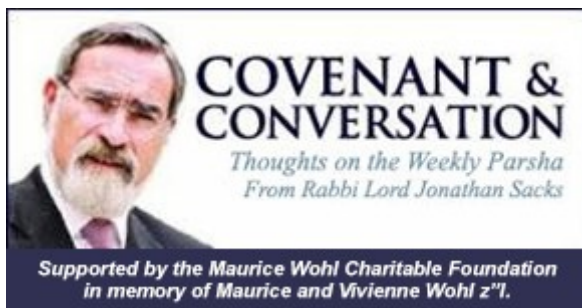


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## On Leadership: The Price of Free Speech

Hannah Smith was a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl living in Lutterworth, Leicestershire. Bright and outgoing, she enjoyed an active social life and seemed to have an exciting future ahead of her. On the morning of 2 August 2013 Hannah was found hanged in her bedroom. She had committed suicide.

Seeking to unravel what had happened, her family soon discovered that she had been the target of anonymous abusive posts on a social network website. Hannah was a victim of the latest variant of the oldest story in human history: the use of words as weapons by those seeking to inflict pain. The new version is called cyber-bullying.

The Jewish phrase for this kind of behaviour is

*lashon hara*, evil speech, speech about people that is negative and derogatory. It means, quite simply, speaking badly about people, and is a subset of the biblical prohibition against spreading gossip.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that it is not singled out in the Torah for a prohibition in its own right, the sages regarded it as one of the worst of all sins. They said, astonishingly, that it is as bad as the three cardinal sins - idolatry, murder and incest - combined. More significantly in the context of Hannah Smith they said it kills three people, the one who says it, the one he says it about, and the one who listens in.<sup>2</sup>

The connection with this week's parsha is straightforward. Tazria and Metsora, are about a condition called *tsara'at*, sometimes translated as leprosy. The commentators were puzzled as to what this condition is and why it should be given such prominence in the torah. They concluded that it was precisely because it was a punishment for *lashon hara*, derogatory speech.

Evidence for this is the story of Miriam (Numbers 12:1) who spoke slightly about her brother Moses "because of the Ethiopian wife he had taken." God himself felt bound to defend Moses' honour and as a punishment, turned Miriam leprosy. Moses prayed for God to heal her. God mitigated the punishment to seven days, but did not annul it entirely.

Clearly this was no minor matter, because Moses singles it out among the teachings he gives the next generation: "Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam along the way after you came out of Egypt" (Deut. 24:9, and see Ibn Ezra ad loc.).

Oddly enough Moses himself, according to the

sages, had been briefly guilty of the same offence. At the burning bush when God challenged him to lead the people Moses replied, "They will not believe in me" (Ex. 4:1). God then gave Moses three signs: water that turned to blood, a staff that became a snake, and his hand briefly turning leprous. We find reference later in the narrative to water turning to blood and a staff turning into a serpent, but none to a hand that turns leprous.

The sages, ever alert to the nuances of the biblical text, said that the hand that turned leprous was not a sign but a punishment. Moses was being reprimanded for "casting doubts against the innocent" by saying that the Israelites would not believe in him. "They are believers the children of believers," said God according to the Talmud, "but in the end you will not believe."<sup>3</sup>

How dangerous *lashon hara* can be is illustrated by the story of Joseph and his brothers. The Torah says that he "brought an evil report" to his father about some of his brothers (Gen. 37:2). This was not the only provocation that led his brothers to plot to kill him and eventually sell him as a slave. There were several other factors. But his derogatory gossip did not endear him to his siblings.

No less disastrous was the "evil report" (*dibah*: the Torah uses the same word as it does in the case of Joseph) brought back by the spies about the land of Canaan and its inhabitants (Num. 13:32). Even after Moses' prayers to God for forgiveness, the report delayed entry in the land by almost forty years and condemned a whole generation to die in the wilderness.

Why is the Torah so severe about *lashon hara*, branding it as one of the worst of sins? Partly

this has deep roots in the Jewish understanding of God and the human condition. Judaism is less a religion of holy people and holy places than it is a religion of holy words.

God created the universe by words: "And God said, Let there be ... and there was." God reveals himself in words. He spoke to the patriarchs and the prophets and at Mount Sinai to the whole nation. Our very humanity has to do with our ability to use language. The creation of *homo sapiens* is described in the Torah thus: "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). The Targum renders the last phrase as "and the man became a *speaking* being." Language is life. Words are creative but also destructive. If good words are holy then evil words are a desecration.

One sign of how seriously Judaism takes this is the prayer we say at the end of every Amidah, at least three times a day: "My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from deceitful speech. To those who curse me let my soul be silent; may my soul be to all like the dust." Having prayed to God at the beginning to "Open my lips so that my mouth may declare Your praise," we pray to Him at the end to help us close our lips so that we do not speak badly about others, nor react when others speak badly about us.

Despite everything, however - despite the Torah's prohibition of gossip, despite its stories about Joseph, Moses, Miriam and the spies, despite the unparalleled strictures against evil speech by the sages - *lashon hara* remained a problem throughout Jewish history and still does today. Every leader is subject to it. The

sages said that when Moses left his tent early in the morning, people would say, "You see, he has had a row with his wife." If he left late they would say, "He is plotting against us."<sup>4</sup>

Anyone from CEO to parent to friend who seeks to be a leader has to confront the issue of *lashon hara*. Firstly he or she may have to put up with it as the price of any kind of achievement. Some people are envious. They gossip. They build themselves up by putting other people down. If you are in any kind of leadership position, you may have to live with the fact that behind your back - or even before your face - people will be critical, malicious, disdainful, vilifying and sometimes downright dishonest. This can be hard to bear. Having known many leaders in many fields I can testify to the fact that not all people in the public eye have a thick skin. Many of them are very sensitive and can find constant, unjust criticism deeply draining.

If you should ever suffer this, the best advice is given by Maimonides: "If a person is scrupulous in his conduct, gentle in his conversation, pleasant toward his fellow creatures, affable in manner when receiving them, not responding even when affronted, but showing courtesy to all, even to those who treat him with disdain ... such a person has sanctified God and about him Scripture says, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified (Isaiah 49:3)."<sup>5</sup>

That is in relation to *lashon hara* directed against yourself. As for the group as a whole, however, you should practise zero tolerance toward *lashon hara*. Allowing people to speak badly about one another will eventually destroy the integrity of the group. Evil speech generates negative energies. Within the group it sows the seeds of distrust and envy. Directed outside the

group it can lead to arrogance, self-righteousness, racism and prejudice, all of which are fatal to the moral credibility of any team. Whether or not you are the leader of such a group you must politely make it clear that you will have nothing to do with this kind of speech and that it has no place in your conversations.

Cyber-bullying is the latest manifestation of *lashon hara*. In general the Internet is the most effective distributor of hate-speech ever invented. Not only does it make targeted communication so easy, but it also bypasses the face-to-face encounter that can sometimes induce shame, sensitivity and self-control. Greek myth told the story of Gyges' ring that had the magical property of making whoever wore it invisible, so that he or she could get away with anything.<sup>6</sup> Social media that enable people to post anonymous comments or adopt false identities are as near as anyone has yet come to inventing a Gyges' ring. That is what is so dangerous about it.

The story of Hannah Smith and the other teenage suicides is a tragic reminder of how right the sages were to reject the idea that "words can never harm me," and insist to the contrary that evil speech kills. Free speech is not speech that costs nothing. It is speech that respects the freedom and dignity of others. Forget this and free speech becomes very expensive indeed.

All of which helps us to understand the biblical idea of *tsara'at*. The peculiar property of *tsara'at* - whether as a skin disease, a discoloration of garments or mould on the walls of a house - is that it was immediately and conspicuously visible. People engage in *lashon hara* because, like wearers of Gyges' ring, they

think they can get away with it. "It wasn't me. I never said it. I didn't mean it. I was misunderstood." The Torah is here telling us that malicious speech uttered in private is to be stigmatised in public and those who engage in it are to be openly shamed.

To put it at its simplest: as we behave to others so God behaves to us. Do not expect God to be kind to those who are unkind to their fellow humans.

1. Leviticus 19:16.
2. See Maimonides, *Hilkhot Deot* 7:3.
3. Shabbat 97a.
4. See Rashi to Deut. 1:12.
5. Maimonides, *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 5:11.
6. See Plato, *The Republic*, book 2, 359a-360d.



## The Difference Between the Nazir and the Metzora

**Vayikra, 14:2:** "This is the law of the *metzora* on the day of his purification, and he shall be brought (v'huvah) to the Kohen."

**Bamidbar, 6:13:** "This is the law of the *Nazir* on the day his abstinence is completed, he shall bring himself (yavi oso) to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

In the beginning of the Torah portion of Metzora, the Torah outlines the process of purification for the *metzora*, a person who has become stricken with a spiritual disease known

as *tzaraat*. The verse uses difficult language to explain the beginning of the process – It states that the *metzora* is **brought** to the Kohen. We know that the *metzora* is not carried to the Kohen, rather he comes on his own two feet. Why then does the Torah use the passive tense?

This question is exacerbated by an almost identical introduction to the purification process of the *nazir*, a person who abstains from wine, cutting his hair, and coming into contact with the dead. However, there, the Torah describes the process in the way that we would have expected – "he shall bring himself..." What is the difference between the *metzora* and *nazir*?<sup>1</sup>

It seems that the situations of the *metzora* and *nazir* are drastically different and this is the key to the difference in word usage. Why does a person become a *metzora*? One reason is that he spoke *lashon hara*, derogatory speech, and a second cause is that he was overly stingy with his money. The common denominator between both flaws is that the person cannot control his natural impulses.

With regard to speech, he derives pleasure from speaking badly about others, even though he knows it is wrong. With regard to money, he is so attached to money, that he is unwilling to part with it, even when he knows that he should. In both cases, the *metzora* is subject to external sources, whether it be his mouth, or money. Consequently, he is not in control of himself. For such a person, the Torah emphasizes that he shall be brought to the Kohen, rather than that he will come on his own volition. This means that as a result of his lack of self-control, he commits actions that cause him to become a *metzora* against his own better judgment, and he is not free enough to come himself, rather he

is brought there.

The *nazir* is a totally different category of person. He realizes the risks of become a slave to one's instincts, in this case, the temptations of wine and immorality. Before he lets that happen, he seizes the initiative and separates himself from wine, and abstains from beautifying his appearance, in order to avoid sin and maintain his person freedom. In essence, he is saying, "I am going to be in charge of myself". The Torah relates that such a person comes of his own volition to begin his period of being a *nazir* because he is in control of himself.

We learn from here that a person may want to act a certain way, but if he is enslaved to his impulses, then inevitably he will act according to those impulses. This idea is demonstrated in a fascinating incident involving the Rambam cited by the Alter of Kelm, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Brodie.<sup>2</sup>

The Rambam had a disagreement with the non-Jewish scholars. They believed that one could train an animal to act with the same level of sophistication as human beings; their natural instinct could be tamed and they could be taught to act like human beings. The Rambam disagreed, arguing that it was impossible to change the nature of an animal.

The scholars sought to prove their point by training a cat to be a waiter, thereby proving that one can change an animal's nature. After several weeks of training, they proudly assembled a large group of people, including the Rambam himself, to view the wonderful spectacle. Indeed, the cat lived up to its expectations; it began by setting the tables and when each person came in, the cat approached him and bowed down to him, treating him with great

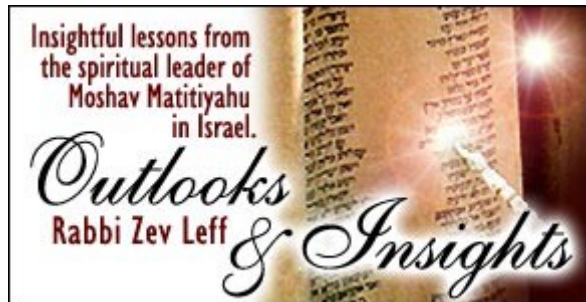
honor. Then the cat went to bring a tray carrying a bottle of wine to serve his guests.

Suddenly, the Rambam took out a small box and opened its lid – out jumped a mouse. As soon as the cat saw the mouse, it dropped the tray on the floor and all the wine spilt everywhere, whilst the cat had resigned its waiter duties in order to catch the mouse! Seeing this, everyone admitted that the Rambam was right and that it was impossible to teach a cat to permanently change its nature. All they could do was to teach it to act in a civilized fashion as long as there was no mouse around, but as soon as he saw the mouse all his natural tendencies came flooding back.

The *metzora* is in a similar situation to the cat – he may well want to act in a certain way, but he has not developed his self-control to be able to withstand the challenges he faces. The Nazir recognizes that he is at peril of falling into the same trap as the *metzora* but he takes the initiative before he falls.

Nowadays, the methodology of the Nazir is not necessarily appropriate for many people in many situations. However, the idea that one must try to nip in the bud his desires before they overtake him, is still of great relevance. Only by learning Torah and working on one's character can a person succeed in achieving true freedom.

1. The answer given is based on Rav Yerucham Levovitz cited by Rabbi Yissachar Frand.
2. Cited in Darchei Mussar, Parshas Chayei Sarah, p.54.



## Life and Death in the Hands of the Tongue

*"Remember what the Lord, your God, did to Miriam on the way when you left Egypt." (Deuteronomy 24:9)*

Almost all of Parshas Tazria and most of Parshas Metzora are concerned with the intricate laws of *tzora'as*. *Tzora'as* afflicted people as a consequence of having spoken *lashon hara*. This is hinted to in Parshas Ki Tetzei, where the Torah warns us to be careful with respect to the laws of *tzora'as* and immediately thereafter to remember Miriam's punishment in the desert for speaking *lashon hara* about her brother, Moses. Miriam was immediately afflicted with *tzora'as* and forced to leave the encampment for seven days.

It seems paradoxical that the Torah chose to admonish us not to speak about the faults and shortcomings of others by reminding us of Miriam's sin.

During the entire time Miriam was afflicted, the nation did not travel. The whole nation waited for her as a consequence of the merit she accrued by waiting to see what would happen to her three-month-old brother, Moses, when she placed him into the Nile in a basket (Talmud - Sotah 9b). Again we wonder: What benefit was it to Miriam to have the entire Jewish people

delayed for her sake? Did that waiting not highlight the cause of her banishment? Would it not have been better for Miriam if the nation had proceeded, unaware of her sin?

The answer is that Miriam did not sin. Her intentions in speaking about Moses were completely well-intentioned, without any malice. She meant no harm to her beloved brother; nor did she cause Moses any harm, or even ill-feeling. Despite this, she was stricken with *tzora'as*. Her disease was not a punishment, but rather the inevitable, natural result of *lashon hara*. Because she had not sinned, Moses did not pray for forgiveness for Miriam - only that she be healed.

## DEVASTATING TALK

The command to remember Miriam does not denigrate her, for she committed no intentional sin. But we do learn from that act of remembrance the devastating effect of *lashon hara*, even when spoken unintentionally and without malice. Just as it makes no difference if one swallows poison intentionally or unintentionally, so, too, *lashon hara* devastates us, even when spoken without deliberate malice.

To highlight the intrinsic devastation wrought by *lashon hara*, it had to be crystal clear that Miriam did not sin and that her intentions were in fact pure. Miriam exhibited her love for Moses when she waited anxiously to see what would happen to him. The waiting of the nation for her was a reminder of her earlier waiting and, at the same time, the proof that she had acted without malice towards Moses. As Maimonides writes (Tzora'as 16:10):

...Concerning this the Torah warns us to be careful with *tzora'as* and to

remember what God did to Miriam, as if to say: "Contemplate what happened to Miriam the Prophetess when she spoke against her brother who was younger than her, whom she brought up on her lap and for whom she endangered herself when she saved him from the sea and whom she had no intention to harm. She erred only in comparing him to the other prophets, and [Moses] did not care about what she said because [he] was a very humble person - and still [she] was immediately punished with *tzora'as*."

## PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

There were two distinct aspects of the Holy Temple which atoned for *lashon hara*. The Talmud (Zevachim 88b) relates that both the incense and the *me'il* (the garment of the Kohen Gadol from which bells and pomegranate-like ornaments hung) atoned for *lashon hara*.

The Gemara explains that the *me'il* atoned for the *lashon hara* spoken publicly, and incense for "hidden" *lashon hara*. The latter is difficult to understand, however, since we learn of the incense's ability to atone for the *lashon hara* from its use to stop the plague that broke out when the people blamed Moses and Aaron for the deaths of Korach and his entourage. That *lashon hara* was public.

Perhaps, then, the Talmud is referring to two aspects of the damage caused by *lashon hara*. According to this understanding, public *lashon hara* refers to the harm done to the person that it was spoken against. Hidden *lashon hara* refers to the spiritual damage to the speaker of the *lashon hara* himself, the destruction of his soul.

What, then, is that spiritual destruction, which is

physically manifested by *tzora'as*? It is the power of speech that distinguishes man from all other creatures. The faculty of speech enables man to fulfill his purpose in the universe.

Through speech man attaches himself to his Creator by learning and teaching Torah; through speech man addresses his Creator in prayer; through speech man crystallizes his thoughts, which in turn leads to action, as it says (Deut. 30:14), "*for this Mitzvah is close to you in your mouth and heart to do it*"; and finally, it is speech that enables man to communicate with others to unite in the communal service of the Almighty.

When man uses his unique power of speech to unite the world in service of God, he realizes his potential as the pinnacle of Creation. The Hebrew word for tongue, *lashon*, is related to *losh*, the process of mixing solids and liquids together. The tongue takes the spiritual inner essence of the soul and expresses it in the physical realm - thereby mixing spiritual and physical together.

## GUARD YOUR TONGUE

Utilizing the tongue for *lashon hara*, to degrade, to defile, to cause strife and dissension, divests man of the very essence of his distinction as a human being by corrupting his most exalted faculty. The Jerusalem Talmud says that there are three sins for which a person is punished in this world and in the next - immorality, murder and idolatry - and *lashon hara* is equal to all three. These three sins represent the destruction of one's physical, emotional and spiritual self.

*Lashon hara* equals them all. For the totality of the human being is destroyed by the corruption of his ultimate distinction, his speech. Thus, one

afflicted with *lashon hara* defiles like a corpse. He is banished from society and mourns himself, for the essence of his being has been negated.

At the conclusion of the Amidah we beseech: "*My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully.*" After we have used our mouths for communicating with our Creator, we can fully appreciate the calamity inherent in corrupting that same wondrous instrument by using it for *lashon hara*.

The laws of childbirth precede the laws of *tzora'as*. Man has the ability to be a partner in Creation, to create a new being, or he can take his own body and divest it of its Divine essence by speaking *lashon hara*. Both extremes are presented. The choice is ours. The literal intent of the words of the Sages is that life and death are in the hands of the tongue.



## The Twofold Shabbat

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's Torah portion primarily deals with the phenomenon of a "*negah*" - a physical skin disease that expresses a spiritual ailment. The Sefer Yetzirah (2:7) states that there is nothing greater than "*oneg*" (delight) and nothing lower than "*negah*." How are we to understand this enigmatic remark?

The Midrash Socher Tov (citing Rebbe Yitzchak on Psalm 92) notes that all aspects of Shabbat are doubled. In the Holy Temple, the meal offering consisted of a double portion (Exodus 16:22); the animal offerings consisted of two lambs (Numbers 29:9); the punishment for desecrating Shabbat is described with double wording (Exodus 31:14); the reward for observing Shabbat contains double wording (Isaiah 58:13); the commandment to observe Shabbat appears in two forms, "*zachor*" (Exodus 20:8) and "*shamor*" (Deut. 5:12); and the Psalm that was sung on Shabbat has two names, "*mizmor*" and "*shir*" (Psalms 92:1).

According to the Shem MiShmuel, the Midrash is not merely mentioning that Shabbat is associated with double expressions. Rather, we learn from here that the very essence of Shabbat is twofold. On one hand, Shabbat is called the "secret of oneness" (Zohar), through which all Jews are equated. On the other hand, Shabbat is likened to the Coming World, where every righteous person receives reward based on his individual merit (see Shmot Rabba 52:3 and Shabbat 152a). The Shem MiShmuel explains these two aspects as follows:

All Jewish people are equal when it comes to refraining from transgressions. In passivity, we are all alike. This is the first aspect of Shabbat - the oneness in which all Jews are equated. The other aspect of Shabbat, as we mentioned, is where each person receives reward based on individual merit. This refers to the mitzvot that require action to fulfill. Far from being equated in this realm, we each grow differently depending on how much energy, sincerity, and pure intention we put into our performance of mitzvot.



We can broaden this discussion and suggest that the Jewish people have a dual mission. We have a unified, national mission, in which we are all equated. However, each individual has a unique, specific mission as well - a mission that is different from everyone else's.

Typically, the idea of a personal mission is understood to mean using our individual talents to bring something unique into the world. Based on the Shem MiShmuel, we now see that we can also fulfill our individual mission through our performance of mitzvot. Although everyone's actions might appear to be identical, in reality, each person performs mitzvot with a different degree of enthusiasm and care.

The "*metzora*" - the one smitten with a spiritual skin disease - is disqualified from both his national and his individual mission. The Torah tells us (Leviticus 13:46) that the *metzora* dwells alone, which the Talmud (Arachin 16b) understands to mean "outside the Jewish camp." This enforced solitude symbolizes the *metzora*'s disqualification from the Jewish people's national purpose.

Furthermore, we learn that the *metzora* is locked away for a week (Leviticus 13:4) or sometimes two weeks (Leviticus 13:5). This shows us that different people require different amounts of time to extricate themselves from their spiritual degradation. The amount of time necessary for each *metzora* to heal is based on the unique way he developed his corrupt behavior. This demonstrates the ruination of the *metzora*'s individual mission, since the time it takes him to heal is directly based on how much effort he put into performing transgressions.

Now we can finally understand the comment

from the Sefer Yetzira that there is nothing greater than *oneg* and nothing lower than *negah*. (This is a play on words: both are composed of the three letters *ayin, nun, gimmel*.) The word *oneg* is frequently used in association with Shabbat. Nothing is greater than the *oneg* of Shabbat because, as we stated, the essence of Shabbat is twofold. Shabbat fully expresses both the national and the individual purpose of the Jewish people, thus symbolizing serving God in totality and completion. *Negah*, on the other hand, symbolizes the utter degradation of the *metzora*, who is disqualified from both his national and individual mission. Nothing could be lower than this inability to fulfill one's purpose on any level.

May we all be doubly blessed to live up to our national and individual missions, thereby enabling us to serve God in totality and completion.

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