

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashot Tazria-Metzora
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פרשות תזריע-מצורע
ו' באייר תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 12:1-15:33

In these *parashot*, Hashem instructs Moshe on the purification rituals for mothers following childbirth, describes to Moshe and Aharon the procedures for identifying and responding to those infected with *tzara'at* (usually translated as leprosy) and the purification ritual for people and homes afflicted with leprosy, and instructs Moshe and Aharon on the laws regarding emission of bodily fluids.

The Torah does not make clear exactly why a person becomes afflicted with *tzara'at*. *Tzara'at* is usually translated as "leprosy," but may in fact have been a different disease from the leprosy that we know today. (I have always thought it might be a form of psoriasis, given the similarities in nomenclature.) The Rabbis of the Talmud, as we shall see below, attributed contracting *tzara'at* to speaking evil of others, colloquially known as *lashon hara*. This is strange because *lashon hara* is an iniquity against humans and not against God, and sins of this type (*bein adam l'chaveiro* – between one person and another) are usually brought to a *beit din* (Jewish court) and adjudicated there, rather than receiving a Divine punishment like *tzara'at*. If someone kills or steals from another person, the first course of action is in the human realm, not the divine, but if someone "just" speaks badly of another, retribution is brought down from Heaven? Why does *lashon hara* incur a Divine punishment?

One of the sections in the Talmud which discusses *tzara'at* may give us a clue to the answer. Here is the discussion in Tractate *Arachin* 15b:

R. Johanan said in the name of R. Joseph ben Zimra: What is the meaning of: "What shall be given to you, and what shall be done more to you, you deceitful tongue (Psalms 120:3)." The Holy One said to the tongue: All

members of the human body are standing, you are lying; all members of the human body are outside, you are guarded inside; not only that, but I surrounded you with two walls, one of bone (the teeth) and one of flesh (the cheeks); “What shall be given to you, what shall be done more to you, you deceitful tongue’!”

And R. Johanan said in the name of R. Joseph ben Zimra: One who bears evil tales almost denies the foundation [of faith] as it is said: Who has said: “Our tongue will we make mighty; our lips are with us; who is lord over us (Psalms 12:5)?” – Further did R. Johanan say in the name of R. Joseph ben Zimra: Anyone who bears evil tales will be visited by the plague of *tzara’at*, as it is said: “Whoso slanders his neighbor in secret, him *azmit* [will I destroy] (Psalms 101:5).” And there it is said: “*La-zemitut* [in perpetuity] (Leviticus 25:30)” which we translate as: “absolutely”... [Note: This comparison is based on the same root for both words.]

Resh Lakish said: What is the meaning of: This shall be the law of the מצורע – *metzora*, the leper? [It means,] ‘This shall be the law for him who is a מוציא שם רע – *motzee shem ra*, who brings up an evil name.’ [Note: this is derived from similar letters in both words as follows: מצורע / מוציא שם רע.] Further, said Resh Lakish: What is the meaning of the Scriptural verse: “If the serpent bite before it is charmed, then the charmer has no advantage (Ecclesiastes 10:11)?” – At some future time all the animals will assemble and come to the serpent and say: The lion attacks and devours; the wolf tears and consumes; but what profit have you? But he will answer: What benefit has he who uses his tongue? Further said Resh Lakish: One who slanders makes his sin reach to heaven, as it is said: “They have set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth (Psalm 73:9).”

Why is it that “one who slanders makes his sin reach to heaven”? I would like to offer a possible answer. All of the other sins that one commits against another human can be found within the animal kingdom. Animals kill each other; they steal each other’s food; they steal each other’s mates. The one category of sins that animals do not commit is those done with higher order language skills. Only humans with our cognitive abilities can do that. And, since language was bestowed upon humans as a gift from God, when we sin with our tongues, it is as if we are spitting in the face of God with the very gift the Holy One gave us. For that reason God will respond directly; human courts need not concern themselves with slander.

This is just another reminder that, almost more than anything else, we need to be careful about what we say, how we say it, and where and to whom we say it. One of the most difficult sets of *mitzvot* to follow is the one that has to do with the power of speech. But these *parashot* remind us that there is nothing more important than how we use our power of speech.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- How does the power of speech make us different from the animals? What does the power of speech allow humans to do that animals cannot?
- It is possible to use the same words in two different instances, where in one case the words are appropriate and another they are not? Can you think of some examples of this?
- Even if the words we say are acceptable, how does our tone sometimes make what we say unacceptable?
- If we have spoken *lashon hara* against someone else, is there any way to make it up to them? How?