

SHEMIRAS HALASHON AND PESACH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This shall be the law of the leper on the day of his cleansing: he shall be brought to the priest." (Vayikra 14:2)

When you think of the kind of person who might be plagued by tzara'as, you might think of someone who has a difficult time keeping gossip to the him- or herself. Great people, especially if they are spiritually great people, do not get tzara'as because quite simply they do not do anything to deserve it.

For the most part, that is probably true. However, one of the most famous cases of tzara'as in history was the case of Miriam, Moshe Rabbeinu's sister. She had spoken loshon hara about her brother and THE Gadol HaDor of all history as mentioned at the end of Parashas BeHa'alosecha.

Even though she was directly involved in the birth of Moshe Rabbeinu himself by advising her parents to remarry in spite of Pharaoh's decree to drown all male babies, she received no preferential treatment. And, even though what she said was for the benefit of another, her sister-in-law Tziporah, she still had to go through the entire treatment of a metzora including living outside the entire camp for one week. How humiliating for her.

There is a message in this. In fact, it reminds me of a section of the Talmud which I will excerpt here:

Our Rabbis taught: The poor, the rich, and the evil will come before the [heavenly] court. They will ask the poor, "Why have you not occupied yourself with the Torah?" If he says, "I was poor and worried about my sustenance," they will say to him, "Were you poorer than Hillel?" It was reported about Hillel the Elder that every day he used to work and earn one tropaik, half of which he would give to the guard at the House of Learning, the other half being spent for his food and for that of his family. One day he found nothing to earn and the guard at the House of Learning would not permit him to enter. He climbed up and sat upon the skylight to hear the words of the living God from the mouth of Shemayah and Avtalion . . . To the rich man they will say, "Why have you not occupied yourself with the Torah?" If he says, "I was rich and occupied with my possessions," they will say to him, "Were you richer than Rebi Elazar?" It was reported about Rebi Elazar bar Charsom that his father left him a thousand cities on the continent and corresponding to this a thousand boats on the sea. Every day he would take a sack of flour on his shoulder and go from city to city and from province to province to study the Torah . . . To the evil person they will say, "Why have you not occupied yourself with the Torah?" If he says, "I was handsome and bothered with passion," they will

say to him, "Were you more handsome than Yosef?" It was told of Yosef HaTzaddik that the wife of Potiphar every day endeavored to entice him with words, and the garments she put on for him in the morning she did not wear in the evening, and those she had put on in the evening she did not wear in the morning . . . Thus [the example of] Hillel condemns the poor, [the example of] Rebi Elazar bar Charsom condemns the rich, and Yosef HaTzaddik condemns the evil. (Yoma 35b)

We could add to this list, perhaps, Miriam the righteous, prophetess, and servant of the Jewish people. When they ask the loшон hara speaker, "Why were you not more careful with what you said and avoid loшон hara?" If her or she answers, "I didn't think it was loшон hara! I spoke it for altruistic reasons! It was for the benefit of others!" they will answer, "Were you more altruistic than Miriam? Were you as concerned about the well-being of another as she was?"

This is a warning not to speak loшон hara, commanding us to remember the terrible punishment that Miriam received [even though she was] a righteous prophetess, and she spoke only about her brother and only privately with her brother, not in public, so that Moshe himself would not be embarrassed . . . But despite these good intentions, she was punished. How much more so must we be careful never to speak loшон hara. (Ramban, Devarim 24:9).

As an "expert" loшон hara speaker (which is loшон hara on myself), I will confess how easy it is to fall prey to the yetzer hara to speak it. When it comes to some sins, if you are a decent person, it usually requires somewhat of a negative change of lifestyle to do them. They are just so "out there" that it is hard to go to sleep at night with a clear conscience after having done them, so we don't.

Loshon hara, however, can be seamlessly woven into the fabric of everyday conversation that you can go to bed at night without even knowing that you spoke it. Indeed, sometimes it is easiest to speak it while discussing truly important issues when there might be a halachic justification for saying some things, but not others.

When becoming afflicted with tzara'as was a real issue it was easier to be more cautious about the cause of it. It was not something you could deal with by privately going to a doctor or taking some meds. There was no secret operation a person could have at some private clinic to get rid of it before others knew you had it. There was but one path to leaving the state of a Metzora, and it wasn't by crossing state lines.

Rather, as described in this week's parshah, it was a process, one that involved a kohen, isolation, hair removal, and sacrifices. Even Miriam who epitomized self-sacrifice for the Jewish people and a modest lifestyle was forced to endure it in order to return to her place among the rest of the nation.

The real problem is what we think about speech itself. Everyone agrees that speech is an important attribute of being human and would not want to do without it. But, how many people see it as one of the holiest activities in which a human being can engage? How many people see what comes out of their mouth as being a defining factor of the value of their very existence?

Here's a tip for anyone interested in curbing their speaking of loshon hara. Before you say anything that might be loshon hara, say one word: Pesach. ">Pesach?" you might be asking yourselves right now. *"What does Pesach have to do with loshon hara?"*

Everything, as the Zohar says:

From a man's mouth you can tell what he is. (Zohar, Bamidbar 193)

As the Arizal explains, Pesach is a combination of two words: peh and sach, which mean the "mouth that spoke." At first that seems to be irrelevant because the holiday seems to have nothing to do with speech until we recall that it has everything to do with speech. An example is the first dialogue between God and Moshe Rabbeinu about saving the Jewish people.

Moshe said to God, "I beseech You, God. I am not a man of words, neither from yesterday nor from the day before yesterday, nor from the time You have spoken to Your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue." But God said to him, "Who gave man a mouth, or who makes [one] dumb or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, God? So now, go! I will be with your mouth, and I will tell you what to say." (Shemos 4:10-12)

Another example is the main antagonist, Pharaoh, whose Hebrew name can be read: peh ra'ah—evil mouth. Furthermore:

The Egyptians made the Children of Israel serve b'pharech—with rigor. (Shemos 1:13)

Rebi Elazar said: "Bepharech" means "with a soft mouth" . . . (Sotah 11b)

And let's not forget that when all was said and done, God told Moshe:

Speak to the Children of Israel, and let them turn back and encamp in front of Pi HaChiros—the mouth of freedom . . . (Shemos 14:2)

No wonder Moshe Rabbeinu was heavily criticized by God for speaking loshon hara about the Jewish people:

Moshe answered and said, "They will not believe me, nor listen to my voice; they will say that God has not appeared to me." God said to him, "What is in your hand?" He said, "A staff." He told him, "Throw it to the ground." He threw it to the ground and it became a snake, and Moshe ran away from it . . . (Shemos 4:1)

This indicated to him that he had spoken loshon hara about the Jewish people, and that he had imitated the trade of the serpent. (Rashi)

It also explains a very perplexing account in the Torah in which Moshe Rabbeinu almost died, by a snake no less, on his way down to save the Jewish people. Apparently, he had delayed the Bris Milah of his son:

It happened along the way to the Inn that God met him and wanted to kill him. Tzipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and threw it at his feet, and said, "You are a bridegroom of blood to me!" She loosened her hold of him and said, "You are a bridegroom of blood, because of circumcisions." (Shemos 4:24)

The angel became a serpent and swallowed him from his head to his thigh, and then spit him out again, and then swallowed him from his legs to the place [of Bris Milah]. Tzipporah thereby understood that it had happened on account of the delay in performing Bris Milah on her son. (Rashi)

After all, the literal translation of Bris Milah is "covenant of the word." Thus, as I said earlier, if you want to remember not to speak loshon hara just say the word "Pesach" before you speak. It was to avoid speaking loshon hara that we were freed from Egyptian slavery at the beginning of Jewish history. As we will see next week, b"H, it will be in the merit of not speaking loshon hara that we will survive to be redeemed at the end of Jewish history.

It's not for naught that we spend the entire Seder speaking.

Text

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