

SHABBOS HAGADOL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

G-d told Moshe, "This is the law of the leper on the day he is to be declared ritually clean." (Vayikra 14:1-2)

This year Shabbos HaGadol falls on Erev Pesach, so many say the Shabbos HaGadol Drush this Shabbos.

Actually, this parshah is an excellent discussion of Pesach. Pesach represents all that we are meant to become. The Metzora represents just the opposite. The primary cause of tzora'as was loshon hara, derogatory speech about another with no Torah purpose in mind. It is a verbal condemnation that can also include hints, whereas Pesach (PEH SACH), the mouth that spoke, celebrates the holiness of speech.

Bris Milah, of course, means "Covenant of the Word," even though it is performed on another part of the body. However, it symbolizes the control a Jew is meant to exercise in every aspect of his life, to channel his spiritual energy in the service of G-d. G-d interfered in history to miraculously redeem the descendants of Avraham in order for them to teach this concept to the world and to implement it.

Thus, the Talmud speaks of bris crus l'sefasayim - a covenant made regarding the lips:

Rebi Yochanan said: From where do we know that this is a covenant made with the lips? It says, "Avraham said to his lads, 'Stay here with the donkey while I and the lad go there, and we will bow down and return to you' " (Bereishis 22:5). (Moed Katan 18a)

It says, "we will bow down and return to you," and so it was: they both returned. (Rashi)

Elsewhere the Talmud speaks about the importance of one's mouth matching what is in his heart. This is obviously an issue of integrity, for as the Talmud states, the seal of G-d is Emes (Truth). But it is about more than truth, for:

G-d formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils a living soul, and the man became a living spirit. (Bereishis 2:7)

A living spirit: A speaking spirit. (Onkeles)

Thus, the Talmud states:

Rebi Elazar said: Every man was created to toil, as it says, "Because man was made to toil" (Iyov 5:7). Now, I do not know if that means to toil through speech or in actual labor; however, once it says, "A toiling soul toils for him, for his mouth compels him" (Mishlei 16:26), I know that a person was created to toil with his mouth. I do not know though if this means to toil in Torah or just in normal conversation. However, once it says, "This Torah should not leave your mouth" (Yehoshua 1: 8), I know that man was created to toil in Torah [through speech]. (Sanhedrin 99b)

Rava said: Anyone who speaks of non-holy matters (Rashi: childishly and light-headedly) has transgressed a positive commandment, as it says, "And speak of them" (Devarim 6:7) - them (Rashi: words of Torah), and not other words. (Yoma 19b)

Anyone who speaks distastefully will earn a negative decree from Heaven, even if they have seventy years of merits in their favor. (Kesuvos 8b)

And, let us not forget that Creation was the result of speech, and the letter Peh which means mouth, in a Sefer Torah alludes to this because the negative space inside the letter is in the shape of a Bais, the first letter of the Torah and of Bereishis.

Thus, we learn from a metzora how speech can be the source of death, for a metzora is one of the four people the Talmud considers dead even while alive (Nedarim 64b). However, we learn from Pesach how speech is the source of life and freedom, and apparently, the difference between the two is not always so readily available.

SHABBOS DAY:

G-d said, "My spirit that is upon you and My words that I have placed in your mouth . . ." (Yeshayahu 59:21)

Everything is min HaShamayim - from Heaven (Brochos 34b; Chullin 7b). A person does not live a second longer than G-d wills it, does not lift a finger if G-d does not sanction it, and does not even have a thought if G-d didn't put it there in the first place. Nothing exists beyond G-d, and therefore everything is, by necessity, part of G-d, including our personal thoughts.

What is amazing about life is the way it can look even though just the opposite is true. My thoughts seem personal only to me, and my body, barring any illness, G-d forbid, seems to respond to my will. (However, if you end up sleeping on your arm for a while and wake up to find the blood circulation cut off a bit, you can get a sense of how one's will is not enough to guarantee bodily movement.) Everything seems so instantaneous giving the impression that there is a direct connection between a person's will and the action that results from it. It all seems to happen in real time.

In truth, what is really going on is that after the person decides to move, let's say, his right arm, a request goes to Heaven for that arm to move. Then G-d commands that the arm may move as per the will of the person, so that he can accomplish things, so that life can give the impression of independence. This way a person has to work on seeing all aspects of life as a gift from G-d and a

function of His will.

Hence, G-d puts His words into everyone's mouth, but there is a difference.

Imagine being at a banquet in honor of the king and you accidentally yknock over your glass of wine. Embarrassed, you look around for something to wipe up the spill, and after checking out a closet the only thing you can find is a cloak. Assuming that no one will miss the cloak while you send it out for dry cleaning the next day, you wipe up the wine from the table, and promptly stuff it into your bag for the dry cleaners.

All of a sudden, the king gets up from his table and heads for the same closet. You are curious, so you follow him at a distance and you go white in the face when the king turns to his steward and asks,

"Where is that cloak of mine? Did I not just put my cloak in this closet before the banquet?"

Now, as bad as the spill seemed to have been, using the king's favorite cloak to wipe it up is far worse. Spilling the wine was accidental, but using someone else's garment to clean it up is abusive. And, just as you consider the fiasco, the steward notices the cloak sticking out a bit from your bag, and reaches over to pull the rest of it out of the bag right before the king's very eyes, red wine stains and all. It is then that you realize that not only have you misused the king's garment, but you have misused the king himself!

You are probably thinking to yourself, "Wow! No one should ever know from such embarrassment!" However, the truth is, we are guilty of the same offense on a daily, if not momentary, basis. For, as G-d told Moshe Rabbeinu:

G-d said to him, "Who made man's mouth? Who makes the dumb, or the deaf, or the open-eyed, or the blind? Am not I G-d? Therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you should say." (Shemos 4:11-12)

This lesson was not exclusive to Moshe Rabbeinu alone. It was a message for all of mankind, and at the very least, for the rest of the Jewish people. There were many aspects to this message, but one of the most important aspects was: watch what you say. Or, more accurately, watch what you make ME say through your mouth. Can you imagine? A person who speaks abusively is really taking the holy cloak of the King of Kings and dragging it through the depths of impurity, forcing G-d, so-to-speak, to speak in such a vulgar way!

Wow!

"I didn't know that!" you say. "I wasn't even aware that G-d was in my mouth, so-to-speak, when I let myself say those things!"

No? Then you are really still a slave to the Egyptians in need of a personal Peh Sach. The Jews escaped the Egyptians by the Red Sea at a place called Pi Hachiros (the Mouth of Freedom), and it

seems that we need to escape all over again. Indeed, the Egyptians made us work b'pharech - b'peh rach (with a soft mouth). Pharaoh (Peh Ra) - the evil mouth himself was behind it all, and if we're going to escape once and for all, we're going to have to fulfill the covenant of the lips.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

When a person is afflicted with leprosy his clothing must be torn, and he is not permitted to take a haircut. He must cover his head to his lips, and call out "Unclean! Unclean!" (Vayikra 13:45)

And why must he cover his head until his lips? Because that is the issue: the lips. A person can think this or think that, but once his thoughts pass over his lips they became encased in reality, engraved in stone, so- to-speak. There can be regret, and there can be teshuvah to rectify what was said, but it does not erase the fact that it was never said. Indeed, using his mouth to proclaim his spiritual status (the metzora had a spiritually-dirty mouth) is one of the initial stages of cleansing.

Why is leprosy the punishment? Why is the flesh attacked? Because, as G-d has said:

"My Spirit will not struggle with man forever. He is but flesh, and his days will be only 120 years." (Bereishis 6:3)

There is another name for flesh according to Kabbalah: Kesones Ohr (Clothing of Skin - Ayin-Vav-Raish) that we have spoken about many times before. It is also called Mishcha d'Chivya (Clothing of the Snake) because he was the one who caused the transformation from Kesones Ohr (Clothing of Light - Aleph-Vav-Raish) to Clothing of Skin. Thus, the only animal to shed his skin is the snake, measure-for-measure.

And, as we know from Moshe's interaction with G-d on Mt. Sinai, the snake's profession is loшон hara:

And he threw it to the earth and it became a snake. (Shemos 4:3)

This was an indication to him that he had slandered the Jewish people . . . and that he had made the snake's occupation his own. (Rashi)

Indeed, the Talmud also equates the speaker of loшон hara to the snake:

Raish Lakish asked, "Why does it say, 'If the snake is permitted to bite before it is charmed, there is no point in having the charmer' (Koheles 10:11)? In the future all the animals will come to the snake and say, 'The lion preys and eats, the wolf tears and eats, but you, what pleasure do you derive?' He will answer them, 'What pleasure does the one who speaks loшон hara have?' " (Arachin 14b)

In other words, like the snake, one who speaks loшон hara sends his venom into the victim but derives no concrete benefit from doing so. It is pure damage for the sake of damage - a very Amalekian approach to life! Thus, the flesh is attacked because it had the most dramatic result from listening to the loшон hara of the snake, and therefore that is the punishment for following in the

ways of the snake, who also symbolized Pharaoh.

Indeed, the Hebrew word for lips is sefasayim (Sin-Peh-Tav-YUD-MEM) and for Egypt it is Mitzrayim (Mem-Tzaddi-Raishi-YUD-MEM). In each case, the Yud-Mem, whose gematria is 50, stands for the Nun-Sha'arei Binah, the Torah knowledge that allows a person to relate to G-d on the highest level possible for a human. However, Mem-Tzaddi-Raish spells "meitzer," which means "constrict", because that is what Egypt did: constrict G-dly knowledge to sever the connection between the Jewish people and G-d.

However, lips symbolize openness to the Nun Sha'arei Binah because what comes forth from one's mouth determines to what extent the Fifty Gates of Understanding one is connected. Speaking loshon hara, or any unholy speech for that matter, is a quick ticket back to Mitzrayim, back into exile, for both the individual and the Divine Presence that wishes to make known its words through the person's mouth.

MELAVE MALKAH:

When your son asks you in the future, "What is this about?" tell him, "Through force G-d brought us out from Egypt from the house of slavery . . ." (Shemos 13:14)

Thus, even if a person finds himself alone at the Seder and he is thoroughly familiar with all aspects of it, he is still obligated to verbalize what is written there. The Haggadah, from the word that means speak, is a lesson in speech. It is speech therapy of a spiritual nature that not only makes us speak about the redemption of the Jews of the past, but that which allows us to achieve our own freedom through speech at the same time.

In Western society, it is interesting that the word freedom is very much associated with speech, as if what you CAN say determines the extent to which you are free in that society. And how right they are about that. However, what they are WRONG about is what you SHOULD be able to say.

Many people think that freedom of speech means being able to say whatever it is they FEEL like saying when they FEEL like saying it. But where does the feeling come from in the first place? From you or from the yetzer hara (the evil inclination)?

In fact, there is a constant battle going on over your mouth between G-d and the yetzer hara, and your mind is the battleground. Obviously, G-d could step in and obliterate the yetzer hara if He wanted to, but G-d wants loyal lips which implies a mouth that was handed over into the service of G-d willingly, as a function of the host's own understanding of what is right and wrong.

However, there is no neutral ground: if the mouth is not being used for holy purposes, it is being used for unholy purposes. It is hard to speak up on behalf of Truth and very easy to say what first comes to one's mind . . . straight from the mind of the yetzer hara. If so, then who is really calling the shots, and who really has freedom of speech, especially if one is unaware of the existence of the yetzer hara in the first place?

Ultimately the fight over the mouth is between the body and the soul, and speech is the scorekeeper. The body is materialistic, and when it controls the mouth then speech is materialistic; conversation can be about so much that means so little in the ultimate sense. The soul, on the other hand, is spiritual and when it controls the mouth about topics that make the greatest difference to life, then speech is spiritual, both in the short- run and long-run.

Unfortunately, no one knows this better than the yetzer hara. Just look at the marketing and advertising industries and how they train us, the customer, to speak in certain ways about certain things, knowing that ultimately we grow into what we speak about. There's nothing like speech to reinforce a way of thinking.

But what is the ultimate test of freedom? When this posuk can apply to a person:

G-d said, "My spirit that is upon you and My words that I have placed in your mouth . . ." (Yeshayahu 59:21)

For, the flow of Divine light comes directly through the soul, and once the soul has secured the use of the mouth, then the light is free to flow down through the person, and what results is a tremendous revelation of truth through the person's speech. That is the basis of Torah Sh'b'al Peh (the Oral Law). When G-d's words can be placed into the person's mouth, then the person knows he has achieved true and eternal freedom.

May we all merit to reach this great level and the freedom that comes with it, fulfilling our mission as a light unto nations.

Good Shabbos and Chag Kosher v'Samayach,
PW

Text

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