

THE FRUIT OF FOUL SPEECH

by Nechama Stampler

The Fruit of Foul Speech¹

The men who produced the evil report about the Land died in a plague before Hashem.

Rashi: The plague here means a special death appropriate to their sin. Measure for measure, their death mirrored their sin. Since they sinned with the tongue, their tongues elongated to their navels. From those stretched-out tongues exited worms, which then entered them through their navels.

Gur Aryeh: Do not think for a moment that Chazal simply paint a grisly picture of the death of people who misused the organ of speech. All the details come together as a single, integrated concept, typical of the great wisdom of Chazal.

The key may be that the earth is an analogue to Man. Both the earth and Man bear fruit. In the case of typical agriculture, various plants that are rooted in the ground send forth stems that further ramify and elongate, giving rise to branches. Something similar happens in the early development of each human being. He is created, in a sense, through growing out and away from his navel, the place where he is connected to his mother.

The produce of the land is called *tevuah*. That word is connected to one of the Torah's expressions for verbal communication: "I create the *niv*/ speech of the lips."² The connection is affirmed by the Radak in *Sefer HaShorashim*, and is simple to understand. As produce is the fruit of the earth, speech is the fruit that Man gives forth.

Think of how a tree grows. From a root structure, the tree develops, elongates. Every new area of growth produces yet other areas of growth. Everything on the tree seems to develop further, sending out new growth beyond - with one exception. If we consider the fruit the goal, so to speak, of the tree, we find the process of elongation arrested once it gets close to the end. Once the growth arrives at the structure that brings forth the fruit, we do not find any further elongation or ramification. All the growth seems oriented at delivering the fruit; the process of reaching out in all directions serves the cause of the fruit. Put simply, the body of the tree flourishes and expands; the fruit-structure narrowly produces within limits.

Now apply our analogy to speech. If words are the fruit, the tongue is the structure that houses and produces it. The organs that host the tongue and nurture it are comparable to the roots and

branches of the tree. It is within their nature to grow and develop; the growth and elongation of the tongue is particularly inappropriate, because it is supposed to be narrowly focused on producing the fruit, not in flourishing, like the other structures.

So far, we've described a tongue doing its job. The meraglim, however, changed the script. Their tongues took on a new function - dynamically flourishing, growing outside of the limits and boundaries of propriety, bursting forth with words that should never have been uttered. In other words, they turned the tongue into a flourisher, rather than a producer.

Human growth begins at the navel. The embryo sprouts, grows, flourishes, from there. If speech is the "fruit" of the human condition, then the distance between the navel and the tongue is the span between root and goal. When the meraglim so devastatingly mismanaged the power of speech, they reversed the roles of root and fruit, of flourisher and producer. They turned the tongue into a flourisher - which then flourished the exact distance ordinarily travelled between what should have been the root and the fruit. The tongue-flourisher now grew along the reverse route, stopping only at the navel, into which it injected its power.

Specifically, the tongue produced worms. Fruit that is still attached to its branch, trunk, and roots does not become wormy. When the fruit decays, worms begin to thrive. Decay usually does not occur when the fruit is meaningfully attached to the tree. When the meraglim turned their tongues into wild flourishers-without-limits, they altered the relationship between the tongue as producer and its ordinary support system. The tongue thus was denied its usual roots, allowing for decay. At the same time, a root system that cannot fulfill its design in support a producer loses its purpose. It, too, is open to decay - and thus became a habitat for the worms of the unruly tongue.

We have thus discovered that the image projected by Chazal is neither arbitrary or bizarre, but ripe with meaning. Unlike the words of the meraglim, those of Chazal are always precise, measured, on target - and full of Divine wisdom.

Sources:

1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Bamidbar 14:37; Nesivos Olam, Nesiv HaLashon, chap. 10
 2. Yeshayahu 57:19
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