

In This Issue

- **Appel's Parsha Page** by *Yehuda Appel*
- **Language of Tomorrow** by *Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein*
- **The New Old Path** by *Rabbi Dr. Benji Levy*
- **Straight Talk** by *Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt*



All About the Mikveh

A few years ago, my wife was teaching about *Taharat Hamishpacha*, the laws of family purity, at the Solomon Schechter school in Cleveland. In the weeks before her class, rabbis of various denominations in the city had encouraged their congregants to attend the session, noting that family purity was a major part of Jewish tradition.

One student shared her own beautiful personal tradition, which illustrated how the family purity laws can renew a marriage. The woman reported that upon her return from the Mikveh each month, her husband would lovingly place the wedding band back upon her finger and say appropriate words to his "bride."

The observance of *Taharat Hamishpacha* has been a central feature of Jewish life for

millennia. One finds Mikvehs in medieval Spain, in ancient Italy and in the famed desert outpost of Masada. In fact the single most decisive element archaeologists use in determining whether or not an unearthed settlement is Jewish is the presence of a Mikveh. This is consonant with Halacha (Jewish law) which mandates that even before the town synagogue is built, a Mikveh must first be established.

The source of the laws of Mikveh and family purity is found in this week's Torah portion. The Torah commands that when a woman has a menstrual flow, she and her husband must stay apart from one another. During this period she is "*tameh*," a Hebrew term that has been incorrectly translated as "unclean."

In point of fact, the word *tameh* has nothing to do with uncleanness. When one is *tameh* it means that a person has had some contact with death. In the instance of a menstruating woman, it is the death of the ovum. Similarly, when a man has had physical relations (which inevitably involve the death of millions of sperm), he too is *tameh*. Implicit in this Biblical tradition is a great sensitivity and awareness of the natural life cycle.

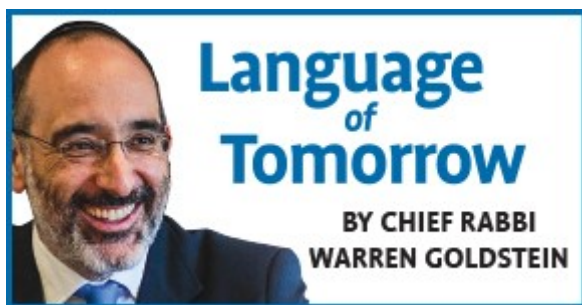
After a week has passed since the cessation of the woman's menstrual flow, the woman goes to the Mikveh where she undergoes a "spiritual rebirth." Various aspects of the Mikveh experience reinforce this notion of rebirth. The Mikveh itself must have 40 *seah* (a Torah measurement) of water, the number 40 alluding to the 40th day after conception when the soul of a child enters the embryo. The woman must have no ornaments or barriers between herself and the water, for her emerging from the

Mikveh is like that of the newborn leaving the waters of the womb.

Why the separation between husband and wife? The Talmud explains that during this period of abstinence, their longing for one another increases. The wisdom of this Talmudic observation has been borne out by psychological and physiological studies, as well as the testimony of its adherents. Many men and women declare that because they observe this practice, they feel as if each month is another honeymoon.

Still others report that abstaining from physical relations intermittently strengthens the relationship, since the husband and wife must relate on an emotional level independent of any issues of physicality.

The Jewish People have traditionally been known for the strength of their families. It is the observance of *Taharat Hamishpacha*, perhaps more than any other factor, that lies behind this strength.



Why Human Beings were Created Last

This week's parsha, Tazria-Metzora, begins with a discussion of the laws of childbirth and a *bris*, key milestones of life, and the laws regarding purity and impurity, what we call *tum'ah* and

taharah, of people. Rashi raises a question about the order of the Chumash: in last week's portion, Shemini, the Torah details the laws of purity and impurity with regard to animals. This week's portion, as well as next week's, deals with the laws of purity and impurity with regard to people. It would seem that the appropriate order should have been to deal with the laws of human beings first and then the laws of animals, as human beings are more important; why, then, does the Torah deal with the laws of animals before the laws of human beings?

To answer the question Rashi quotes from the Midrash which says that God modelled this structure on the order in which He created the world. In the same way that when He created the world He created animals before human beings, so too in the Torah He dealt with the laws of the animals before the laws of human beings.

The question, then, is compounded; why did God create animals before human beings in the first place?

The Talmud in Sanhedrin 38a gives four reasons why God created animals before human beings. First, so that the heretics would not say that there was a partner in Creation with God. Had God created Adam and Eve at the beginning of the six days of Creation, the heretics and the deniers of God's existence would say that God did not create the world – Adam and Eve actually did it, or at least helped Him out. Therefore, Adam and Eve had to be created at the end, to take away the argument from the heretics and the deniers.

We see from here how important it is to refute heresy and those who deny the truth. We see as well that people will deny even God's creation

of the world. People will deny many things – for example, the Holocaust, God’s existence, or the Jews’ right to the Land of Israel. Basic facts of history and rational enquiry are denied by people, and we must go to the trouble to refute the heresy and stand up for what we believe, just as God did by structuring the order of Creation in such a way.

The soul is the key factor differentiating between us and animals

The second reason that human beings were created last is because God wanted to teach people humility; even the mosquito was created before humankind. Lest we think we are so great, even a mosquito was created before us.

One of our commentators, the *Ktav Sofer*, explains further that when people sin and are detached from God, they are saying their body is what defines them. Human beings are comprised of two parts, body and soul. We can view ourselves as a body which just happens to have a soul but our main identity is the body, or we can view the soul as our main identity and the body as merely the house for the soul. If our whole self-definition is based solely on “body,” then we are saying that we are no superior to the animal kingdom. Therefore God reminds us that even the mosquito was created before humankind. But if the soul is the main focus, then man is truly superior; the soul, being a Divine spark of God Himself, preceded all of Creation. The soul and the intellect are the key differentiating factor between human beings and animals.

On a physical level we are no match for the animals: even a simple mosquito can beat us. If

any of you have been to Kruger National Park – and I certainly hope that you have, because it is a wonderful way to see the magnificence of God’s Creation – you know that one of the things you have to worry about is mosquitoes. Look how much trouble we go through to fight off the mosquitoes: we have developed drugs and all kinds of creams and insecticides to fight them off. Physically, we are weaker. It is only with the spiritual and intellectual dimension of the *neshama*, the soul, that we are elevated above the animal kingdom. We were created last to remind us that if we are going to behave like animals, then even the mosquito is better than us; it preceded us.

The world was created for human beings to do good

The third reason the Gemara gives for human beings created last is so that they would be created on Friday and go straight into Shabbos, straight into doing a mitzvah. The fourth reason human beings were created at the end is because God wanted the world to be ready for them, like a bride and groom who enter the wedding hall last; everything is ready and everyone is waiting just for them because they are the most important part of the celebration.

The third and fourth reasons are actually connected. Human beings were created last so that they would enter a world ready and waiting for them, indicating that all of Creation was created just for them. This relates to – and is dependent on – the third reason, namely, that human beings came last in order to go straight into a mitzvah; the purpose of creating human beings was for us to serve

God. God created everything for human beings,

in order that human beings would serve Him. That is the ultimate purpose of the world.

The Torah's order parallels Creation's order

The Midrash comments that the reason the Torah deals with the laws of *tum'ah* and *taharah* in relation to human beings after the laws of *tum'ah* and *taharah* in relation to animals is because God created the world in that order.

But we have to ask ourselves the following question: it is true that God created the world in this particular order for the four aforementioned reasons, but why is it necessary to apply this order to the laws of the Torah? What does one thing have to do with the other? Just because God created the world in that order, does that mean that the laws of the Torah have to be structured in the same way?

Torah is the blueprint for the world

The Torah and the world are intertwined. They are both creations of God and in a sense they are actually the same creation. Rav Yerucham Levovitz, one of the heads of the Mir Yeshiva prior to World War II, explains that the Torah's order parallels the order of creation because Torah is the blueprint of the world – as our Sages tell us, God looked into the Torah and created the world. This is what the Mishnah refers to when it says “turn it [the Torah] over and over, for everything is in it.” Everything that we see in this world has its roots in Torah because the Torah was the overarching design for the world. Thus, the order of the Torah and the world are parallel, because the world was

created from the Torah.

The 613 commandments of the Torah are comprised of 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments. A positive commandment commands an action, such as putting on *tefillin*, while a negative commandment is a prohibition, such as not to eat non-kosher. There are 248 positive commandments, paralleling the 248 limbs of the body, and 365 negative commandments, paralleling the 365 sinews and muscles of the body. How exactly we categorise what is considered a limb and what is considered a sinew is not for the present discussion, but the point is, says Rav Yerucham, that the 613 commandments are linked to the structure of the body.

Rav Yerucham mentions from Rabbeinu Tam that animals are created prostrate while human beings are created upright because the human being has an immortal soul put there by God and which eventually returns to God for eternity. We come into this world to serve God and we go back to Him. Therefore, the human being stands erect; he strives upwards, to God; not so with animals. Here, too, the physical structure of the world is intertwined with the concepts of the Torah because God looked into the Torah and He created the world. The two go hand in hand because the creation of the world is based on the Torah itself.

The Torah is a continuation of Creation

The Maharal of Prague has another approach to this. He says that the Torah is actually the continuation of creation, which was not complete after the six days. The physical part

had been completed but the moral and spiritual part of the world had not been brought to fruition yet because the Torah had not yet been given. Without the Torah, the world was incomplete. We only reach completion when we live in accordance with God's will as He has set out for us in the Torah. The reason why the structure of the laws in the Torah parallels the structure of the creation of the world is because the one is the physical creation of the world, and the other is the spiritual creation of the world. Torah brings the physical world to perfection. All of the commandments of the Torah – how to treat our fellow human beings, giving charity, keeping Shabbos, and everything that comprises Judaism – are there to complete the world. The commandments of the Torah refine us, taking us from a state of incompleteness to a state of completion. Therefore, the Torah is parallel to the world in its structure; it is the continuation of creation.

Torah is the purpose and foundation of the world

In this vein the Maharal explains the passage in the Talmud that says that the world was actually in abeyance. The book of Bereishit calls the sixth day of creation *yom hashishi* “**the** sixth day.” All of the other days of creation do not have the definite article. For example, it does not say *yom hasheni*, “**the** second day,” but *yom sheni*, “day two,” meaning day two of creation. Why is this so? Because, says the Gemara, it is referring to a different, specific “sixth day,” **the** sixth day of Sivan which was the date the Torah was given. At the outset God said if the children of Israel will accept the Torah at Mount Sinai, good; if not, the world will return to *tohu vavohu*, chaos and void, as it was before

Creation. Thus, the whole of Creation was waiting for the sixth day of Sivan.

The Maharal explains this Gemara to mean not that God had completed the world and would reverse the whole Creation if the Jews did not accept the Torah, but rather that the world was not finished being created. The six days of Creation were waiting for their completion and until the Torah came into the world there was just chaos and void. The Torah brought that chaos into order and structure by giving the framework for how to live our lives and in effect completed the process of creation. Thus, the structuring of Creation is exactly the same structure as the laws of the Torah. Torah is part of the process of creation.

This gives us the correct outlook on the world and our lives. Essentially, Torah is not just something “extra,” just a nice thing to have. It is the very framework and foundation that gives structure and order to everything in the world. We should not view our lives and the world as merely physical things. We must understand that this physical world is a shell and that what really matters is what is inside, the soul of the human being and the spiritual and moral code that God has given us in His Torah. That is what brings everything to fruition and completion.

On a deeper level, what the Maharal is teaching us is that the Torah is an act of creativity. By living a life of Torah we are constantly involved in the creative process. God created the physical infrastructure in the six days of Creation, but on the sixth day of Sivan, when He gave us the Torah, He gave us the spiritual infrastructure for the world.

Living a life of Torah is about creativity, about the process of bringing ourselves, our lives,

those closest to us, our families, and our communities to that creative process, to complete the process of creation that was begun by God in the six days of Creation.



Pleasure is in the Eye of the Beholder

It is always interesting to note how two people can see the exact same thing in two completely different ways. The State of Israel, for example, has differing religious meanings for different groups of Jews. Some, such as the Neturei Karta group, are categorically opposed to the establishment and existence of the State of Israel, believing that it is slowing down the ultimate redemption by the Messiah. On the other hand, there are religious Zionists who believe that the State of Israel is a miraculous gift from God, that it is the beginning of the redemptive process and constitutes the fulfilment of biblical prophecies. Yet these directly opposing perspectives are based on the same historical facts and presented through the same religious texts. Similarly, if two people gaze at an object, one from the front and one from the back, they can have two very diverse perspectives on what it looks like, though they are looking at the same object. And of course, each individual's own preconceptions and experiences come into play when they interpret

the meaning of a particular event or object.

The Talmud describes two different types of guests, one good and one bad:

What does a good guest say? How much trouble did the host go to for me! How much meat and wine, and how many rolls he brought before me, and all the trouble that he went to was only for me. But what does the bad guest say? What trouble did the host go to? I ate only one piece of bread and drank one cup of wine, and all the trouble that he went to was only for his wife and children (Talmud Bavli, Tractate *Berachot* 58a).

Two guests of the same host can choose to see the same experience in completely different ways. Their choices, according to the Talmud, do not reflect on the host, but rather they define the guest. This phenomenon is alluded to by the Torah when describing the effects of *tzaraat* (commonly translated as leprosy), a physical manifestation of a spiritual illness. In contrast to a regular skin condition, which is present on the outside of the body, this condition is described as being 'in the person' (*Lev.* 13:9). The Talmud isolates seven different potential causes for this disease, the best known of which are slander and improper speech, or *lashon hara* (Talmud Bavli, Tractate *Arachin* 15b). However, another cause, according to the Talmud, is *tzarut ayin*, or narrow-sightedness – seeing the negative in a given situation or person (Talmud Bavli, Tractate *Arachin* 16a).

When describing *tzaraat*, the Torah repeatedly uses the term *nega*, meaning affliction. Interestingly, the term *nega* is an anagram comprised of the very same letters as its direct

opposite – *oneg* – meaning pleasure. An ancient book of Jewish mysticism states that: ‘There is no good higher than *oneg* and no evil lower than *nega*’ (*Sefer Yetzira* 2:7). Both words contain the letters *nun* and *gimmel* next to one another; the only difference is the positioning of the letter *ayin*. In addition to being a letter, the word *ayin* means ‘eye’. Based on an inference quoted in the *Sefat Emet* one can extrapolate a deeper meaning within these Hebrew words.

Depending on where it is placed, the *ayin* (eye) can transform the other two letters from meaning an affliction, to meaning pleasure. In life, our experience of any given situation can be entirely altered by the unique lens through which we perceive it. When we look through a negative lens, we will see a *nega* – a painful affliction. But if we move our eye to look on the bright side, the same situation can take on a positive transformation.

At the conclusion of its description of the *tzaraat* affliction, the Torah states that the final way that the priest should assess whether or not an affliction is considered *tzaraat* is to check if the *nega* has ‘transformed its *ayin* (eye)’ (*Lev.* 13:55). This cryptic verse now makes perfect sense – the only remedy for the malady of narrow-sightedness is to shift one’s paradigm and look through a different lens. The Mishna states about this disease: ‘Even if [the afflicted one is] a Torah scholar who believes with certainty that the affliction exists, he should not render [negative] judgement with a definitive statement’ (Mishna, Tractate *Nega'im* 12:5, based on *Lev.* 14:35). The reason for this law is that one should learn to admit, with humility, the limitations of one’s own knowledge – for only God knows for certain the real meaning behind a situation (*Mizrachi* on *Lev.* 14:35). The

Tosefot Yom Tov takes this one stage further and states that by branding something as destructive or negative, one ensures that it will become so. This conveys the strength of an individual’s attitude in the transformation of a situation.

If we look for the bad in life, it will always be found. Declaring a situation as doomed can generate a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, if we search hard enough and look at the world through a positive lens, metaphorically positioning the *ayin* appropriately, then even something ostensibly bad can turn out to be good.



Cutting to the Core

Parshat Metzora describes the consequences of negative speech, *loshon hara*.

"Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me." Whoever made that one up is either naive or deaf. While we might tell our children not to be bothered, the reality is that words hurt a great deal more than sticks and stones. The pain caused by sticks and stones is temporary; the pain caused by words can be eternal.

When someone hits you, it is a very crude and superficial expression of contempt for your humanity. What he is saying, in effect, is that you are an object, not a person. There is a sense

of violation. Words, however, can express that contempt infinitely more eloquently and thus penetrate much deeper. When you talk badly about another person, it can be much more personal and biting, and cut to the core of his individuality. Ouch.

Beyond this, the Sages say that whoever speaks *loshon hara* denies God Himself. It is, to be sure, an indefensible action to talk badly about a fellow human being, but to say that one who does so denies God seems a little harsh. Here is an explanation that I once heard from one of my students.

Every human being is made in the image of the God. No one of us is inherently any more or less Godly than anyone else. We are Godly no matter what we do. The question is only whether we will act in a Godly fashion or not. The Jewish concept is that although a person may 'do' bad, his or her essence 'is' still good. When one recognizes this, one is able to appreciate the goodness, the greatness and almost unlimited potential of those around us.

At the same time, all of us Godly human beings make mistakes. Yes, we are God-ly, but we are not God. And only God is perfect.

When one speaks *loshon hara*, one is focusing on the bad that people do. God created a world of Godly and elevated souls and we, in our minds and with our words, turn it into a world of small and petty people. We are looking at God's most precious creation, a human being, created in his image, and not even noticing that goodness.

If we wish to see God in those around us, He is always there to be seen. But equally, if we want

to ignore God, we will see the bad and end up speaking *loshon hara*.

When one puts it into that perspective, it becomes obvious why there are few things in Judaism that are considered worse than talking badly about another person. Next time you are tempted to do so, take a moment to consider how unbecoming it is for a dignified soul to stoop to such depths. It simply doesn't pay.

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