

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Tazria – Lessons from Tzora'at

This week we read Parashat 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 that also cause Tzora'at – murder, false oaths, immorality, arrogance, theft and stinginess. The common theme of these sins is that they represent a form of anti-social behaviour. The significance of Tzora'at is highlighted by the fact that the Torah devotes over 12% of the pesukim in Sefer Vayikra to these laws.

The infliction of Tzora'at was actually a chesed (kindness) from Hashem. It was a personal message that we were doing something wrong, and we needed to mend our ways. Today, we no longer have Tzora'at. However, its absence does not signify that we are perfectly righteous and do not commit the sins that are listed above. Unfortunately, the opposite is the case. Due to the regularity with which these sins are committed, Tzora'at would no longer be an effective personal message because almost everyone would have it! We are no longer on a high enough level to be deemed worthy to be given such a clear message from Hashem. In addition, perhaps Hashem knows that most of us would not heed His warning in any case.

However, 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

Lashon hara (speaking negatively about others) is strictly prohibited other than in certain, limited circumstances. However, unfortunately it is extremely common. Two common excuses that people use to justify speaking lashon hara are: “they are just words” or “but it's true”. Let's discuss each of these excuses in more detail and then see what else we can learn from these laws of Tzora'at.

“They are 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. 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, 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 else in a negative way or defame them, we can destroy them and their reputation.

“But it's true”

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

The Kohen's diagnosis

In the times when Tzora'at was inflicted, a sufferer with the symptoms of Tzora'at needed to obtain a formal diagnosis from a Kohen. The Kohen would inspect the affliction and then pronounce the person to be tahor (pure) or tamei (impure). As soon as the Kohen pronounced the word 'tamei', the person would immediately become

¹ Arachin 15b

² This idea is often mentioned by Rabbi Akiva Tatz.

ritually impure. Their life would then turn upside down. They would have to leave their home, their family and their community. They would have to call out 'impure' to those around them to warn them not to come too close. They would be required 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 have diagnosed themselves accurately, they were still required to seek the Kohen's pronouncement. Their status would not change unless and until the Kohen pronounced his verdict. The ramifications were only set in motion by the Kohen saying the word 'tamei'.

But what did the Kohen do? He just said a word! And what he said was true! But the ramifications of saying that word were enormous. This irony is no coincidence. It teaches the perpetrator a vital lesson about the power of words. We can learn that lesson too.

The doctors' holiday

In order to be diagnosed with Tzora'at, the Kohen would first need to inspect the person's symptoms. However, there were certain days when the Kohanim were on 'holiday' and not available to make such a diagnosis. Therefore, the isolation process would be delayed. Rashi³ explains that Kohanim did not examine people during festivals or during the week following the person's wedding (the week of Sheva Brachot). As an aside, this provides further evidence that Tzora'at is a spiritual affliction, rather than the physical, contagious disease of leprosy. If someone had a suspected physical 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 mingling in close proximity to many other people (as is common during the week of Sheva Brachot and during festivals).

Why didn't the Kohanim diagnose Tzora'at during these days? One explanation is that Hashem does not want to force people to be isolated during their special times of celebration with their families and friends.⁴ Despite the perpetrator's guilt, the Torah ensures that the punishment was 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 may need to criticise someone. We might need to rebuke them or to confront them about some negative behaviour. Nevertheless, we should try to be sensitive to their feelings and choose a time to rebuke that is as least embarrassing as possible, to avoid causing them too much pain.

Both of the above lessons teach us 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." (Talmud Yerushalmi Brachot 1:2)

In order to minimise the likelihood of using our mouths for negative purposes, we can try instead to use our mouths for learning Torah, praying and speaking pleasantly to each other. Since we only have one mouth, at least it will be occupied with something holy!

Let's try something this week:

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

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ In his commentary to Vayikra 13:14 in our Parasha.

⁴ See Rashi to Moed Katan Daf 7a (ד"ה לא להחמיר)