

# WE HAVE THE MANUAL FOR LIFE!

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"This shall be the law of the Metzora..." [14:2]*

A "metzora" was a person afflicted with tzaraas, a spiritual ailment that looked like leprosy -- but which could also strike a person's clothing or house. Our Sages said (Medrash Tehillim and Yalkut Shimoni): "HaMetzora: HaMotzi Ra." The Metzora was "[he] who put forth evil." They taught us that it came to a person who spoke Lashon Hara, who gossiped and spoke evil about others.

There is a story in the Medrash concerning a traveling medicine salesman, who came through various towns around Tzipori and called out, "who would like to purchase the potion of life?"

One of the Sages who lived there was Rebbe Yannai. Rebbe Yannai heard the salesman, and went over to him and said, "bring your bag here -- sell me some!"

The salesman replied, "you don't need it, neither you nor those like you." [Rebbe Yannai was a Torah scholar, and Torah provides its own protection.]

Nonetheless, Rebbe Yannai pressed him, until the salesman brought out a book of Psalms. And he showed him Psalm 52:14, "Who is the man who desires life, who loves days, to see good?" Asked the salesman, "What are the next verses? 'Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking falsehood. Turn away from evil and do good, desire peace and pursue it!'"

Rebbe Yannai said, "all the days of my life I read this verse, and I did not understand its simple meaning -- until this salesman came and taught it to me."

Rebbe Yannai believed that the verse referred to the world which is truly good, the World to Come. Guard your Tongue, and you will be rewarded -- which, of course, is true. But the potion salesman, who came with all sorts of medications, taught him that guarding your tongue works in the "here and now." It's good medicine!

Honestly, I understood this as a gift from Heaven, a reward for not gossiping. We see in the Torah that G-d promises to lengthen the lives of those who honor their father and mother (Exodus 20:12), and I thought that this was similar.

The Kochav MiYaakov explains that even this is not all it means. Think, he says, about what gossip causes: fights, hatred, animosity -- things which quite literally harm the health of a person, which shorten his life.

The wisdom of the Torah isn't just trying to tell us how to get a good seat in Heaven. The Torah is called Toras Chayim, Instructions for Life. A recent book began: "we're all flying on this big blue spaceship, which has no instruction manual." But it does -- and we have it.

Just yesterday a reporter called me, concerning an upcoming article about religion on the Internet. Someone had told him that the Internet was forcing clergy to make religion "more relevant." It had to affect people's day-to-day lives, he said, or they wouldn't frequent religious Web sites.

I told him that I really couldn't respond -- Judaism is so hands-on that there's nothing to change. Judaism is all about learning and doing. As the Kochav MiYaakov writes, guarding your tongue is not only a mitzvah, which will be rewarded in the World to Come, but a simple medicine, something which improves the health of a person and extends his life.

People who try to "make Judaism more relevant" don't know what Judaism has! Judaism is about taking the lessons and applying them to new situations. Judaism is about making our daily lives more G-dly -- and happier, and longer, at the same time.