

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Tazria-Metzora

This week's double Torah portion deals primarily with the tzaarat discolorations which can potentially plague one's body, clothes, or house. Although the Torah does not explicitly explain the cause for such outbreaks, the Talmud (Arachin 15b) teaches that they come as a result of a person speaking evil about others, which we refer to as *loshon hara*. The Midrash says that first the plagues affect one's house, and if one does not correct his ways and repent, then they come upon his clothing. If he still does not learn from these signals to change his ways, then they afflict his body.

Interestingly, the Talmud (Arachin 16a) quotes another opinion that says *tzaraat* can also come as a result of six other sins: murder, swearing in vain, immorality, haughtiness, stealing, or hoarding one's possessions. But *tzaraat* is most famously associated with *loshon hara*, based on the earlier opinion cited in the Talmud.

We also see the historical significance of the sin of *loshon hara* from a comment of R' Yisroel Mayer Kagan in the introduction to his monumental work, *Chofetz Chaim*. He writes that G-d allowed the Romans to destroy the second Temple because of rampant *loshon hara*. Although the Talmud (Yoma 9b) says the second Temple was destroyed because of the baseless hatred Jews had for one another, the *Chofetz Chaim* asserts that hatred alone would not have been a sufficient reason for the destruction of the Temple. He says it must be they expressed their hatred for one another through speaking badly about each other and thus intensifying this hatred.

In describing the weight of the sin of *loshon hara*, the Talmud (Arachin 16a) says that the severity of the sin depends on the effect it produces. If one spoke badly about someone but it did not cause strife between people, then the robe (*me'il*) of the high priest could atone for this infraction and he would not be punished for this sin with *tzaraat*. But if his evil speech triggered hatred between people and caused them to fight with one another, then the atonement of the *me'il* would not suffice and the sinner might develop *tzaraat*.

We learn further from King David's Psalms that besides for preventing conflicts, avoiding *loshon hara* will greatly enhance our lives. In Psalm 34, he says, "Which man desires life, who loves days of seeing good? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit." Rabbi Kagan names his book about the laws of slander *Chofetz Chaim* based on this verse. When one sees good in others and makes a conscious effort to avoid speaking negatively about others, he will enjoy a better life.

The punishment to send the *metzora* out of the camp also shows us how evil speech destroys relationships and ruins lives. Rashi (Leviticus 13:46) quotes the Talmud which says this punishment fits the sin, measure for measure. By speaking badly about others, the speaker creates friction which can cause a husband to separate from his wife and a man from



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continued ...

his fellow. Therefore, the Torah says he too must be separated from others and live temporarily outside of the camp.

If we understand the pivotal role proper speech plays in our lives, we can better appreciate the paragraph we say after the blessings of our standing prayer (Shemoneh Esrei), before we take three steps back and conclude the prayer. The paragraph is based on the prayer of Mar, recorded in the Talmud (Berachot 17a) among several other prayers which the rabbis of the Talmud composed and said after they finished their eighteen blessings.

The paragraph begins with the plea, "My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully," clearly paraphrasing the directions of King David in Psalm 34. In the next lines of the prayer, we ask G-d to give us the strength to stand up to the insults or curses from the people we encounter and to thwart any evil plans people have to harm us. Clearly, this prayer focuses on our wish to have good relationships with others. Although we cannot control how other people talk to us or think about us, we can guard our own tongues from speaking evil. By seeing the good in others and talking positively about others, we can increase the harmony in our relationships.

We also ask G-d to help us in our interpersonal relationships in the *yehi ratzon* in the very beginning of the prayer service, in which we ask him to save us from brazen men, evil men, evil neighbors, and harsh opponents. The Talmud (Berachot 16b) records this as the prayer that Rav said after he said the eighteen blessings. In both the prayer of Mar and the prayer of Rav, we ask G-d to save us from conflicts in our interpersonal relationships. So why did the rabbis, when composing the siddur, choose to put the prayer of Mar after the silent eighteen blessings instead of the prayer of Rav?

As we mentioned, the prayer of Mar starts with man asking G-d to help him guard his tongue from saying evil, an effort that a person can make to better his relationships. In contrast, the prayer of Rav only talks about the challenging people and situations, but it does not mention a person's efforts to speak nicely and positively to others. As we finish the silent prayer, we stand on the threshold of leaving this elevated encounter with G-d. We hope that we will use the same tongue which spoke holy words to the Almighty to speak in a positive, refined manner to the people we encounter throughout the day. We hope to use our speech in ways that will enable us to avoid difficult conflicts, enhance our relationships, and better our lives.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Yosef Saltzman

3921 Fabian Way Suite A-017
(650) 493-5764



Palo Alto, CA 94303
www.jsn.info