

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם**

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Tazria, March 2014

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Tazria – lessons from Tzora'at

This week we read Parshat Tazria, the first of two Parshiyot that deal with the laws of Tzora'at. Tzora'at, often mistranslated as leprosy, is a spiritual disease with physical symptoms. The most well-known sin for which one receives Tzora'at is lashon hara (negative speech). The Gemara¹ lists a number of other sins – murder, false oaths, immorality, arrogance, theft and stinginess. The common theme of these sins is that they represent a form of anti-social behaviour.

Tzora'at was actually a chesed from Hashem. It is a personal message that we are doing something wrong and we need to mend our ways. Today we no longer have Tzora'at. Unfortunately its absence does not signify that we are perfectly righteous and do not commit the sins that are listed above. Unfortunately it is the opposite. Due to the regularity with which these sins are committed, Tzora'at would no longer be an effective personal message because everyone would have it!

Nevertheless, the importance of the laws of Tzora'at is highlighted by the fact that the Torah devotes over 12% of the pesukim in Sefer Vayikra to the laws of Tzora'at. Even though we don't have Tzora'at today, there are many relevant lessons that we can learn from these Parshiyot, particularly in relation to lashon hara.

The power of words

Though lashon hara (speaking negatively about others) is strictly prohibited other than in certain, limited circumstances, unfortunately it is extremely common. Two common excuses that people use to justify speaking lashon hara are: "it's just words" and "it's true". Let's discuss each of these excuses and then see what we can learn from this week's Parsha.

It's just words

In Hebrew, when one word has two meanings, those two meanings must be connected in some way.² The Hebrew word 'davar' can mean 'word' or 'thing'. Words are not 'just words'. Words can be as real and as powerful as 'things'. The saying: 'sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never harm me' – is simply not true. Words have power. It is no coincidence that Hashem created all of creation through speech. And Hashem gave the power of speech only to humans. Like Hashem, our speech has the power to create. Or, G-d forbid, our words can be used to destroy. We use our power of speech positively when we pray, learn Torah, speak pleasantly to each other and spread peace. Conversely, when we describe someone in a negative way we can destroy them and their reputation.

It's true

Under the secular law of defamation, if the perpetrator can prove that the statement is true then this is a good defence. But this defence does not apply to the law of lashon hara. In fact, lashon hara only applies when the comments are true. If the comments are false then a different sin applies – motzi shem ra.

¹ Arachin 15b² This idea is often mentioned by Rabbi Akiva Tatz.

The diagnosis of the Cohen

In the time of Tzora'at, a sufferer with the symptoms of Tzora'at needed to get a formal diagnosis from a Cohen. The Cohen would inspect the affliction and then pronounce the person to be tahor (pure) or tamei (impure). Once the Cohen pronounced the word 'tamei', the person's life would turn upside down. They would immediately become ritually impure. They would have to leave their home, their family and their community. They would have to call out 'impure' in order to warn anyone that comes too close to them. They would have to live by themselves, outside the camp or city until they had healed. Interestingly, though the person may have been an expert in the laws of Tzora'at, and could diagnose themselves accurately, they were required to seek the Cohen's pronouncement. They would be totally pure until the Cohen pronounced his verdict. The ramifications were only set in motion by the Cohen saying the word 'tamei'.

But what did the Cohen do? He just said a word! And what he said was true! But the ramifications of saying that word are enormous. This is the vital lesson that the perpetrator needs to learn – the power of words. We need to learn that lesson too.

The doctors' holiday

In order to be diagnosed with Tzora'at, the Cohen would need to inspect the symptoms. However there were certain days when the Cohanim were on 'holiday' and were not available to make a diagnosis. Rashi (Vayikra 13:14) explains that people were not examined during the week following their wedding (the week of Sheva Brachot) and during festivals. By the way, this indicates that Tzora'at is a spiritual affliction, rather than the physical, contagious disease of leprosy. If someone had a suspected contagious disease, we would rush in the experts to diagnose them as soon as possible so that we could isolate them from other people. This is especially the case if they were in close proximity to lots of people (as is common during the week of Sheva Brachot and during festivals).

So why are the Cohanim on holidays during these days? One explanation is that we don't want to isolate people during their special times of celebration with their families and friends. Despite the perpetrator's guilt, the Torah ensures that the punishment is meted out in a compassionate way, by minimising the person's embarrassment and inconvenience.

The lesson for us is clear. There are times when we need to criticise someone. We might need to speak harshly to them, or to confront them about some negative behaviour that they are exhibiting towards us. But even still, we should try to be sensitive to their feelings and choose a time that is as appropriate as possible so as not to cause them too much pain or embarrassment.

Both of the above lessons teach us about the significance of using our words appropriately. Rebbe Shimon Bar Yochai said the following:

"Had I been standing on Har Sinai at the time the Torah was given I would have asked Hashem to create man with two mouths, one to learn Torah, pray and speak wisdom and the other mouth for our other needs. However, I realised the Divine wisdom in creation. If with one mouth a person cannot control himself from speaking Lashon Hara, if he had two mouths it would be far worse." (Yerushalmi Brachot 1:2)

Let's try to use our mouths for learning Torah, praying and speaking pleasantly to each other. To help achieve this goal, we can strive to fulfil the suggestions set out below.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the power of our words. Think carefully before we say anything about anyone else.
2. When we feel that it is necessary to criticise someone, we should try to do so with compassion by choosing a time and a manner that minimises their pain and embarrassment as much as possible.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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About Darchai Noam

The passuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: “Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace”. The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem’s help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of ‘v’ahavta l’reiacha kamocho’ – loving one’s fellow as oneself.

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