

## Metzora

### THE POWER OF SPEECH

The theme of this week's Torah portion, Metzora, revolves around *tzaraat* – biblical leprosy. It's important to distinguish between biblical leprosy (which no longer occurs) and the modern disease we know as leprosy or Hansen's disease. While relatively rare, contemporary leprosy is a treatable skin infection. Biblical leprosy, on the other hand, is not a condition with a medical cure or treatment.

Maimonides explains that *tzaraat* is a purely spiritual phenomenon, illustrating his point with an extreme example from our parshah:

"And if the *tzaraat* has spread over the skin, whereby the *tzaraat* covers all the skin of the [person with the] lesion, from his head to his feet, wherever the eyes of the priest can see it, then the priest shall look [at it] and, behold! The *tzaraat* has covered all his flesh, he shall pronounce [the person with] the lesion clean. He has turned completely white; he is clean." (*Leviticus 13:12-13*)

Essentially, if a person develops a rash that we suspect might be *tzaraat*, but it covers their entire body, the priest must pronounce the individual ritually pure.



Credit: Rivka Korf Studio, Chabad.org

While medicine might classify this as a severe case of leprosy, *tzaraat* is not a medical matter; it does not require the attention of a dermatologist. Maimonides concludes that biblical leprosy is solely based on spirituality. It is miraculous. It is otherworldly. It is a Divine sign. It is a punishment sent from On High.

What was the Divine message to those afflicted with *tzaraat*? That their behavior was not as it should be. The primary misdeed that led to *tzaraat* was "*lashon hara*" – negative talk (lit. "evil tongue"). *Tzaraat* served as a punishment for gossiping or speaking ill of others, whether or not the gossip was true. Those who incessantly engaged in *lashon hara* developed leprosy on their bodies. If they learned

their lesson and changed their behavior, it ended there. If they persisted, the leprosy could spread to their clothing and, if left unchecked, even to the walls of their houses.

#### Adrift In the Wind

There's a profound story of a man who approached his rabbi seeking advice on the proper path to repentance after speaking *lashon hara*.

"Rabbi," the man began, "I must confess. I have engaged in *lashon hara*, and I'm ashamed to admit that I've done so extensively. How can I possibly atone for my sins?"

"Please go home," replied the rabbi, "and return with a feath-



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er pillow and a knife.” Confused but determined to follow the great rabbi’s instructions, the man did as he was told.

“Now cut open the pillow,” instructed the rabbi. “Walk outside and let the wind carry the feathers wherever they may go.” The man followed the instructions and the feathers flew everywhere.

“Now,” concluded the rabbi, “go and collect all of the feathers and put them back in the pillow; when you’ve done that, you will know that G-d has forgiven you.”

“But rabbi!” cried the man, “the feathers flew here, there, and everywhere! There’s no way I can get them all back into the pillow!”

“Exactly,” said the rabbi, “and such is the nature of one’s language! Unlike an object that can be returned to its owner, a word can never be retrieved once released from one’s mouth. The damage it does is impossible to undo.”

## Unintended Harm

So, what exactly constitutes *lashon hara*? All forbidden speech, including anything derogatory or damaging spoken against an individual, regardless of one’s intentions.

The Alter Rebbe, founder of Chabad, recounts the following story in Chapter 30 of Tanya:

The great Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi, redactor of the Mishnah, once examined a bill of divorce, and was displeased with the way it was written. When his son, Rabbi Shimon, defended the document’s validity, Rabbi Yehuda looked at him disapprovingly and maintained that such a document should not have been written in that way. In his defense, Rabbi Shimon stated, “I did not write it; Rabbi Yehuda Chaita wrote it.” His father responded, “Turn away from uttering this kind of malicious speech, this *lashon hara*!” (*Talmud, Bava Batra 164b*)

Rabbi Shimon clearly had no intention of speaking negatively about Rabbi Yehuda Chaita; he was merely defending himself. Nonetheless, his father reprimanded him. What he was essentially saying was, “All you needed to say was, ‘I didn’t do it.’ There was no need to disclose who did.”

## Elevate Yourself

Many people engage in *lashon hara* due to their own insecurities; when they feel insecure, they seek solace in belittling others. A profound principle that we must uphold and teach our children and our grandchildren is: Don’t elevate yourself

by putting others down; elevate yourself by elevating yourself.

When Rabbi Shalom DovBer, the Fifth Rebbe, and his brother Rabbi Zalman Aharon, known as “the Raza” were children, the Raza was shorter than his younger brother, which didn’t sit well with him.

One day, the Raza snuck up behind his brother and gently pushed him down, causing him to fall into a small pit. Standing over his brother, the Raza happily remarked that he was now the taller one. Their father, Rabbi Shmuel, the Fourth Rebbe, known as the Rebbe Maharash, witnessed the incident.

The Rebbe asked for a chair, instructed the Raza to stand on it, and asked him, “Who’s taller now?”

“I am!” answered the Raza enthusiastically.

“Indeed!” affirmed the Rebbe Maharash, “but now you understand that there’s no need to bring your brother down; you can simply elevate yourself.”

When we engage in *lashon hara*, we are attempting to elevate ourselves at the expense of others.



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## Packed Suitcases

A wise friend once shared with me that people can be placed into one of three distinct categories based on their topics of conversation.

The lowest category comprises those who talk about other people.

The next category consists of those who talk about “things.” Some people love to talk about their material possessions: their new car, new house, or the great vacation they just went on. “Look what I have, look what I bought, look what I got.”

Then there’s the highest category of people—those who discuss ideas.

We should always keep fresh Torah teachings in our minds, memories, and hearts. This way, even if we encounter a situation where people are engaging in *lashon hara*, we can redirect the conversation and say, “You know, I recently learned something very interesting,” or “I read something fascinating in a Torah book.”

The Rebbe once gave this advice to a young rabbinical student who was preparing for a stint as a “roving rabbi” in Chabad’s *Merkos Shlichus* program. The program dispatches hundreds of rabbinical students to small Jewish communities around the globe for Passover, during the summer, and for the High Holidays. Their mission is to meet with Jewish people and plant seeds of spirituality and inspiration wherever they go.

The Rebbe instructed this young man to always have a substantial amount of Torah wisdom on hand, ready to be shared with others. “Pack many Torah teachings into your suitcase,” instructed the Rebbe.

As we travel the road of life, what should we pack in our suitcases? Torah teachings. We should always have a Torah thought ready to share with others. It’s the best antidote to *lashon hara*.

## Self-Worship

Another character trait that should be avoided like a disease is anger. Our sages taught, “Anyone who becomes angry is like one who worships idols.” (*Maimonides, De’ot 2:3*) What is the connection between idolatry and anger? With idolatry, we worship an idol; with anger, we worship ourselves.

All too often, anger leads to verbal abuse and belittling of others. The destructive nature of this behavior cannot be overstated.

Unfortunately, many of us have encountered people who said very hurtful things to us. In the olden days kids were sometimes

told to “go in the corner and put on the ‘dunce cap’ because you’re a dunce.”

Verbal abuse is extremely destructive; we must take great care to avoid it. Instead, we should use life’s situations to elevate, inspire, and uplift those around us.

We all remember that wonderful parent, grandparent, uncle, aunt, teacher or principal who told us, “You can do it! I know you’re going to be great! I have high hopes and great expectations for you! You’re a smart young man. You’re a wise young lady.” These empowering words can make a lasting impact. Let us strive to be that person in someone else’s life.

## Irreparable Damage

A man with a terrible temper once sought advice from his rabbi on how to overcome this destructive behavior. The rabbi handed him a bag of nails and instructed him to hammer a nail into the wooden fence in his backyard each time he lost his temper. On the first day, the man hammered nearly two doz-



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en nails into the fence. As he gradually gained control over his temper in the following weeks, the corresponding number of nails that he hammered into the fence slowly decreased. He found that it was easier to control his temper than to drive those nails into the fence.

Finally, the day came when the man didn't lose his temper at all. Excitedly, he informed the rabbi of this achievement. The rabbi then suggested he remove a nail from the fence each day he kept his temper in check. Many days passed and the man was finally able to report to the rabbi that all the nails were gone.

The rabbi then led him to the fence. "You have done well, my friend," said the rabbi, "but look at the holes in the fence. The wood will never be the same. When you say things angrily, it leaves a scar just like this one. You can stab a man with a knife and withdraw it, but no matter how many times you apologize, the scar remains."

## A Painful Lesson

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838-1933), a renowned Talmudist, rabbi, and authority on Jewish law, better known as the "Chafetz Chaim" after the title of his book on *lashon hara*, was once traveling by train to

a Jewish community to give a lecture. During the trip, a man sat down next to him and struck up a conversation. When the Chafetz Chaim asked where he was headed, the man replied, "I'm going into town to hear the Chafetz Chaim speak. He's the greatest *tzaddik* (righteous person) in the Jewish world today."



**That night at the lecture, the man was shocked to realize that the person he had hit was none other than the Chafetz Chaim himself.**



Embarrassed by the praise, the Chafetz Chaim responded, "People tend to exaggerate his greatness. I know him very well and he's not that great." Enraged by this remark, the man slapped the Chafetz Chaim across the face.

That night at the lecture, the man was shocked to realize that the person he had hit was none other than the Chafetz Chaim himself. As soon as the lecture ended, he pleaded with the

Chafetz Chaim for forgiveness.

In response, the Chafetz Chaim simply smiled and said, "There's no need for forgiveness—you were defending me. In fact, you taught me a great lesson: I learned that not only should one not speak *lashon hara* about others, but one should also not speak badly about oneself."

The parshah of Metzora reminds us of the importance of being extremely sensitive to the feelings of others, which begins by ensuring that we always use the right words.

As we approach the holiday of Passover and gather around the Seder table with the Four Sons—the wise son, the wicked son, the simple son, and the son who does not even know how to ask—let us remember the power we hold in our speech. Let us use our words to educate, inspire, and uplift. With our speech, we can build greatness. Let us keep our insecurities in check and be mindful never to hurt others in our attempt to elevate ourselves.

May we all be blessed with a happy and kosher Passover, filled with elevating those around us. And may we merit the Ultimate Redemption from this last and final exile, with the coming of our righteous Moshiach, speedily in our days. Amen.

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Published by Chabad of the Valley. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from a sermon delivered by Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon in Encino, California in 2014 and broadcast on Chabad.org.

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*Life Lessons from the Parshah* is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley.

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