

NOT AFFLICTED, STILL AFFECTED

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Parsha of Metzora deals with the plague of tzoraat - according to the Rabbis of the Talmud, a product of the sin of slander and abusive speech. "Life and death are in the hands of speech and the tongue." In a society where everyone demands the right to know everything about everyone anytime, it is difficult to promote the ideas of privacy, correct speech and avoidance of gossip and unnecessary curiosity about others. Though the exact plague of tzoraat is no longer apparent in our lives, the damages of loose talk are apparent all around us. Tzoraat is not only a plague that affects the individual affected by it but it is a plague that damages the general society as well. A society that approves gossip, that condones verbal abuse, insults, obscenities and shameful statements, itself is already plagued. The level of public debate, as well as that of private conversation, requires elevation and care. A drive to arrest loshan hara (evil speech) has been prominent in the Jewish world over the past decades. It is difficult to assess its true success but the mere fact that such a drive was initiated and maintained is itself a positive thing. In a world of free speech, which is certainly a basic right of humans, self-discipline in exercising that right is necessary. Otherwise, free speech becomes destructive speech. And destructive speech should be avoided at all costs.

In our world, tzoraat is no longer an identifiable disease, but the damage of bad speech is easily recognizable in our society. Bad speech stems from bad societal attitudes. Hatred of others, "justified" denigration of those who are different than our own narrow group, an intolerance of spirit and a narrowness of vision all combine to create evil speech and eventually bad behavior. In the haftorah of Shabbat Hagadol, the prophet Malachi calls for charity of spirit and behavior in order to bring about the physical and spiritual redemption of Israel. The task of the Prophet Elijah at the end of days will be one of reconciliation and harmony and not one of revenge and exclusion. Good and optimistic attitudes foster good speech and a cheerful countenance. In that attitude and view of life lies the secret potion that wards off any attack of tzoraat in our midst. We are all aware that preventive medicine and warding off disease before it strikes is the best type of health maintenance and well-being. Proper attitudes towards others and the absence of evil speech is the outstanding medical advice that the Torah provides for us in this week's Parsha.

Pesach is in the wings and I wish to extend to all of you my best wishes for happy and kosher Pesach and a wonderful holiday week. May the blessings and miracles of this great festival fill our hearts and souls and allow us to rededicate ourselves to the service of God and His Torah, people and land. And may we see the continuing redemption of Israel and a peaceful and orderly world of goodness and cooperation.

Shabat Shalom.
Rabbi Berel Wein

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