

GATED COMMUNITIES

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

This is the law of the metzora on the day of his purification: he shall be brought to the kohen. The kohen will go forth, out of the camp, and see that the nega of tzora'as has been healed...

Be'er Yosef: Who is going to whom? We understand that the metzora cannot be purified other than by the pronouncement of the kohen. Somehow, the two of them must meet up. The two phrases seem to contradict each other, however. Is the metzora brought to the kohen, or does the kohen pay a house call on the metzora? The Seforno has the two of them meet half way. The metzora, who has been banished from the camp, is brought to some place close to its limits where it will be convenient for the kohen to go out and examine him. Both phrases are thus true at the same time.

We could resolve the contradiction simply. Not every metzora must leave the camp. Yehoshua sanctified only walled cities with the sanctity of machaneh Yisrael.² Only metzora'im residing in those cities need to exile themselves to outside the city limits. Both phrases are therefore true, but in different circumstances. When a metzora hails from an unwalled city, nothing prevents him from being brought directly to the kohen. Should he reside in an ancient walled city, however, he is banished from the city, and cannot return until pronounced cured. The kohen must then go out of the city in order to meet the metzora.

We now confront a different question. Why would the Torah specify that the metzora be banished only from walled cities? The gemara³ takes a definite position on the reason for this punishment. The metzora was stricken with tzora'as because he spoke lashon hora.⁴ The toxic effect of such speech is to create friction between husband and wife, between a fellow and his friend. Because he disrupted social cohesion and distanced people from each other, the Torah punishes him by distancing him from people, and denying him the privilege of social interaction. The punishment fits the crime elegantly - but does not seem to allow for any distinction between cities with walls or without them!

We may find an answer in another passage in the gemara⁵, which reports on Hashem expressing His displeasure with the loose tongue. "All other limbs stand vertically; you lie flat. All others are external to Man's body; you have been sequestered internally. Moreover, I surrounded you with two walls, one of bone and one of flesh. â??What can He give to you, what can He add to you, deceitful tongue?"⁶ "

We can surmise that sending out the metzora specifically from walled cities genuinely amounts to a punishment of midah keneged midah. The metzora unleashed his tongue from a place whose two walls of bone and flesh (i.e. teeth and lips) tend to safeguard against unlicensed speech. By breaching those walls with lashon hora, he makes himself unworthy of living in cities enhanced with special holiness that they owe to their walls.

This approach will help us understand a difficult passage in the gemara⁷ regarding the period of the second beis hamikdosh. It relates the ominous signs of impending disaster in the last forty years of this Temple. The Yom Kippur lot for the goat inscribed "for Hashem" no longer consistently came up in the right hand of the kohen gadol when he plunged his hands into the ballot box. The crimson thread on the head of the second goat no longer turned white; the ner ma'aravi no longer continued to burn after the others had expired. The doors of the heichal opened on their own, until R. Yochanan ben Zakai scowled at them, saying, "Why do you bother frightening yourselves? I realize that you are ultimately going to be destroyed. This was already prophesied by Zecharyah ben Iddo."

With a single exception, all these signs represent some miraculous activity that regularly occurred in the beis hamikdosh, but now ceased, as the end drew near. The doors of the heichal - as reported in the same passage - were huge. They opened and closed with great difficulty, and emitted a deafening sound as they turned on their hinges. Opening on their own was miraculous. As some of the old miracles ceased, Hashem provided a new one! Why would this be?

The second beis hamikdosh was destroyed because of groundless enmity between people.⁸ The Chofetz Chaim⁹ takes this to mean lashon hora. Thus, it was the aveirah of lashon hora that caused the loss of the Second Temple.

Nefesh ha-Chaim¹⁰ notes that the primary mikdash and place of indwelling of the Shechinah is in Man himself. When this inner mikdash is defiled, the external edifice of the mikdash no longer functions. Its kedushah withdrawn, it only awaits a conqueror to set it afire.

Putting it all together, we realize that the second bayis was endangered by Am Yisrael's failure to maintaining the sanctity of the inner and outer mikdash by restraining their tongues within the wall Hashem assigned to them. To warn the people that their lashon hora would lead to the Temple's destruction, the door of the outer mikdash would breach the safeguarded perimeter of the Heichal by opening on their own. (R. Yochanan ben Zakai objected. What need did the doors have to go to such lengths? The navi Zecharyah had already warned the people! If they disregarded the navi, why would they pay attention to the doors?)

Using this theme of the tongue-encased-by-walls, we find new meaning in a passage in Berachos,¹¹ which instructs us to enter a shul "the space of two doors" before we begin davening. The Rishonim offer several explanations:¹² we should not sit all the way in the back, appearing ready to bolt

outside; we should pause a short while and compose our thoughts before beginning to daven; we should avoid the back rows that offer a distracting view of the area outside. The Bach, however, opines on the basis of a Yerushalmi, that a shul should have a vestibule in front of the main shul, so that people who enter literally must pass through two doors - the one from the street, and the one from the vestibule - before entering the shul proper.

The Bach explains that we do this to emphasize the wonderful privilege of tefilah. It is usually impossible for the common man to speak directly to the person at the top of the command structure. Generally, to beseech the king requires waiting in an anteroom, while some lesser official conveys the request. Hashem, however, allow us to enter the second, inner room. We turn this thought into shul architecture, by forcing everyone to pass through two doors.

Our approach provides another dimension to this practice. R. Yonoson Eybeschutz¹³ addresses our prefatory request before Shemonah Esreih - "Hashem, open our lips." He waxes lyrical in describing how Hashem places our tongues behind two levels of protection, not just to prevent lashon hora, but to help us reserve them for the holy purposes for which they were intended: for Torah, for tefilah, for other forms of avodas Hashem.

When we enter the two doors of a shul or beis medrash, we remind ourselves that we have arrived at a place where it is both safe and praiseworthy to remove the walls around our tongues, and to use them for what they were designed - to enhance the kavod of Hashem in this world.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Vayikra 14:2-3
 2. Tosfos Yom Tov, Kelim 1:7
 3. Arachin 16B
 4. Rashi, loc. cit.
 5. Arachin 15B
 6. Tehimlim 120:3
 7. Yoma 39B
 8. Yoma 9B
 9. Introduction to Sefer Chofetz Chaim
 10. Nefesh ha-Chaim 1:4, gloss
 11. Berachos 8A
 12. All of them cited in Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 90
 13. Ye'oros Devash 1
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