

NIPPING THE QUIP

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

This week, the Torah reading is comprised of two parshiyos combined: Tazria and Metzora. Both of these parshiyos deal extensively with the laws of tzaraas - a medieval skin disease oft translated as "leprosy." This is a common misconception which unfortunately is incorrect. Leprosy is strictly a physical illness. By contrast, tzaraas is viewed by Chazal, our Sages, not as a typical physical phenomenon, but rather as the physical manifestation of a spiritual malady. Normally, we do not equate one's suffering or well-being as a direct sign of their character and integrity. Though it is true that, *"There is no suffering unless there is sin"* (Masecha Shabbos 55a), all the same, under normal circumstances it is beyond our comprehension to try and directly attribute a person's maladies to his behaviour. This is the exclusive realm of Hashem alone - it is highly dangerous and imprudent for humans to try and put together a puzzle when, for us, most of the pieces are missing.

Tzaraas is the one exception to this rule. One who contracts tzaraas - again this is not common leprosy, but rather a skin ailment with very specific symptoms which the Kohanim were qualified to assess - is being sent a very powerful message from Above: Mend your ways!

Specifically, tzaraas is a punishment for the sin of lashon hara - gossip and slander. This, explain mefarshim, is why the metzora (one who contracts tzaraas) must be quarantined and sent outside of the Jewish quarters: Not, as common understanding has it, to prevent others from contracting his disease. For as we have explained, tzaraas is not an ordinary disease which can be transferred through germs and bacteria. Rather, his quarantine comes to teach him a powerful lesson: Gossip is antisocial behaviour. Since, by gossiping, the metzora brings dissention and strife into his community, his punishment, appropriately, is to be separated from that very community.

When examined under the penetrating light of the Torah's wisdom, the age-old adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me," fades and withers. It simply isn't true. Words - spoken, written, even those implied by a simple gesture or body movement - can become powerful tools of destruction in ways that physical violence could never dream of. Shlomo haMelech put it succinctly (MishleiProverbs 18:21), "Death and life are within the tongue." Perhaps, then, it would be more appropriate to say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will kill me."

We have all experienced pain in our lives, both physical and emotional. Think back for a moment to the most physically painful experience you have ever experienced. Are your hairs standing on end?

Likely not. Although at the time physical pain is disruptive to our lives, and at times seems unbearable, we can usually look back at it with a degree of equanimity. It is something which we have gone through, and now it is over. But think back to the most embarrassing experience in your life. Think back to a time when you made an absolute fool of yourself. If you could have at the time, you likely would have dug a hole and buried yourself. Do you feel your ears turning red? Are the same feelings of shame and humiliation you felt then beginning to re-manifest themselves once again? Likely they are. The pain of humiliation is something that people can spend their entire lives trying to live down.

How awesomely powerful speech is! Do we really realize, when we open up our mouths to idly gossip about our neighbour/fellow congregant/classmate/boss/co-worker/etc., how far-reaching the effects of our words may be? Do we contemplate the pain he/she would feel if they knew what I was saying now? For they will, almost surely, find out. Is it fair to besmirch a person who's not even present to defend himself? And is there anything more cowardly than to attack someone when they are defenceless to stand up for themselves? Lives have been ruined so that - heaven forbid - no one be left out of hearing the latest gossip. After all, this is all in the name of honesty and truthfulness and freedom of speech.

Gossip - true or otherwise - is a sin. It is counter-constructive, brings no good to anyone, and causes discord and dissention within the community. Sometimes it seems that as much as we hear and learn about this simple truth, it just doesn't sink in. Sometimes I wish I could have a sign that would flash before my eyes every time I opened my mouth to speak: Gossip is a sin. I suppose tzaraas was just such a sign. Believe me, all it would take is one bout of tzaraas and a person would think twice before again opening his mouth to gossip idly. No other sin has the ill-fated merit of having a disease created specifically for it. This gives us an inkling about the graveness of lashon hara.

One, says the Vilna Gaon, who desired to speak, who had a great quip on the tip of his tongue, yet restrained himself and did not speak - his reward is immeasurable. It is greater, he says, than fasting for many days. Fasting can be healthy. Passing up on the fleeting, momentary pleasure of gossiping is something so healthy and nourishing for our neshamos (souls) - we can't even fathom it. If we all just nip the quip, our communities, and the world, will be a better, healthier place to live.

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