference between *lashon hara* and *motzi shem ra*. "A person who speaks negatively about his friend, even if it is true, is called a gossiper. One who speaks a lie against his friend is a defamer. Against both of these the Torah

says s'eit or baheret, s'eit for a defamer and baheret for a gossip." The Or HaChaim explains that the gossip who speaks the truth feels justified in telling others his "news" because it is the truth even though it is disgusting. The Or HaChaim continues by telling us that since there are different levels of gossip and defamation, the Torah gave us a third category of a color sign, sapachat, a different shade of white.

We have seen the different categories of sins and the importance of the evaluation before a Kohein. We have also discussed that this mark is a sign of a spiritual disease and the cure must be for the soul and not the body. We have seen that Aharon was mentioned first and separately since he was the ultimate healer of the soul. Yet there is another reason why Aharon is mentioned separately. Most of these sins are irreparable sins between a man and his neighbor. The damage is far-reaching and may continue for generations. These are the hardest sins from which to gain forgiveness. Aharon was known as an appeaser. He constantly went between two antagonists seeking a peaceful resolution of a dispute. He was adept at working out a compromise that satisfied both parties. Perhaps it was this quality that earned him the right to represent the people before Hashem when seeking forgiveness. In the rebellion of Korach, where Korach wished to replace Aharon as Kohein Gadol, accusing Moshe of nepotism, Aharon remained silent and only Moshe reacted.

We are no longer subject to the outward sign of tzara'at even though gossip and defamation are widespread among us. We no longer have Aharon, the great mediator. Yet it is incumbent for us to evaluate our actions regularly and to seek atonement for any gossip or slander. May we each strive to understand the hurt caused by gossip and slander, and may we learn to control our actions in the future. © 2021 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd if the appearance is not deeper than the skin, and no black hair is in it, the Kohain shall isolate the affliction for seven days." (Vayikra 13:31) What is Tzaraas? It is a physical disease which manifests due to a spiritual illness. A person who was guilty of one or more various sins, including murder, illicit relationships, and taking a false oath, but more likely arrogance, miserliness, and most commonly, Lashon Hara; being a gossip monger. The Midrash, seems to put the focus squarely on the last one, and the word Metzora is even similar to Motzi (shem) Ra, one who speaks evil.

Instead of seeking out a doctor, for this illness one sought out a Kohain. Instead of taking a medicine or putting on a cream, the cure for this disease came from inside. One could only be healed by repenting of

his ways and purifying his heart.

Much attention is given by the Torah to the skin and the hair on the body. Why are these items specifically tied to this disease? If we take a homiletic approach, we can learn some important lessons. The epidermis is the outermost layer of skin. It is the one we see when we look at someone. This layer produces keratin, which makes up hair and provides a protective layer in the epidermis.

The Metzora is one who until now has appeared healthy, but suddenly, his skin ceases to protect him from people finding out about what is inside him. If he is haughty or miserly, he may hide it, and secretly look down upon others or excuse his stinginess as a lack of available funds. Now, though, the natural protections are gone and Hashem wants everyone to know that he is not as pure as he may have seemed.

Why would Hashem do that? In order to force the person's hand, so that they work on themselves and choose to become better. The result of their internal work will again be visible on the outside, as their skin and hair will return to a normal, pure state. The fact that a Metzora lost that protection will be a motivator for him to mend his ways.

Interestingly, the Zohar tells us that Adam HaRishon's body was covered with a hard protective layer of keratin. When he sinned, he lost that protection and it only remains at the ends of our fingers, perhaps as a reminder. And yes, fingernails are also produced by the epidermis, just as the body hair and protective skin cells are. Perhaps this was the very first case of a person losing an external protection due to an internal flaw. But why, when Adam repented, did he not gain this layer back, as a Metzora's flesh returns to normal?

It may be because in Adam's case, the sin caused him to internalize the Yetzer Hara. Previously it had been an external force in Man, but now it was taken into the body and is unable to be removed. Instead, we maintain a constant struggle to be righteous and learn from our mistakes. What we now know, though, is that our protection comes not from any physical layers of hair, skin, wealth or power, but from our internal connection to our Creator and the humility and devotion required to maintain that relationship.

R' Naftoli Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin known by the acronym, Netziv, never went to the doctor when he was sick. Once, though, when he experienced a prolonged period of not feeling well, he acquiesced to his family's urging and let a doctor visit. After the exam, the doctor gave him a prescription and the Netziv thanked him. No sooner did the doctor leave than the Netziv tore up the scrip. "What are you doing?" asked his incredulous family.

The Netziv explained that instead of going to a doctor when something hurt him, he would think about which mitzvos are associated with that limb. He would then examine which of those mitzvos he has been lax

in and make an effort to repair his wrongdoing, thereby strengthening that body part.

However, this time he could not identify exactly which part of his body caused him to feel weak. Once the doctor identified it, he no longer needed he doctors medicine. He would now cure it the way he always cured his own ailment, through teshuva. – Source: revach.net © 2021 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

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 indescribable 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. ©2021 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

