

TIMELESS TORAH

PARSHAT TAZRIA-METZORA : THE STORY THAT SPEAKS TO US

The Power of the Tongue

The remarkable amount of space in the Torah dedicated to the technical details of the laws of *tzaraat* (a leprosy-like set of afflictions) can only urge us to seek out the underlying lessons that discussion of this affliction teaches us. Indeed, one opinion in the Gemara contends that, despite the Torah's extensive treatment of the *bayit hamenuha* (a house afflicted with *tzaraat*), this particular phenomenon never actually occurred. The entire parsha of *bayit hamenuha*, concludes this opinion, exists solely for us to derive spiritual benefit from learning about it.

The overarching trend through the teachings of our Sages is that *tzaraat* manifests itself as a consequence of speaking badly about other people — the transgressions of *lashon hara* (negative speech) *rechilus* (slander) and *motzi shem ra* (promulgating a bad name). The Gemara expresses this idea in numerous ways, but the basic source seems to be from an analysis of two verses in Parshat Ki Teitzei (Devarim 24:8-9). One verse there warns one to take note of a *tzaraat* lesion that appears on the skin; he or she may not remove it but must allow the Kohen to examine it and follow the procedure dictated in our parsha. The very next verse exhorts us to remember how Miriam, Moshe Rabbeinu's older sister, was afflicted with *tzaraat*, an episode that is related in Parshat Behaalotcha. Miriam's *tzaraat* was a punishment for her speaking negatively about her brother, Moshe, and the juxtaposition of these two verses indicates that this behaviour is the primary cause of *tzaraat*.

Thus, the lengthy and intricate parshiyot of Tazria-Metzora are meant to impress upon us the severity of negative speech. Possibly, suggests Rav Yisrael Salanter (Koenigsberg, d. 1883), this warning against *lashon hara* follows the laws of *kashrut* enumerated in last week's parsha to emphasize that one must be at least as careful about what leaves one's mouth as what enters it.

Jumping to Conclusions

On examination, however, the story of Miriam's *tzaraat* seems to be a poor paradigm for the sin of *lashon hara*. Looking through the verses in Parshat Behaalotcha (Bamidbar 12), one sees no indication of vindictiveness; Miriam was merely discussing with her brother Aharon why Moshe's attainment of prophecy meant that he had to separate from his wife. After all, she contended, we are also prophets, but we are nonetheless able to live normal family lives. Miriam's assumption that Moshe was on a similar level to his siblings was an error, and once this error had been demonstrated, she did not continue to question her brother's behaviour. This is a far cry from the virulent stories of slander that we normally associate with *lashon hara*. Moreover, Moshe, in his humility, would presumably not have minded this question being raised, and certainly not by Miriam, to whom he was indebted for having saved his life as a baby. How, then, does Miriam's *tzaraat* teach us to avoid negative speech?

Rabbi Yechezkel Weinfeld (Jerusalem, contemporary) explains that the key to addressing this observation is found in a



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powerful insight into the core trigger for lashon hara. Essentially, lashon hara is based on a judgment made about someone else, and in the vast majority of cases, this judgment is formed by jumping to conclusions. Miriam's transgression might not have been the worst case of *lashon hara*, but that only highlights the essence of what was in fact wrong about her behaviour - she made a judgement about her brother without considering carefully enough the full context.

This insight sheds light on a perplexing point later on in the parsha. The verse says that if one finds a *tzaraat* stain on the walls of their house, they must go to the Kohen and tell him, '**K'nega** nir'eh li babayit — What **appears** to be a *tzaraat* affliction has been found in my house (Vayikra 14:35)'. The Sages pick up on this interesting terminology and tell us that even if one is learned and knows beyond a doubt that this stain is actually *tzaraat*, he should refrain from saying this explicitly. Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi (Constantinople, d. 1525) is troubled by this. Even the most knowledgeable scholar is unable to render *tzaraat* impure by himself; the input of the Kohen is critical to this process. If so, why is the phrase '*k'nega nir'eh li*' unusual? He concludes that our Sages are pointing out the corrective behaviour that behoves one who speaks lashon hara when facing the consequences of their speech. When one finds *tzaraat*, they should avoid repeating their habit of jumping to conclusions and instead act with caution and humility, entertaining the possibility that what they are certain is an impure stain on their house might actually be harmless.

Blinkered Vision

How can we train ourselves to avoid this habit of judging others? A clue for this can be found in the verses that describe the culmination of Creation. When Hashem completed the Creation of the world, He looked back at 'all He had done and saw that it was exceedingly good' (Bereishit 1:31). Only because Hashem could see the entire existence, could He categorically say that it was good. Too often, we view our world with a blinkered vision and assume, incorrectly, that we have the full picture. This cannot be true — a human being never sees the full picture. When we fail to recognize this, we fall into the trap of making judgements based on presumptions. Such presumptions are more than likely to be negative.

A beautiful verse in Tehillim underscores this idea: '*Mi haish hechafetz chaim ohev yamim lir'ot tov* — Who is the person who desires life, loves days to see good' (Tehillim 34:13). One who wants to live must turn away from destructive thought patterns and see the good in the world around them. The negativity might scream out at us, but if we can focus ourselves on appreciating that our perception is inevitably restricted, we will be able to infuse positivity into both ourselves as well as our surroundings. In an ever more confusing world, may we merit to seek out and see that goodness, allowing it to inform every decision we make.

**Next Week: Acharei-Kedoshim
Sparks of Spirituality: Discovering
Kedusha in Everyday Existence**