

# BATTLING THE SERPENT

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

This week's Parsha describes the affliction of Tzaraas (leprosy). We are told that Tzaraas was an external manifestation of G-d's displeasure with someone for speaking Lashon Harah (slander). In the realm of divine justice, there is a fundamental principle termed "measure for a measure"; meaning, the punishment fits the crime. Does Tzaraas as the consequence for slander fit the principle of measure for a measure?

Slander is an insidious, cowardly, and craven way to harm someone else. Hiding behind a veil of self-righteousness, concern, and friendship the perpetrator launches his or her sneak attack. The attack leaves no visible damage on the body of the victim and the intended victim usually never knows where the attack came from. Almost always the damage to the victim includes some degree of social ostracization and humiliation.

(Note that this was the exact crime of the Nachash (Serpent) in Gan Eden (Paradise). His attack against Adam and Chava was cowardly, insidious, and veiled behind self-righteousness and friendship. The Nachash's attack resulted in Adam and Chava being ostracized / banished from Paradise and subject to death.)

In response to the crime of Lashon Harah, G-d designed the perfect punishment. The criminal would be afflicted externally with a Tzaraas blemish. The blemish could not be hidden and had to be shown to a Kohain (priest). If the Kohain determined the blemish to be Tzaraas, the individual was forced to leave the community and was temporarily branded as a Metzora - a leper. If he encountered someone, he would have to announce himself to that person as a Metzora. Reentering the norms of societal life demanded that the Metzora undergo a purification process culminating in a public appearance at the Bais Hamikdash (the Holy Temple in Jerusalem).

Although unspoken, we can assume that everyone was thinking that the reason for the Leper's affliction was his or her having spoken Lashon Hara. In essence the Metzora / speaker of slander was subject to the same "punishment" as the victims of his slander.

Although there are many examples of slanders insidiousness and the harm Lashon Hara leaves in its audible wake, I will share with you an epiphany I had four years ago following one of the murderous terrorists bombings at the Machaneh Yehudah market in Yerushalayim mid April, 2002.

Please understand that the situation in Eretz Yisroel and in the United States is troubling at best. We live in dangerous times. Israel is in a constant state of war even when they celebrate the momentary

reprieves of overt terrorism. The enemy hides behind a world media led campaign of deliberate misinformation and has zero leadership of note or value. America is at war and is battling terror on every side from without while at the same time battling despondency, confusion, cowardice, misinformation from within. What should be obvious to all is constantly being attacked by an ill directed and misguided media and political process. Where loyalty and strength should be supporting the troops abroad and our President, political self-centeredness and divisiveness reigns supreme. We lack clarity of vision, leadership, and the means of properly communicating those ideals to the nation and world.

As I drove carpool and listened to the news that Friday four years ago, I was saddened by the all too familiar details of another inhuman suicide attack. Once again the market at Machaneh Yehudah had been targeted for death and destruction as families hurried to prepare for Shabbos. In one explosive ignoble flash, families and lives were forever changed and another infamous moment was engraved in the annals and hearts of our people.

Along with the sadness came disgust at the media's reporting of the incident at the attempt to somehow rationalize and balance the horror. I was disgusted because the report was followed by an "on the scene report by our correspondent stationed right outside Jennin." (At the time the IDF had undertaken a major incursion into Jennin in the hope of forcing Arafat's hand and stemming the flow of terror.) The reporter related that the residents of Jennin were reporting "untold atrocities" being perpetrated by IDF soldiers and officers. These included the wanton torture and execution of civilians and the hurried cover-up burials of innocent victims by the Israelis.

The station then asked their "on the scene reporter" to respond to the statement by Arab and PLO spokespersons that this latest incursion into the "occupied territories" was creating a "whole new generation of would be suicide bombers." The reporter responded in an emotionally charged voice, (as I recollect) "What else do you think? Of course! The recent attacks and massacres of Palestinians have engendered hatred among thousands of youth who until now had not been touched by the occupation..."

The reporter must have realized how nonsensical the contrast and how unbalanced the response. She then added that the Israelis were claiming that no atrocities have been perpetrated and that the only people intentionally killed were PLO gunmen who died in gun battles with Israeli soldiers. Of course, the PLO called for international observers to oversee the removal and burial of the dead - but Israel refused. The reporter concluded, "Why would Israel refuse if there was nothing to cover-up?"

As a seeming afterthought, the reporter stated that Israel had always engaged in the collection and burial of enemy gunmen after which, whenever possible, the bodies were returned to their towns and families. (Of course, the reporter failed to mention that in contrast to the IDF's caring for the dead and dying the Palestinians engage in constant mutilation and desecration of the Israeli dead.)

My disgust was overwhelming. Israel had embarked on a courageous and dangerous mission. As part of that mission their soldiers were placed in mortal danger to minimize Arab civilian casualties. The battle in Jennin as is the case in all populated areas was being fought house-to-house and hand-to-hand. The IDF's casualties were mounting so that the enemies would not. Israel did not "blanket bomb" the Palestinians hoping to destroy enemy strongholds and protect the ground troops. Israel did not engage in that luxury even though they had the firepower to do so. Israel did not do so although every other nation and government would have done so, including our own.

We even heard that when Israeli soldiers were rotated from battle and given leave to return home, they emptied their backpacks and pockets of all rations and money and gave them to the civilian Palestinians.

One of the reporters at the time stated that ambulances were having a difficult time getting to the wounded, dying, and dead, because soldiers were searching them for hidden explosives and terrorists. The reporter stated that holding back an ambulance is against the Geneva Convention; however, it was understandable given the fact that explosives had been discovered in the ambulances. She then added, "And it's not only the Red Crescent ambulance being restricted. Red Mogen David ambulances are also attempting to reach Arab wounded and are also being restricted by the unfortunate events."

How many of you heard that Red Mogen David ambulances had attempted reaching the Palestinian wounded and dying? How many of you heard that our soldiers gave away their remaining rations and Shekels to the unfortunate victims of Arafat's cowardice and inhumanity? How recently have you heard repeated that upon hearing the news of 9-11, the Palestinians danced in the streets? How often was that fact reported since 9-11? How recently have you heard repeated that during the Gulf War Arafat and the Palestinians openly sided with Saddam Hussein?

Dear Friends, beware of the media serpent. World media uses words to confuse and complicate the unalterable truths of reality. Their intentions are insidious and cowardly. They refuse to confront history, and they ignore facts. Instead, they hide behind the veil of their own bias and assumed morality. Their words are destructive and their words can and do kill.

Israel is fighting a righteous war. Israel is behaving in a self-sacrificing manner that is beyond heroic and is beloved to G-d. Their conduct is a sanctification of His name to highest degree. Do not despair and do not give in! Be proud and stand tall!

Likewise, regarding our President and our troops in Iran. Do not allow a destructively biased media or political process to confuse the truth with select facts. To see the greater picture is to be like G-d and at this time we must all try to be G-d-like. All facts must be considered regardless of initial reasons and information. A margin of error exists in every human plan that demands of the decision makers to be flexible and ready to do whatever is necessary to accomplish the goal. Whether it is building a new home, planning a vacation, writing an essay, or planning a menu, we rightfully make

allowances for the vagrancies of time circumstance, and mortality. To do any less is unrealistic and foolish. Yet, in waging this new world-war of good against terror, the many self-proclaimed seekers of truth make zero allowances for error.

It is amazing the travesties we engage in and sanction under the all allowing blanket of democracy. As much as truth needs criticism truth must also ignore self-hatred disguised as criticism. Our President has returned nobility and purpose to his office and we stand taller and prouder because of it. I personally hope that he stays the course of his decision for he too sanctifies G-d's name as do the men and women of our armed forces. They deserve much better than a media's betrayal perpetrated under the guise of freedom of speech.

Do not be silent! Anyone you can speak to, write to, fax to, or e-mail must be contacted. It is our right and privilege to live in a country that provides the freedom for us to verbally defend our people. That right and freedom must be used in defense of Israel and America! Do not be lazy! To not be indifferent! Let the President know and let Israel know that there is truth in strength as there is strength in truth.

As a community we have strength in numbers and we have the power to affect change. Share your ideas with others. Do not be shy or modest when you fight on behalf of goodness and truth. It is an even greater Mitzvah to motivate others to be involved than being involved yourself! When your friends see your enthusiastic involvement, leadership and persistence they will be moved! It will make a difference! There is a time and a place for modesty; this is not one of those times.

By the way, I am not talking about personal honor. Everyone who has ever worked for the greater good and benefit of the community knows that there is always more frustration than honor in communal work. If it is honor you seek, trust me that the time and effort is not worth the 15 seconds.

Do not delay! Every day the situation is getting worse and we must respond! If we do not respond now we fail ourselves and we fail our people.

Everyone must get involved! It is not enough to be momentarily encouraged to take action. Those moments wear off all too quickly and pass on into nothingness. Motivation and intention can only be sustained by concerted effort and sacrifice.

Ignore the media and spread the truth. The blemish of media Lashon Harah has hurt Israel and America; however, we do not trust the media or depend upon them. We only trust and depend upon G-d! There is a much bigger picture out there that many fear. The way to combat the fear is to stand for truth and oppose the Loshon Harah.

Iyar 5, 1948 to 2004 (Reprinted from Rabbi's Notebook 3:38)

The State of Israel is an event of unparalleled importance. Since the destruction of the second Bais Hamikdash we have been a nation without a land. True, we never stopped davening for our return to the land; however, for 2,000 years G-d did not agree to our tears and prayers. Fifty-six years ago, G-

d deemed us worthy of returning to our home. Maybe because we had offered 6,000,000 pure and blameless burnt offerings. Maybe because G-d's pitcher of tears is nearing full. Maybe because the supplications of the Avos and Imahos had been joined by a chorus of 6 million more voices singing His praises and demanding His love. I don't know why we finally merited seeing the realization of our Tefilos. However, as Rav Kook Zt'l writes, "The establishment of the State of Israel allowed the Jewish people to once again become a nation. In the Golah (exile) we are individual Jews. However, our purpose is to be a Holy Nation, a light unto the word. This can not be done when we are scattered all over the world under the authority of the other nations. It can only be accomplished when we are together in our Holy Land as a Nation." (As heard from a shiur by Rav Shabbtai Rappaport)

Rav Eliyahu Kitov writes, "In the year 5708, on the 5th of Iyar, there arose men of the seed of Yakov, and they stood upon the soil of the Holy Land and declared, "This land upon which we dwell and cling to with all our might belongs to us, to us alone, and to our children afterwards forever! No sovereignty or rule shall prevail in this land save that of her sons, the children of Israel, who are reclaiming their stolen inheritance. Let them all come from the four corners of the earth and inherit their eternal possession. When you see people of Israel who are thankful for all the good, but who still pray for G-d's redemption to be complete, join them! But if you see people of Israel whose hearts are divided and who are unable to recognize the goodness that has been bequeathed them, pray for them to be granted clarity of vision to see G-d's salvation, and for yourself to be rescued from the blindness and ingratitude into which they have fallen. Let your mouth be filled with song and praise to G-d for what He did, for what He does, and for what He will do..."

This Shabbos, it is incumbent upon us to proclaim to ourselves and our children that we see the miracles of G-d that "are with us daily; evening, morning, and afternoon." The problems that beset our beloved State of Israel, internally and externally, are complex and apparent; however, her existence is still the single greatest revelation of G-d's love and protection since the second Bais Hamikdash. (Possibly since the time of Purim)

Often, within the majestic tapestry of history, the true greatness of G-d's love for us is lost. We can all either recall or have studied the great moments of our modern miracle: The establishment of the state; the breath taking revelation of the Six Day War; the unbelievable rekindling of a generations desire to do Teshuva and return to the ways of their ancestors; the fears of that fateful Yom Kippur; the pain and anguish of our war in Lebanon; the hopes and often disappointments for a seemingly impossible peace, and our ongoing battle against the horrors of terrorism. Within such a whirlwind of earth shattering front-page events we tend to forget the true miracle that is Eretz Yisroel.

Let me share with you the simple joys of reveling in G-d's revealed presence in a land whose Kedusha (sanctity) is as real as the smell of Angel's freshly baked bread.

To touch and even kiss the stones of the Kotel. To walk the streets of Yerushalayim and know in the

depths of your soul that you have come home. To stand at the corner of Rechov Strauss and Malchei Yisroel on Erev Shabbos (Friday) and wonder, "Where did all these Jews come from?" To ride a bus and see the full spectrum of our people sitting shoulder to shoulder - some touching and some doing their very best not to!

How many of us have been to Israel to visit our children who are learning in Yeshivos and Seminaries in a manner that 35 years ago was considered extraordinary and unique? Can anyone determine the changes that have resulted from two generations of Torah study within the shadow of Yerushalayim's walls? To have walked through the ruins of Masada, floated in the Dead Sea, swam in the Kineret, hiked the paths of Ein Gedi, snorkeled in the Sinai, and traced Avraham and Yitzchak's steps through the hills of Judah and Shomron as they made their way to the Akeidah.

However, there is one miracle that is so real and commonplace that it takes the words of Zechariah to highlight the meaning of redemption and the revelation of G-d's love. Throughout Eretz Yisroel, the modern State of Israel, you can visit parks and playgrounds where young children run freely, playing, climbing, and scraping their knees. At the same time, watching over them, or simply enjoying the warmth of the sun or a cool breeze, the elderly of our people sit on park benches enveloped in the normalcy of life and living.

"Thus says G-d: Old men and old women shall again dwell in the streets of Yerushalayim... and the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in her streets." (Zechariya 8:4)

To be alive and to witness the fulfillment of promises and the realization of prophecy is a gift truly deserving of rejoicing and gladness. May we all merit to see the coming of Mashiach, and the building of the Bais Hamikdash, speedily and in our days!

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