

... SPEAKING OF LOSHON HARA...

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d told Moshe, "Tell the Children of Israel that if a woman conceives and gives birth ..." (Vayikra 12:1-2)

Whenever the issue of giving birth is addressed, it must be pointed out that the term "giving birth" can have different meanings, in the context of G-d's master plan. The reason for saying this is obvious: there are people who, want as they may and try as they might, are incapable of having children. Why one family is able to have children, and another is not, or why a family who did not want to have children, or more children, is blessed with offspring whereas a couple who would seem to make ideal parents can't even have one child, is a matter of Divine Providence. And even though the Talmud states:

The world was made for procreation. (Arachin 2b)

--elsewhere in the Talmud, it is clear that for us, the main issue for which we are questioned on the Final Day of Judgment is: Did you TRY to have children. Whether we were successful will have been totally in the hands of G-d, and for reasons known only to Him (Shabbos 31a).

Just how central this mitzvah of TRYING to have children is can be seen from the episode of King Chizkiah:

... What did The Holy One, Blessed is He, do? He brought suffering to Chizkiah, and then told Yeshayahu, "Go and visit the sick," as it says, "In those days Chizkiah became ill to the point of death; and Yeshayahu son of Amotz, the prophet came and said to him, 'So says Hashem, L-rd of Hosts, "Command your house for you shall die and not live." (Yeshayahu 38:1).' ... "Why do I deserve such a severe punishment?" asked Chizkiah. "Because," answered Yeshayahu, "you have not had children." "But I saw through prophecy that I would have evil children." "What business have you with kavshei Rachmanah (mysteries of G-d)?" (Brochos 10a)

In other words, the prophet told Chizkiah, what our children become, and why they become this, is a different issue altogether. Our job is to try to bring children into the world, and then raise them according to the best of our abilities.

As a side point, the Talmud finds an allusion to the period of time for a full-term pregnancy in the

Hebrew word, "harayon" (heh, raish, yud, vav, nun)--which also means "idea." The numerical value of "harayon" is equal to 271 (5+200+10+6+50), which is equal to nine full months (Niddah 38a).

According to the Talmud, the period of gestation can be broken into two periods. The first period consists of the initial forty days. It is during this period that the child lives soul-less (which is why it is acceptable to pray regarding the gender of the fetus during this time). At forty days, the child receives either a male or female Neshamah, and therefore changing the gender of the fetus at this time would require a miracle that we don't usually request.

(When Leah prayed that her upcoming seventh son--Yosef--would become a girl instead--Dinah--it was during the first 40 days of pregnancy; Brochos 60a. This is why Dinah's birth is mentioned in the Torah, even though many daughters were born to the Leah previously; Bereishis 30:21.)

The Talmud attributes different parts of the baby's existence to a partnership between G-d, the husband, and the wife, as follows ...

The Rabbis taught: There are three partners in the creation of a person: The Holy One, Blessed is He, the father, and the mother. The white seed results in the bones, tendons, nails, brain, and the white of the eye. The red seed results in the skin, flesh, hair, and the black of the eye. The Holy One, Blessed is He provides the Ruach and Neshamah, facial appearance, eyesight, hearing, speech, ability to walk, understanding and seichel. When it comes time to leave this world, G-d takes His part back and leaves behind the father's and the mother's. (Niddah 31a)

... And pondered the following question:

How does the fetus form? From the head, as the verse says, "... From the stomach of my mother you drew me ..." (Tehillim 71:6). Abba Shaul said: >From the belly-button, and from there roots go out in each direction ... (Yoma 85a)

At this point, the discussion can take a Kabbalistic leap up to another, more esoteric understanding of the birth process--one that is fitting at a time that we count the omer, which corresponds to the Sefiros as well.

To begin with, it should be pointed out that when G-d made man "in His image," it meant more than with the ability to make free-will choices. According to the Zohar, it means that the man's physical structure actually mimics the spiritual formation of creation vis-a-vis the Sefiros. Thus, much of the terminology applied to man is applied to the spiritual lights as well, including terms such as "pregnancy" and "birth."

In fact, even the terms "Abba" (Father) and "Imma" (Mother) are used with reference to the Sefiros as well, as is the concept of "zivug" (which means "soul-mate"). There are ten sefiros (Keser, Chochmah ... Malchus) that govern all of physical existence. Kabbalistically, they act as spiritual "filters" to bring the light of Ain Sof--G-d--down to us mortal beings, so that we can exist and benefit from it.

Just like each part of the body is both a piece of the whole, yet, on another level, is a world unto itself, so too is it with the Sefiros. In fact, though Chochmah and Binah are the ninth and eighth sefirah in the general system of ten, when they are looked at in terms of their own sub-worlds of ten sefiros each, they are then called "Abba" and "Imma" respectively.

Furthermore, when they "face" each other and light passes from Chochmah to Binah, it is called a "zivug," and the result is the birth of something called "Da'as"--godly knowledge. The creation of Da'as is the entire point of man's existence here on earth!

The analogy goes much further, and is the subject of the deepest and most profound Kabbalistic discussions about creation and the running of the universe. However, this is as far as we need to go to appreciate that when the Talmud states:

The world was made for procreation. (Arachin 2b)

"having children" represents far more than the physical continuation of the physical species; it also represents the continuation of the spiritual world as well, which ultimately, a person's learning of Torah and good deeds affect the most.

Shabbos Day:

... On the seventh day the priest will examine the patch, and if it did not spread over the skin nor penetrate it, then the priest will declare him ritually clean; he must wash his clothes and become ritually clean. If the bald patch spread over the skin after his being pronounced clean, then the priest will examine him, and if the patch has spread then the priest need not search for gold-colored hair--he is ritually unclean. (Vayikra 13:34-36)

"Need not search ... There are two: 1.) '... need not search for gold-colored hair--he is ritually unclean,' 2.) '... he shall not check whether it is a good one or bad one'; because he did not distinguish between good and bad, therefore the kohen will not distinguish and he is impure ..." (Ba'al HaTurim 13:36)

This obscure Ba'al HaTurim is typical. We know that the Ba'al HaTurim is not merely pointing out a rare occurrence of a phrase, but is, in fact, making a not-so-obvious connection between two seemingly different issues. It is a connection that we would probably not have made, but now that the Ba'al HaTurim has done so, we have to ask, "What is the connection?"

The second verse to which the Ba'al HaTurim refers deals with tithes, and comes at the end of Sefer Vayikra:

Regarding animal tithes from cattle or sheep, the tenth one to pass under the rod is consecrated to G-d; he shall not check whether it is a good one or bad one, nor shall he exchange it ... (Vayikra 27:32-33)

As Rashi explains, one might have thought that tithes taken from our produce and animals should be the very best we can offer, which means examining each tithe for its imperfections. However, the Torah says, no--whatever passes under the rod as the tenth animal, that is to be the tithe, for better or for worse.

However, what connection does the Ba'al HaTurim find between a mitzvah not to distinguish between animals ready to be tithed, and a mitzvah not to examine the skin plague on one affected by tzara'as?

One connection may be the following. What is the difference between letting the tenth animal be whatever it may be, and "interfering" in the process and determining for ourselves what it will be? Divine Providence.

"But everything is a matter of Divine Providence," you will tell me. "Have we not pointed out several times," you will add, "that the Talmud says that a finger does not go up in the air if it is not first ordained in Heaven ... and that the Midrash says that even a blade of grass has a 'mazel' directing its growth?"

Yes, that is very true. However, we human beings tend to feel Divine Providence more when we are "forced" by the events themselves to take a "back seat" to events that govern our lives, which, usually, we are not permitted to do. However, once-in-a-while, we are told to do specifically this, in order to provide perspective on life, and to remind ourselves that, though we were made in the "image of G-d," we are not G-d Himself.

"Partners" with G-d we may be sometimes, but never can we fool ourselves into thinking that we are G-d Himself, or act as if we are.

As we have mentioned before, one of the deeper problems involved with speaking loshon hara--derogatory speech--is that one plays G-d (Perceptions: Tazria 5758). When one speaks derogatorily about someone, he is making the following assumptions:

1.) What I saw and understood is exactly what occurred and as it is meant to be understood. 2.) There is no logical, moral basis for what was committed; the act was the result of negligence. 3.) The person committing the act is fully responsible for what he did, and could have avoided the situation if he had wanted to. 4.) What I have witnessed is not a test for me, to see if I can judge others to the side of merit, but merely the result of someone else's Divine Providence to which I just happen to be privy.

In other words, a person, when speaking loshon hara, assumes a lot--in fact, too much--about himself. His ability to use free-will to influence the outcome of events gets the better of him, and takes him beyond the boundaries of one only made in the image of G-d. Therefore, by forbidding the kohen to enter into the picture and use his judgment to influence the spiritual outcome of the person with tzara'as, the speaker of loshon hara is re-introduced to Divine Providence in the most obvious

way. It is as if to say to him,

"Make no mistake about this--G-d is talking to you personally, and He is telling you to back off!"

Playing G-d was also part of the problem that led to Adam's eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. By eating from the forbidden tree against G-d's command, Adam had, in fact, acted as G-d Himself (as we all do to some degree when we commit sins). And, it is not coincidental that it was the snake, the symbol of loshon hara, who used loshon hara to convince Adam and Chava to go against G-d in the pursuit of knowing the difference between good and evil:

The serpent told the woman, "You will not die! G-d knows that once you eat from it [Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil], your eyes will be opened, and you will be like G-d, knowing good and evil." (Bereishis 3:4-5)

Thus, had Adam not taken the words of the snake for face value, but had, in fact, delved into them to distinguish between the good and evil in what he was saying, then we would all still be in the Garden of Eden today. Had the first man and woman viewed their predicament as a function of Divine Providence, as a test for them, then they might have approached the situation with more caution, and would have re-considered eating the forbidden fruit.

The same is true of the loshon hara-speaker. For not distinguishing between the good and bad in what he was viewing, and taking everything at face value, he spoke loshon hara. And measure-for-measure, the Ba'al HaTurim alludes, that is exactly the way with which the Torah deals with him.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Parashas Metzora

This is the law for every leprous mark, bald patch, leprous mark in a garment or house; And blotch, discoloration (Vela-se'es v'lasapachas) or spot ... (Vayikra 14:54)

There is leprosy, and then there is leprosy. Well, actually, the truth is, it is not so. Though tza'aras is often translated as "leprosy," it is not merely a skin disease like the typical form of leprosy. Tza'aras, as opposed to leprosy, is a physical manifestation of a direct spiritual reaction to a specific spiritual flaw, as the following demonstrates:

Anyone who thinks highly of himself, in the end, will be reduced in stature, as it says, "Vela-se'es v'la-sapachas" (blotch, discoloration ...)--"se'es" always means "high" ... and "sapachas" always means "unimportant." (Sotah 5a)

What the Talmud means is that the word "se'es" comes from the word "nasa" which means "raised." This is because this blotch appeared to be higher than the rest of the skin, even though physically, it was not (Sifra). Since the skin is somewhat translucent, an opaque white patch can have the

appearance of being elevated.

The word "sapachas," according to some, means a secondary or external symptom (HaKesav V'HaKabbalah); hence the connection to the Talmud's interpretation of "unimportant." In 13:6, it is even seen as a sign of healing from the more serious se'es form of tza'aras.

The Talmud's warning is in keeping with what we said in the previous parshah, that loshon hara is the result of assuming too much about oneself. Here, the Talmud is finding an allusion to this reality of life in G-d's world in the words for "blotch" and "discoloration."

However, the Talmud is not merely pointing out a bad character trait, one which leads, in the end, to tza'aras. The Talmud is also warning us that pride eventually interferes with our whole raison d'être, which is to learn Torah. This we learn from the following:

Torah is not in heaven ... (Devarim 30:12) This means that Torah will not be found in someone who elevates himself. (Eiruvim 55a)

This is one very important reason why G-d cares so much about the loshon hara we speak, and why He inflicts tza'aras on one who speaks it. The attitude behind loshon hara threatens to undermine the very Torah-foundation of the Jew.

Melave Malkah:

This is the law for every leprous mark, bald patch, leprous mark in a garment or house; And blotch, discoloration or spot [on the skin], to allow decisions to be made regarding the day one is declared ritually clean and the day one is declared ritually unclean. This is the law of leprosy. (Vayikra 14:54-57)

In Hebrew the term is "makah b'patish,"--the "final hammer blow." In English, a comparable term might be "the last nail in the coffin." Whichever phrase one uses, each can be applied to the following statement regarding loshon hara:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, only gave Torah to the Jewish people to prevent them from speaking loshon hara. Who wants to acquire the World-to-Come ... even cheaply, as Dovid [HaMelech] said, ... 'Who is the one desiring [eternal] life? ... The one who prevents his lips from speaking loshon hara ...' (Tehillim 34:14) And what should he do? 'May these lying lips be silenced ...' (Tehillim 31:19). From what should they be prevented? 'How abundant is Your goodness that You have hidden away from those who fear You ...' (Ibid. 20). (Yalkut)

According to the Radak, King David is warning those who speak with arrogance and contempt about righteous people to whom bad things happen. Such people, says the Radak, fail to appreciate the awesome goodness G-d has in store for the righteous in the Next World, which will make all

goodness in This World pale by comparison (to say the least). (The truth is, according to the Zohar, such goodness will begin to manifest itself long before that time as well, when the righteous are resurrected first after the period of Moshiach.)

However, why does the Midrash connect this to the first part of its statement, that G-d only gave the Torah to prevent the Jewish people from engaging in loshon hara? All we learn from the latter part of the Midrash is that people who speak loshon hara, specifically about righteous people who suffer in This World, are making a big enough mistake to cost them their portion in the World-to-Come. Does this prove that the Torah's prime mission is to dampen one's drive to speak derogatorily about other people in general?

Yes--because the Torah's prime mission is to help us maximize our portion in the World-to-Come (even though the Mishnah tells us not to serve G-d/learn Torah for that expressed purpose; Pirkei Avos 1:3).

How does Torah do this? By widening our perspective on life, and by making us aware of the "Big Picture." What is the "Big Picture"? It is a perspective on life that includes for more than what is only transpiring at the moment. It includes every single moment in history--past, present, and future--on the way to the fulfillment of G-d's master plan for creation. It is the "Big Picture," also known as the "Aitz HaChaim" (Tree of Life), that allows us to escape the limited perspective of our own personal "slice-of-time," to rise above it, in order to see the events of today in the context of G-d's master plan.

Hence, the one who speaks loshon hara is, in fact, spiritually short-sighted. It is a limited spiritual and intellectual perspective that results in the speaking of loshon hara, which is why the punishment is tzara'as. After all, the infliction itself and the subsequent treatment of the one who has been stricken is so terribly confining that the Metzora ends up being incarcerated in his present moment of time--measure-for-measure.

Hence, though the physical infliction of tzara'as may be a forgotten reality today, the spiritual reality of tzara'as is not. For, nothing can be more debilitating, more blinding and limiting than a perspective that takes in only what is viewed in the immediate vicinity of the person's range of vision. In the case of the attitude that leads to tzara'as, the malady and the punishment end being one and the same thing.

May we merit to learn the lesson on paper, and avoid learning it through real life, and merit life in the World-to-Come.

Have a great Shabbos,

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