

PARSHAS METZORAH

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Metzora, 5631

Chazal tell us that tza'ra'as afflicts a person because of his/her anti-social behavior. Lashon ha'ra is the epitome of anti-social behavior. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Chazal see the metzora as a person who is 'motzi shem ra' -- who says bad things about people or institutions. Likewise, we can readily understand that as part of his punishment/rehabilitation process, a metzora must dwell outside the community, excluded from society. Before the metzora may reenter the community, he must undergo a procedure for kapara (atonement). This procedure includes bringing two birds to the Beis HaMikdash. The Sfas Emes quotes Rashi on the reason for bringing one bird. Birds chatter mindlessly. So, too, the metzora is being warned about the consequences of speaking mindlessly about people or institutions.

The Sfas Emes is bothered by a basic question. We can understand why the metzora brings one bird, which the kohein slaughters. Clearly, that bird is to atone for the person's mindless talk. But what is the message of the second bird, the one that is not slaughtered, but is set free?

The Sfas Emes answers by quoting a passage from the Zohar. That passage explains that scourges like tzara'as afflict a person because of "mila bisha; ve'ahl milin tavim ... ve'lo mileil". That is, one bird is to deal with the lashon hara that the person spoke. The second bird is to deal with the good things that he could have said but did not say. The Sfas Emes quotes a pasuk in Tehilim (39:3): "Hechesheisi mitov, uke'eivi ne'echar." (R' S. R. Hirsch: "I kept silent as regarded the good; my pain as all the more grievous because of [my silence].") What the Torah is teaching us with the second bird is the importance of saying good words when we encounter something positive.

My mother, a'h', taught English literature. She used to quote the following lines from a poem: "The word we had not sense to say, Who knows how grand it might have rung?"

B'H', people have developed a much heightened awareness about the evils of lashon hara. Now let's also try to do better with lishna tava, speaking well of others!

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