

HUMANITY IN SPEECH

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The disease of tzoraat, the description and cure of which occupies most of the subject matter of these two parshiyot that we read this Shabat, is closely linked in rabbinic thought and literature with the sin of speaking lashon hara - slander and idle gossip. The connection between the sin of lashon hara and the resultant punishment and consequence of tzoraat is not immediately obvious. And, the fact that tzoraat is no longer clearly definable or even present today further complicates this issue.

The sin of lashon hara unfortunately is still hale and hearty today but apparently its consequences have become invisible to us. One of the many explanations given as to the connection between lashon hara and tzoraat is that lashon hara attempted to "kill" and defame a person in private and secret - a discreet stab in the back tactic - so the punishment was a public physical disfigurement able to be seen by all.

But disfigurement is disfigurement only in relation to the appearance of the general population. If everyone is disfigured in a like manner, so to speak everyone has tzoraat, then no one is really disfigured and the punishment of tzoraat has lost its punch, its deterrent effect. Thus in biblical times, when lashon hara was not yet very commonplace, tzoraat was deemed a just punishment - a public exposure of the slanderer who "kills" secretly. But in later times, when in the words of the Talmud, "everyone is covered with the dust of lashon hara," then tzoraat loses its effect. For as I stated earlier, a society where everyone is disfigured is a society where no one is deemed to be disfigured.

There is a further relationship between tzoraat and lashon hara. Speech, the gift of verbal communication and intercourse, is a uniquely human characteristic. The Targum Onkelos translates the phrase that God gave man the breath of life as meaning that God gave man the gift of speech and communication. There is nothing therefore more definitive of being a human being than the ability to speak and talk to others.

There is nothing more dehumanizing than being horribly disfigured. All sorts of prosthetic devices have been created to help people minimize their disfigurement. Though our modern society has become more tolerant of people suffering from disfigurement than was the society of our grandparents, we all still feel that the disfigured person is less "human" than the rest of society. Thus the gift of speech promotes the great concept of human uniqueness while the punishment of tzoraat serves to minimize that person's humanity in the eyes of others.

Lashon hara - evil, gossip speech - dehumanizes us all. It takes a holy vessel, speech and communicative ability, and defiles it and turns it into an instrument of harm and tragedy. Tzoraat came to remind us all of that basic lesson of life. And even though tzoraat is not visible amongst us today, our reading and studying of these two parshiyot of the Shabat serves as a vehicle for us to think about and appreciate the gift of speech given to humans and arrange our speech accordingly. We must wipe off the dust of lashon hara from our bodies and minds.

Shabat shalom.

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