

THE POWER OF SPEECH

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Tazria

The Power of Speech

This week's parashah introduces the laws of tzara'at, while next week's parashah describes the purification process from that ailment. Regarding this, R' Zvi Yehuda Kook z"l (1891-1982; rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Merkaz Harav) taught:

The Torah necessarily encompasses man's entire existence. Certainly the Torah relates to a normal, healthy person. The first part of the Book of Vayikra describes lofty spiritual levels-- the sacrifices and the dedication of the mishkan. But, the Torah is meant to direct a person, and the life of a typical person includes times of illness. In Parashot Tazria and Metzora we meet the Jew when he is in an unhealthy state; specifically, when he is spiritually unhealthy.

The unique aspect of the human being is his power of speech. Thus, on the verse (Bereishit 2:7), "And G-d blew into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living being," Onkelos comments, "He became a speaking spirit." Man's speech reveals his thoughts. Man has within him a special soul, and that soul's power reveals itself through speech. Also, man is a social creature, which is made possible by speech.

But, speech is a terrifying and horrible thing when used impurely. This is why Chazal speak so strongly of the evils of lashon hara. When one corrupts the power of speech, he corrupts the essence of the human being.

Chief among all illnesses are those which come from unhealthy speech. All other faults stem from there. When man is worthy, he radiates the light of Torah on his surroundings. When he is unworthy, there will (G-d forbid) be tzara'at in his house. (Ha'Torah Ha'go'ellet Vol. II p.134)

"A woman who will conceive and give birth . . ." (12:2)

What is added by mentioning that a woman conceives before she gives birth? asks Rav Mordechai

Ze'ev Margulies z"l (died 1893). This is obvious!

The Midrash Tanchuma states: "After G-d created the animals, birds, reptiles and insects, He created man. Similarly, as long as a baby is in the womb, G-d teaches him and tells him, 'Eat this; don't eat that. This is pure; that is not, etc...'" The message of the midrash, Rav Margulies explains, is that G-d's involvement with man begins in the womb, at the time of conception, and long before birth. Just as G-d took six days to create the animals, birds, reptiles, insects and everything else that man needs in his environment, so He takes nine months to prepare the baby for entry into the world. (Kol Haramaz)

"He [the metzora] is to call out, 'Tamei, tamei!'" (13:45)

The Gemara (Shabbat 67a) explains that the metzora must bring his suffering to the public's attention so others can pray for him. This, writes R' Moshe Sternbuch shlita (rabbi in Johannesburg, South Africa and Yerushalayim and author of several popular works) is the source for the custom that the congregation prays for those who are ill. However, R' Sternbuch adds, it appears from the Gemara that it is not enough for the congregation to know that someone is sick. In order to pray effectively, the congregation must know of the person's *suffering.*

Why does the Torah teach the idea of praying for others in the context of a metzora? R' Sternbuch suggests: Tzara'at is a punishment for speaking lashon hara. One who speaks lashon hara is separating himself from society. [As our Sages taught: A metzora's punishment is to sit alone outside the city's walls because his actions were anti-social, destroying marriages and friendships.] In contrast, prayer is most effective when it is done as part of a group. That is why Shemoneh Esrei is worded in the plural. It is fitting that the metzora, who behaved in an anti-social way, should be made to recognize the benefits of being part of society. (Ta'am Va'da'at)

R' Shalom Noach Berezovsky z"l (1911-2000; the Slonimer Rebbe) observes: Tzara'at existed only in the era of the prophets, for it was a form of direct communication from G-d to let a person know that he had sinned. In a way, it was a sign of G-d's love for man. It's bad enough when G-d distances Himself from us, but it's far worse when He distances himself and we don't even realize it. This is the meaning of Tehilim 51:14, "Cast me not from Your Presence, and take not Your ruach hakodesh / Divine inspiration from me." If You must cast me from Your Presence, at least leave in me the ability to recognize that You are distant from me. (Netivot Shalom)

Pesach

"We cried out to Hashem . . ." (Devarim 26:6; quoted in the Haggadah)

R' Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson z"l (Lubavitcher Rebbe; died 1950) once commented: People mistakenly think, "If only we had a Moshe Rabbeinu today, he would rescue us from our exile." Those people are wrong. The redemption is not delayed because we don't have a Moshe Rabbeinu. Even in Egypt, Hashem sent the redeemer only after the people cried out to Him. If we would cry out to Hashem similarly, He would send our redeemer. (Quoted in Otzrot Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot)

"Hashem brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand--this refers to the plague of devver / epidemic--and with an outstretched arm-- this refers to the sword . . ." (Devarim 26:8, as expounded in the Haggadah)

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) comments that "a mighty hand" alludes to those plagues that occurred because G-d distanced himself from man, while "an outstretched arm" refers to those plagues in which G-d actively struck man. (Gevurot Hashem ch. 56)

R' Aharon Lopiansky shlita (rosh yeshiva of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington) explains these two types of Divine "behaviors":

G-d brought the plagues upon the Egyptians not only to punish them, but to teach both them and us. There are two erroneous viewpoints that the plagues were designed to counter. Some philosophers assert that G-d does not exist at all, while others acknowledge that He exists and that He is the Creator, but claim that once He finished creation, He can no longer intervene in the world's affairs. To counter the first belief, G-d sometimes pulls back from the world and says, "Look what would happen if I did not exist--the world would fill with darkness and evil." This is the meaning of the verse (Eichah 3:38), "From the mouth of the Most High will not emanate evil." When evil strikes man, it's not because G-d did it, but because He distanced Himself from man, creating a spiritual vacuum that was filled by evil.

To counter the second belief--that G-d is subservient to the laws of nature--He sometimes intervenes directly in the world. We read about the drowning of the Egyptians in the sea (Shemot 15:1), "A horse with its rider He hurled into the sea." Why is it important that the Egyptians were riding on horses when they drowned? A soldier mounted on his powerful steed is a symbol of man's might. Thus, this verse reminds us that G-d is mightier still. Nothing can stop Him from intervening in man's affairs when He chooses. (Heard from R' Lopiansky 26 Adar 5763)

Memoirs

R' Yom Tov Lipman Heller z"l (1578-1654) is best known as the author of the Mishnah commentary Tosafot Yom Tov. In 1629, while serving as rabbi of Prague, he was imprisoned on a false charge of writing anti-Christian statements. That experience is the subject of his memoir "Megillat Eivah"--literally, "The Scroll of Hatred." The following is the opening of that work:

There was woe and crying, wailing and mourning; I became the subject of lamentation, on the night preceding the third day [Monday night], the fifth day of the fourth month [Tammuz], when the Hand of Hashem was directed against me, though not with anger, as I will tell briefly. [My story is] as true as the Torah is.

If I wanted to relate the entire experience, all the troubles that found me in those days and at that time, many pages would not suffice. But, I will relate it briefly and will write it down for my descendants forever. For all of you, dear readers, this story can open your eyes so that you will fear the Honorable and Awesome G-d, for you will see that no person is safe from calamity, as our Sages have said. But, likewise, one may ever give up hope of receiving G-d's compassion. Even when a sharp sword is at a person's throat, he should not refrain from prayer [Berachot 10a]. Our Sages are true and their words are righteous and true.

[After describing his distinguished rabbinical career, which included serving as Chief Rabbi of Nikolsburg, Moravia; Vienna, Austria; and Prague, Bohemia, as well as listing the many popular sefarim he authored and mentioning his fabulous wealth, with which he supported an entire yeshiva, R' Heller writes:] I did not relate all of this in order to glorify myself; rather, it is to publicize how all this greatness disappeared from me in a moment. I rose to greatness gradually, as I have related, while my descent to the lowest level was sudden. May the Name of Hashem be blessed for everything! This is a reminder of [the fate of] Yerushalayim--the greatness of Yisrael was achieved step-by-step, while the destruction happened suddenly. - To be continued -

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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