

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Tazria Metzora  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Tazria Metzora – Lessons from Tzora'at

This week we read two Parshiot – Tazria and Metzora, both of which 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 Gemara 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 a personal message that we are doing something wrong and we need to mend our ways. Today we no longer have Tzora'at. 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 pasukim in Sefer Vayikra to the laws of Tzora'at!

#### Why is there so much focus on Tzora'at?

Why does the Torah focus on this affliction to such an extent? The following idea might shed some light on this question.

The prohibition against eating insects is one of the most serious prohibitions in the Torah<sup>1</sup>. If someone eats a piece of pig, they are guilty of one sin. But if someone eats a tiny insect, they can be guilty of up to six separate prohibitions!<sup>2</sup> The Pri Chadash explains why the Torah is so stringent regarding this issue. It is quite unusual to accidentally eat pig. But it is very easy to accidentally eat an insect. Insects are very common and they are difficult to see. We could accidentally consume a number of insects just by eating an unchecked piece of lettuce! Therefore, the Torah increased the number of prohibitions to encourage the Jewish people to be extra careful in checking for insects.

Perhaps a similar argument applies to lashon hara. Errors of speech are so prevalent that most people don't even realise that they are sinning. Almost every time we open our mouths, we are at risk of saying something that is damaging to another. Thus, perhaps the Torah increased the number of pasukim concerning Tzora'at to remind us of the severity of these prohibitions and to encourage us to be extra careful in checking the words that come out of our mouths.

#### Be among the disciples of Aharon – love peace and pursue peace

Only a Kohen can diagnose Tzora'at. Kohanim were descendants of Aharon, who was renowned for his efforts in bringing peace between people. In Pirkai Avot (1:12) we are advised to be among the disciples of Aharon - loving peace and pursuing peace.

As we mentioned above, the sins that lead to a person being afflicted with Tzora'at all represent forms of anti-social behaviour, the main sin being lashon hara (negative speech). It is specifically Kohanim who diagnosed Tzora'at because the perpetrators of these sins needed to learn from the descendants of Aharon how to use their words in a loving manner and for the pursuit of peace. This is a powerful message for the person that was suffering from Tzora'at. And a powerful message for us.

However, if Aharon's descendants represent peace and love, it seems strange that they should be the ones chosen to diagnose Tzora'at and thus cause pain to people. Perhaps we can understand this idea by looking at

<sup>1</sup> Bedikat Hamazon, Chapter 2, by Rav Moshe Vaye.

<sup>2</sup> Four prohibitions for a water insect; five prohibitions for a land insect; and six prohibitions for a flying insect.

the story behind the 19<sup>th</sup> blessing in the Shemoneh Esreh<sup>3</sup>. As the name suggests, the Shemoneh Esreh (which literally means 18) originally had 18 blessings. However, after the destruction of the second Bet Hamikdash, the Jewish people were under serious threat from various sects of heretical Jews. Rabban Gamliel, the Nasi, decided to add an additional blessing to the Shemoneh Esreh asking Hashem to help defeat these heretics. Shmuel HaKatan was chosen to compose this blessing. Pirkei Avot teaches that Shmuel HaKatan was a person who lived the maxim of not rejoicing in the downfall of your enemy. As the Mishna in Pirkei Avot says:

*Shmuel HaKatan says: 'When your enemy falls do not be glad, and when he stumbles, do not let your heart be joyous...'* (Pirkei Avot 4:24)

Why was Shmuel HaKatan chosen to compose the blessing against the dangerous heretics? Rabban Gamliel understood that Shmuel HaKatan could be trusted to show the appropriate level of restraint in his rebuke and to use the minimum level of harshness as was absolutely necessary.

Similarly, the Kohanim represent Aharon and the pursuit of peace. Presumably they would be reluctant to impose a diagnosis of Tzora'at on a person. They would only do so if absolutely necessary. Perhaps by choosing those who pursue peace to proclaim such a devastating sentence contains an important lesson for the perpetrator and for us. Sometimes we may need to speak harsh words of truth to someone. By emulating Shmuel HaKatan and the Kohanim's attitude to other people's suffering, we can hopefully use the right level of restraint.

This idea appears in the parable of the homeowner and the cat as told by Rav Chaim Brisker. The homeowner and the cat both want to rid the house of mice. But there is one crucial difference – the cat hopes that more mice will appear because it enjoys catching them, whereas the homeowner hopes that there will not be any more mice. When we have to speak harshly, or impose a harsh decree or decision that may cause others pain, we should try to be like the homeowner, and not like the cat. In other words, we should be pained to cause any strife to others. This attitude will be reflected in our words and our manner of speaking.

### **Who is greater – Moshe or Aharon?**

One doesn't need a degree in psychology to work out why people speak lashon hara. We all like to feel good about ourselves. That is human nature. There are two ways to accomplish this. The hard way is to work on ourselves. The easy way is to put other people down so that we look relatively better in comparison. It's a quick and easy fix. But, ironically, putting other people down can actually make us look worse.

Rav Moshe Feinstein's interpretation of a comment by Rashi teaches us the folly in putting other people down.<sup>4</sup> Rashi (Shmot 6:26) explains that the Torah sometimes mentions Moshe's name before Aharon's name, and sometimes it mentions Aharon's name before Moshe's name. This is in order to teach us that Moshe and Aharon were equal. This comment from Rashi is difficult to understand. The Torah itself testifies that Moshe was the greatest prophet that ever lived! How could Rashi say that they were equal? Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that Moshe and Aharon were equal in that they both fulfilled their potential. Hashem does not compare us to other people. He only compares us to our own potential. Therefore, it does not matter how we appear in comparison to other people. Rather, we should focus on how we measure up against ourselves. Keeping this idea in mind might help to deter us from speaking negatively of other people.

Let's try something this week:

1. Before opening our mouths to speak, remember to try to emulate Aharon HaKohen and use our words to pursue peace.
2. If we need to impart rebuke or speak harshly, it should cause us pain. We should try to emulate Shmuel HaKatan and use as much restraint as possible. Strive to be like the homeowner, not like the cat.
3. To avoid tearing down others to build ourselves up, remember the powerful lesson from Rav Moshe Feinstein. Let's remember that it really doesn't matter how we appear compared to the people around us. Our performance only matters when compared against our own potential.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>3</sup> I first heard the story about Shmuel HaKatan composing the 19<sup>th</sup> blessing from Rabbi Mordechai Becher. Historical details about the 19<sup>th</sup> blessing were taken from the Artscroll siddur commentary.

<sup>4</sup> Seen in the Artscroll Stone Chumash – footnote to Shmot 6:26.