

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Tazria – why is there such a big emphasis on Tzora’at?

This week we read Parshat Tazria, the first of two Parshiyot dealing with the laws of Tzora’at. Tzora’at is often mistranslated as leprosy. But it is actually a spiritual disease with physical symptoms. The most well-known sin for which one receives Tzora’at is lashon hara (negative speech). However, the Gemara lists a number of other sins that are also punished with Tzora’at – murder, false oaths, immorality, arrogance, theft and stinginess. All these sins represent a form of anti-social behaviour.

The fact that the Torah devotes over 12% of the pesukim in Sefer Vayikra to these laws demonstrates the significance of Tzora’at. Even though we don’t suffer Tzora’at today, there are many relevant lessons that we can learn from these Parshiyot, particularly in relation to lashon hara.

When he was young, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (the Chofetz Chaim) spent two years writing the Sefer Chofetz Chaim to teach people the parameters of proper speech. The Chofetz Chaim lists a staggering 31 Torah commandments which may be violated when a person speaks or listens to lashon hara. The actual number of infringements will vary depending on the circumstances but one single act of negative speech can violate numerous prohibitions.

Lashon hara refers to speech that is derogatory or damaging. A related prohibition is against rechilus, or tale bearing (telling someone what someone else said or did against them). The main prohibition against lashon hara appears in Vayikra: “You shall not go as a talebearer among your people” (Vayikra 19:16). Some of the other sources that prohibit lashon hara include:

- Do not accept a false report (Sh’mot 23:1). This includes the prohibition against believing unverified lashon hara about another person.
- Do not place a stumbling block before the blind (Vayikra 19:14). This means that we can’t cause another to sin. By speaking lashon hara we are also causing the listener to commit a sin. By listening to lashon hara we are also causing the speaker to commit a sin.
- You shall not hate your brother in your heart (Vayikra 19:17). This prohibition is violated if you pretend to be friendly with someone in their presence but speak against them behind their back.
- Do not be like Korach and his assembly (Bamidbar 17:5). This is a prohibition against maintaining disputes. Any words we utter that cause the continuation of a dispute will be a violation of this prohibition.
- Love your fellow as yourself (Vayikra 19:18). According to Rabbi Akiva this is the most fundamental rule of the Torah.¹ We are commanded to be equally considerate about the feelings of others as we are about our own feelings. Just as we wouldn’t want others to

¹ Brought by Rashi in his commentary on this verse.

Speak negatively about us, so too we would be breaching this law if we speak negatively about others.

- With righteousness you shall judge your fellow (Vayikra 19:15). This source obligates us to give others the benefit of the doubt. When we speak negatively about others we are almost certainly not giving them the benefit of the doubt.

The above is only a short sample of the 31 prohibitions that apply to lashon hara. We can now understand why the Torah devotes so many pasukim to the laws of tzora'at. On the positive side, this means that for every word of lashon hara that we manage to avoid we can merit many mitzvot at the same time.

The name "Chofetz Chaim" comes from Tehillim Chapter 34 which discusses negative speech:

"Come my children, listen to me and I will teach you to fear Hashem. Who is the man who desires life (Chofetz Chaim), loves each day to see only goodness? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceitfully. Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it." (Tehillim 34:12-15)

When we spread lashon hara, we are focusing on the negative and causing disunity amongst our people. If we can hold back from lashon hara, we are not just adding to peace and unity amongst Bnei Yisrael, we are also able to achieve a life pleasure and happiness in this world as well as the World to Come.

Whenever Hashem gave Moshe a commandment to pass on to Bnei Yisrael, the Torah introduces the speech with the most common phrase in the Torah: "Vayedaber Hashem el Moshe Laimor". The first four words of this phrase are translated as: "Hashem spoke to Moshe". This is self-explanatory. However, what is the meaning of the last word of this phrase? "Laimor" can be translated as "to tell". In other words, the phrase means: "Hashem told the following to Moshe in order for Moshe to tell Bnei Yisrael". Interestingly, the word "laimor" is repeated every time that Moshe is commanded to pass on a message to Bnei Yisrael. Since the Torah does not waste words, perhaps one implication is that Hashem needed to specifically instruct Moshe to pass on each and every message. Otherwise Moshe would be forbidden to do so² because we are not permitted to pass on information that we heard from someone without specific permission to do so. We can learn a powerful lesson from this. We should stop and think before opening our mouths. Do I have permission to pass on this information? Would I be saying this if the person about whom I am speaking would be able to hear me?

The Vilna Gaon wrote that for every second someone holds himself back from forbidden speech, he merits a hidden light in the World to Come that the angels can't even come close to!³ Let's use this week as an opportunity to focus on the laws of lashon hara and make more of an effort to guard our speech.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the power of words. Pause and think carefully before saying anything about anyone else.
2. Spend some time revising the laws of negative speech so that we are aware of the parameters and details before we find ourselves in a tempting position.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

² I heard this idea many years ago but unfortunately I cannot recall the source.

³ Seen in "We Want Life" by Rabbi Yisroel Greenwald, page 17.

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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're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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