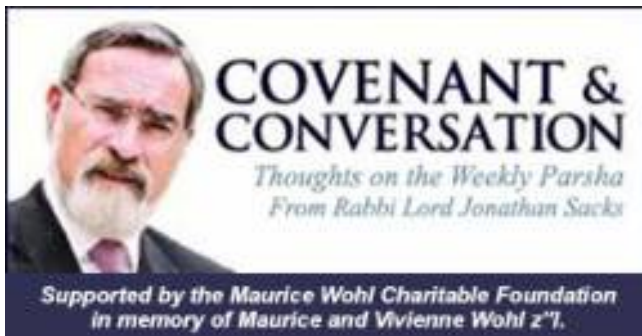


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Words That Heal

In *A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood* (2019), Tom Hanks plays the beloved American children’s television producer presenter Fred Rogers, a legendary figure to several generations of young Americans, famous for his musical invitation, “Won’t you be my neighbour?”

What makes the film unusual is that it is an unabashed celebration of the power of human goodness to heal broken hearts. Today such straightforward moral messages tend to be confined to children’s films (some of them, as it happens, works of genius). Such is the power and

subtlety of the film, however, that one is not tempted to dismiss it as simplistic or naïve.

The plot is based on a true story. A magazine had decided to run a series of short profiles around the theme of heroes. It assigned one of its most gifted journalists to write the vignette about Rogers. The journalist was, however, a troubled soul. He had a badly broken relationship with his father. The two had fought physically at his sister’s wedding. The father sought reconciliation, but the journalist refused even to see him.

The jagged edges of his character showed in his journalism. Everything he wrote had a critical undercurrent as if he relished destroying the images of the people he had come to portray. Given his reputation he wondered why the children’s television star had agreed to be interviewed by him. Had he not read any of his writings? Did he not know the obvious risk that the profile would be negative, perhaps devastatingly so? It turned out that not only had Rogers read every article of his that he could get hold of; he was also the only figure who had agreed to be interviewed by him. All the other “heroes” had turned him down.

The journalist goes to meet Rogers, first sitting through the production of an episode of his show, complete with puppets, toy trains and a miniature townscape. It is a moment ripe for big-city cynicism. Yet Rogers, when they meet and talk, defies any conventional stereotype, turns the questions away from himself and toward the journalist, almost immediately senses the core of unhappiness within him, turns every negative question into a positive affirmation, and exudes

the calmness and quiet, the listening silence, that allows and encourages the journalist to talk about himself.

It is a remarkable experience to watch as Hanks' gentleness, immovable even under pressure, slowly allows the journalist – who had, after all, merely come to write a 400 word profile – to acknowledge his own failings vis-à-vis his father and to give him the emotional strength to forgive him and be reconciled to him in the limited time before he died. Here is a fragment of their conversation, that will give you a feel for the tone of the relationship:

Journalist: You love people like me.

Fred Rogers: What are people like you? I've never met anyone like you in my entire life.

Journalist: Broken people.

Fred Rogers: I don't think you are broken. I know you are a man of conviction. A person who knows the difference between what is wrong and what is right. Try to remember that your relationship with your father also helped to shape those parts. He helped you become what you are.

Note how in a few brief sentences, Rogers helps reframe the journalist's self-image, as well as his relationship with his father. The very argumentativeness that led him to fight with his father was something he owed to his father. The film (though not all the plot details) is based on a true story about the real Fred Rogers and the journalist Tom Junod. Junod, like his character in the film, came to mock but stayed to be inspired. He said about the experience, "What is grace? I'm

not certain; all I know is that my heart felt like a spike, and then, in that room, it opened and felt like an umbrella." The film is, as one reviewer put it, "a perfectly pitched and played ode to goodness."¹

The point of this long introduction is that the film is a rare and compelling illustration of the power of speech to heal or harm. This, according to the Sages, is what Tazria and Metzora are about. *Tsara'at*, the skin condition whose diagnosis and purification form the heart of the parshiyot, was a punishment for *lashon hara*, evil speech, and the word *metzora*, for one suffering from the condition, was, they said, an abridgment of the phrase *motzi shem ra*, one who speaks slander. The key proof-text they brought was the case of Miriam who spoke badly about Moses, and was struck with *tsara'at* as a result (Num. 12). Moses alludes to this incident many years later, urging the Israelites to take it to heart: "Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam along the way after you came out of Egypt" (Deut. 24:9).

Judaism is, I have argued, a religion of words and silences, speaking and listening, communicating and attending. God created the universe by words – "And He said ... and there was" – and we create the social universe by words, by the promises with which we bind ourselves to meet our obligations to others. God's revelation at Sinai was of words – "You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice" (Deut. 4:2). Every other ancient religion had its monuments of brick and stone; Jews, exiled, had only words, the Torah they carried with them wherever they went. The supreme mitzvah in Judaism is *Shema Yisrael*, "Listen, Israel." For

God is invisible and we make no icons. We can't see God; we can't smell God; we can't touch God; we can't taste God. All we can do is listen in the hope of hearing God. In Judaism, listening is high religious art.

Or it should be. What Tom Hanks shows us in his portrayal of Fred Rogers is a man who is capable of *attending* to other people, listening to them, talking gently to them in a way that is powerfully affirming without for a moment being bland or assuming that all is well with the world or with them. The reason this is both interesting and important is that it is hard to know how to listen to God if we do not know how to listen to other people. And how can we expect God to listen to us if we are incapable of listening to others?

This entire issue of speech and its impact on people has become massively amplified by the spread of smartphones and social media and their impact, especially on young people and on the entire tone of the public conversation. Online abuse is the plague of our age. It has happened because of the ease and impersonality of communication. It gives rise to what has been called the disinhibition effect: people feel freer to be cruel and crude than they would be in a face-to-face situation. When you are in the physical presence of someone, it is hard to forget that the other is a living, breathing human being just as you are, with feelings like yours and vulnerabilities like yours. But when you are not, all the poison within you can leak out, with sometimes devastating effects. The number of teenage suicides and attempted suicides has doubled in the past ten years, and most attribute the rise to effects of social media. Rarely have the

laws of *lashon hara* been more timely or necessary.

At the risk of disclosing a spoiler, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood* offers a fascinating commentary on an ancient debate in Judaism, one discussed by Maimonides in the sixth of his *Eight Chapters*, as to which is greater, the *chassid*, the saint, the person who is naturally good, or *hamoshel be-nafsho*, one who is not naturally saintly at all but who practices self-restraint and suppresses the negative elements in their character. It is precisely this question, whose answer is not obvious, that gives the film its edge.

The Rabbis said some severe things about *lashon hara*. It is worse than the three cardinal sins – idolatry, adultery, and bloodshed – combined. It kills three people: the one who speaks it, the one of whom it is spoken, and the one who receives it.² Joseph received the hatred of his brothers because he spoke negatively about some of them. The generation that left Egypt was denied the chance of entering the land because they spoke badly about it. One who speaks it is like an atheist.³

I believe we need the laws of *lashon hara* as rarely before. The social media are awash with hate. The language of politics has become *ad hominem* and vile. We seem to have forgotten what Tazria-Metzora are meant to remind us: that evil speech is a plague. It destroys relationships, rides roughshod over people's feelings, debases the public square, turns politics into a jousting match between competing egos and defiles all that is sacred about our common life. It need not be like this.

1. Ian Freer, Empire, 27 January 2020.
2. Arakhin 16b.
3. Arakhin 15b.



Shabbat HaGadol

The Shabbat prior to Passover is called Shabbat HaGadol. The source of the term is unclear as it is not found in the Tanach or Talmudic literature,¹ though in the Middle Ages a number of authorities occupied themselves with explaining the origin of the term.

One approach sees Shabbat HaGadol as originating with the special Haftarah, specifically the verse which refers to a day in the future which will be *gadol*, meaning "great."²

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord.
(Malachi 3:23)

The prophet speaks of the day of redemption in the future. Passover, which represents the day of redemption of antiquity, serves as the archetype of the future redemption.³ Therefore the Talmud teaches:

Rabbi Yehoshua says: "In Nissan the world was created ... the bondage of our ancestors ceased in Egypt; and in Nissan they will be redeemed in time to come." (Talmud Rosh HaShana 11a)

The tradition, which accords Elijah a primary role in the Messianic age, calls upon us to read the portion of the prophet which alludes to that "great" day.

THE EXODUS TIMETABLE

Other commentaries look back to the past for an explanation for the term. The Talmud teaches that the day the Jews left Egypt -- the 15th of the month of Nissan -- was a Thursday, and the 10th of the month was the previous Shabbat:

As to Nissan in which the Israelites departed from Egypt, on the fourteenth they killed their Passover sacrifices, on the fifteenth they went forth, and in the evening [of the 15th] the firstborn were smitten... and that day was a Thursday. (Shabbath 87b)

The significance of the 10th is mentioned in the Torah:

Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, "In the tenth day of this month they shall take every man a lamb, according to the house of their fathers, a lamb for a house." (Exodus 12:3)

Tosfot⁴ point out that by taking the lamb, the Jews piqued the interest, and the ire, of the

firstborn of Egypt. They pleaded with Pharaoh to release the Jews. When he refused, the firstborn rebelled and attacked their own parents.⁵ Therefore the day is considered great, due to the miracle of God which was manifest and the subsequent unraveling of Egyptian society. Furthermore, by slaughtering the object of Egyptians worship, the Jews liberated themselves from the chains of spiritual slavery.

When the Holy One, blessed be He, told Moses to slay the paschal lamb, Moses answered: "Lord of the Universe! How can I possibly do this thing? Do You not know that the lamb is the Egyptian god? As it says: *If we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?*" (Exodus 8:22) God replied: "As you live, Israel will not depart from here before they slaughter the Egyptian gods before their very eyes, that I may teach them that their gods are really nothing at all." This is what He [God] actually did, for on that night He slew the Egyptian firstborn and on that night the Israelites slaughtered their paschal lamb and ate it. When the Egyptians beheld their firstborn slain and their gods slaughtered, they could do nothing, as it says: *While the Egyptians were burying them that the Lord had smitten among them, even all their firstborn; upon their gods also the Lord executed judgment.* (Midrash Rabbah – Exodus 16:3)

God then said to Moses: "As long as Israel worship Egyptian gods, they will not be redeemed; go and tell them

to abandon their evil ways and to reject idolatry." This is what is meant by: Draw out and take you lambs. That is to say: Draw away your hands from idolatry and take for yourselves lambs, thereby slaying the gods of Egypt and preparing the Passover; only through this will the Lord pass over you. This is the meaning of *In sitting still and rest shall you be saved.* (Midrash Rabbah – Exodus 16:2)

The taking of the lambs was significant on another level as well. The Jews were now occupied with performance of a Divine decree; aside from the rejection of the Egyptian gods they were now actively fulfilling God's command.

A MYSTERY

All these explanations though, seem to point to the significance of the 10th of Nissan,⁶ rather than to the Shabbat which precedes Passover.⁷

While that 10th of the month in Egypt happened to fall on Shabbat, its significance has apparently no intrinsic connection with Shabbat. Our conclusion, based on the sources we have seen thus far, is that we should celebrate the 10th of Nissan as well as the 15th. but Shabbat Hagadol remains a mystery.⁸

In order to understand the idea we must first explore the relationship between Shabbat and the other holidays. Shabbat and the Jewish holidays should be seen as different orbits. Shabbat is a commemoration to creation, while the holidays have an historical impetus. Moreover, Shabbat

exists in a system established with, and as a result of, creation. Every 7th day is Shabbat, independent of any other calendric input. The Divine precept which introduced the Passover holiday began with a command to keep time, to anoint time.

And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying: "This month shall be to you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you. Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, 'In the tenth day of this month they shall take every man a lamb, according to the house of their fathers, a lamb for a house.'" (Exodus 12:1-3)

It is the responsibility of the Israelites to sanctify time. The court decides that the new month has arrived; then, and only then are the holidays set up. It can be said that Shabbat comes from above while the holidays come from below.⁹ The Shabbat was holy due to God's creation and rest:

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Shabbat day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:11)

THE JEWISH CALENDAR

Man dictates the calendar and the holidays:

Rav Yochanan said: "When the ministering angels assemble before God and ask, 'When is Rosh HaShanah and when is Yom Kippur?'

God says to them: 'Why do you ask Me? You and I, let us all go to the Court on earth [and inquire of them].'" (Midrash Rabbah - Deuteronomy 2:14)

While Shabbat existed from the time of creation, only God was bound by this concept; Shabbat did not seem to have much to do with man. The description cited above of Shabbat being the result of creation is absent the second time the Ten Commandments are written in the Torah. There, the verse illuminates a different aspect of Shabbat:

And remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and with a stretched out arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Shabbat day. (Deut. 5:15)

Here we find an historical component to Shabbat. Our duty to observe Shabbat is not due exclusively to the theological concept of creation and God's rest. Rather, the historical events of our slavery and redemption are the focus.

The Sfat Emet explains that the term "Shabbat HaGadol" results from the Shabbat taking on new significance. Only with the Jews redemption from Egypt did Shabbat acquire the historical identity which intertwined with the theology. The Sfat Emet explains that Shabbat had now become "greater": Now the second aspect of Shabbat, articulated in the repetition of the Ten Commandments, would be realized.¹⁰

WHY IS THIS SHABBAT DIFFERENT?

This Shabbat in Egypt was different from all other previous Shabbatot. Now man joined God in His holy day. Ironically, the mode of observance was not resting in the classic sense. Man was bidden to take his lamb, in what we have already noted was a strong polemical statement hurled at the polytheistic, lamb-worshiping Egyptians.

The Sfat Emet states¹¹ that by taking the lamb the Jews observed Shabbat in Egypt. This was their first Shabbat as a people, a moment of passage in the national sense: They had reached the age of majority, became adult ("gedolim"), with responsibilities. This was Shabbat "HaGadol".¹² The most basic teaching of Shabbat is the acknowledgement that God created the world in six days. By taking the lamb the Jews rejected idolatry and accepted God. This was not merely an action which took place on the tenth of Nissan. This was a watershed of Jewish history. Now the Jews joined God in a Shabbat.

The Talmud teaches that one who desecrates Shabbat is guilty of idolatry, for he has rejected the works of God. Now we see that those who rejected idolatry were viewed as "Shabbat observers." Moreover, in taking the lamb, they kept their only Shabbat commandment. This "perfect track record" made it a truly great Shabbat.¹³

Our sages teach us that if all of Israel fully observe just two Shabbatot we will merit the coming of the Messiah:

Rav Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: "If Israel

were to keep two Shabbatot according to the laws thereof, they would be redeemed immediately." (Shabbat 118b)

Interestingly, according to the mainstream Jewish approach the world was created in Nissan, which means that the Shabbat which takes place around the 10th of the month was the second Shabbat in the history of the world. Had those two Shabbatot been kept properly the world would have been redeemed.

In the Sifrei Hapardes, Rav Yeshiel Epstein writes that the two Shabbatot which must be observed are Shabbat Hagadol and Shabbat Shuva. Each of these Shabbatot have a special power to them:

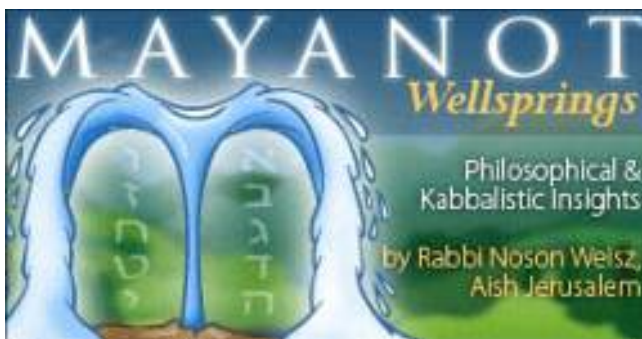
One falls between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, it is a Shabbat which teaches man how to return to God. The other Shabbat is the first Shabbat observed in Egypt. It is a Shabbat which contains within it the secret of redemption.

If man could master these two Shabbatot, the Messiah would quickly arrive.

1. The Machzor Vitri section 259 writes "The Shabbat prior to Passover the people are accustomed to call it "Shabbat Hagadol" though they don't know why. The term may be found in the Zohar 1 47b, 2 204a, Tikunei Zohar 40b.
2. Cited in the name of Rav Shlomo Luria, known as the Maharshal, see Mateh Moses section 542, Rav Ovadia Yosef, Yabia Omer 4:39. Also the Maharal in Gvrurot Hashem chapter 39, and Tiferet Yisrael chapter 44.
3. Rabbi Soloveitchik pointed out that the term "geula" is only used to describe two occurrences: the redemption in Egypt and the messianic age. Other times of salvation are called "purkan," as in references to Channuka and Purim.
4. Commenting on Shabbat 87b.
5. "To him who struck Egypt in their firstborn" (Psalms 136:10). When God sent the plague of the firstborn...All the firstborn went to speak to their fathers and said "Everything which Moses has said has come true, don't you want us to live? Let us get the Hebrews out of our homes otherwise we are dead". They

answered "even if all of Egypt dies they are not leaving". All the firstborn gathered in front of Pharaoh and screamed "Please remove this nation, because of them evil will befall us and you". Pharaoh said to his servants "Remove them and break their knees". What did they do? Each took a sword and killed his father. Thus it says: To him who struck Egypt in (with) their firstborn. (Midrash Tehilim 136:6, Ancient Tanchuma Bo 18). For more on this idea see my Notes on Parshat Bo, 5759.

6. This question has been posed by many: See Taz, Magen Avraham, and other commentaries to section 430 of Orach Chaim.
7. There is some debate as to whether on the Shabbat immediately preceding Passover the special Haftarah would be read in the event that Erev Passover is Shabbat – or if it would be pushed to the previous Shabbat.
8. Some have a custom of reading the Haggada on Shabbat Hagadol. This is mentioned in the customs of the Maharil, Laws of Erev Passover section 10, and was institutionalized by the Ramah Orach Chaim 430:1. The Vilna Gaon (Biur Hagra 430) looked askance at this custom for the Mechilta and the Haggada itself suggest that perhaps the commandment of telling the tale of the Exodus should be performed on the first of the month. Rather the verse stresses "And you shall tell your son *on that day*, saying, This is done because of that which the Lord did to me when I came forth out of Egypt". (13:8) n that day you shall tell your son -- and not on the Shabbat preceding Passover.
9. Rav Tzadok Hacohen from Lublin, Pri Tzadik Shabbat Hagadol 3.
10. Sfat Emet Shabbat Hagadol 5637.
11. Sfat Emet Shabbat Hagadol 5646.
12. Sfat Emet Shabbat Hagadol 5674.
13. See Chulin 5a and the comments of Rashi.



Sticks and Stones

It is quite impossible to appreciate the worldview of Judaism without having some familiarity with the concept of *lashon hara*, literally "evil speech."

In English, *lashon hara* can be loosely translated as "gossip"; but this misses the flavor entirely. Gossiping is no doubt an unattractive habit one might go so far as to say that it is repulsive; but no one would term it evil. But according to Torah law saying anything derogatory about anyone, whether the derogatory information is true or not is forbidden as *lashon hara*, literally 'evil speech,' except in very exceptional circumstances.

Indeed, Jewish thought regards this all too common social practice as one of the greatest moral evils. The sin of speaking *lashon hara* is regarded as the equal of the sins of idolatry, forbidden sexual acts and murder combined (Talmud, Erchin 15b) in the degree of its evil. Tradition teaches that the sin of *lashon hara* was responsible for bringing about the destruction of the Second Temple (Yuma 9b). It is a sin that God refuses to overlook; it brings retribution on its practitioner in this world as well as in the next.

Lashon hara is also the prime cause of contracting *tzara'at* – a particularly vile skin disease akin to leprosy – the illness dealt with in this week's Torah portion. (See Maimonides, Yad Hachazaka, Ethics 7:2-3; Talmud, Yuma 9b and Erchin, 16a; and, Yerushalmi, Peah 1.)

How can we relate to the severity with which the Torah regards this widespread and apparently 'harmless' social custom?

SPEECH OR GOD'S BREATH?

"And YHVH Elohim formed man out of dust from the earth, and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life. And man became a living being." (Genesis 2:6)

Onkelos, the translator of the Torah from the original Hebrew into Aramaic, translates the word 'living' as 'speaking'; his version: *"And man became a speaking being."*

God's breath in man – the source of the Divine life force in the human being – is manifest in him as the power of speech. The ability to express his innermost thoughts and communicate them to others is the phenomenon that connects man to the Divine.

While all of creation – itself brought into being through a series of speeches – testifies to the glory of God, apart from the solitary exception of man the testimony is mute. Only man is able to comprehend and verbalize the idea that his very existence is an expression of God's glory. Only he can give voice to the testimony that the entire universe was created to express. His power of speech casts man in the role of the universal spokesman; as we shall see, this unique role is his reason for being.

King Solomon expressed the thought in a more dramatic way:

"Death and life are in the hands of the tongue, and whoever loves either will eat of its fruit." (Proverbs 18:21)

The Midrash, elaborates the meaning of the above verse with the help of a metaphor:

The king of Persia took ill and was advised by his doctors that he needed to drink the milk of a lioness in order to be cured. Someone volunteered to bring the king fresh lion's milk; he only asked for ten goats. He took the goats and traveled to where the lions

hang out. On the first day, when he was sure that a lioness saw him clearly, he threw her a goat from far away. The next day he came closer... by the tenth day he had won her trust and managed to obtain a full jug of lion's milk.

On his way back he had a vision; the parts of his body had a major argument. The legs said, "None of the other limbs can compare to us. If we would not have transported the body, it would have been impossible to obtain this milk." The hands argued that they were without parallel. If they hadn't performed the various actions necessary, it would have been impossible to obtain the milk. The heart argued that if it had not come up with the idea of the goats the entire project would have been impossible. The tongue argued that if it had not spoken up, all would have been for naught.

All the other limbs were enraged at the tongue, "How do you even dare to make any claim? You are in a dark place hidden away, you can't do anything and can't think of anything!" The tongue told them, "You will see, this very day you will all agree that I am your master."

After the man heard all this, he went to the king and told him, "Your majesty, here is the bitch's milk." The king was enraged and demanded that he should be hung. On the way to the execution, all the limbs began to cry. The tongue told them, "Didn't I tell

you that you are all helpless? If I save you, will you all acknowledge my superiority?" They all agreed.

The man then asked the executioner to let him speak with the king once again, and his request was granted. He told the king to try the milk as it would surely cure him, and anyway many people also refer to a lioness as a bitch. The king tried the milk and was cured, and the man was spared. Indeed "*death and life are in the hands of the tongue*"! (Midrash Shochar Tov, Ch. 39)

The Midrash emphasizes a concept we often overlook; the impact of events can never be measured in terms of the events themselves; the impact is a function of the way they are perceived and communicated. This rule applies to the universe as a whole just as much as it does to the things that take place in it.

SUBJECT TO INTERPRETATION

The world that God created is not clear-cut; it does not speak for itself and is subject to interpretation. Everything that happens in the world can be interpreted in more than one way. Until the tongue has its say, no one knows how to size up the significance of anything.

Look at John Smith, a man who started on the bottom and fought his way to the pinnacle of success. Someone can put him down and say that John Smith comes from a really low class family. Someone else can relate to the same information with admiration and say that John Smith managed to accomplish a great deal without any strong

family backing. Jane Doe positively dominated an important meeting and managed to prevail over strong opposition. Some will say that Jane Doe was so rude and overbearing that everyone just decided to let her have her way. Others will say that Jane Doe knows how to stand up for her principles and isn't it wonderful how hard she fought to defend her beliefs.

Events and actions provide the backdrop against which the tongue wields its might. We are all familiar with this phenomenon. Publicists and "spin doctors" are much in demand in our world and the talented ones command very high salaries.

It is impossible to exaggerate the significance of this phenomenon, as Jewish history shows.

Rava said, "No one could speak *lashon hara* like Haman. He told Ahasuerus, 'Let's destroy them [the Jews]!' The king answered, 'I'm afraid of their God, lest He do to me what He did to earlier kings [Nebuchadnezzar, Belshezar and Sanherub, who were all destroyed for their maltreatment of the Jewish people].' Haman told him, 'They are dormant in their observance of the commandments.' The king said, 'What about their rabbis?' Haman answered, 'They are a single people [their rabbis are like the rest of them] ... they are all scattered and separated [they have lost their inner cohesion].'" (Megila 13b)

The Midrash reveals the enormous implications of what would appear to be an earth bound conversation; Haman's 'gossip' reverberated through the universe whose impact penetrated all

the way up to the heavenly court; so powerful were his remarks that they were responsible for an edict of destruction to be issued against the Jewish people in Heaven.

He could have looked at the same phenomenon – the low level of observance of God's commandments among the Jews – and attributed it to extreme discouragement and depression rather than to weakness of faith. According to everyone's calculations the seventy years of the Babylonian exile should have been over by this time and yet the promised redeemer had never arrived. The presumption was that he never would arrive. But Haman chose to advance the view that the lack of observance was not due to mere discouragement but was the manifestation of a deeper malaise; a loss of direction and an abandonment of faith.

The heavenly court was forced to accept this interpretation as legitimate; it was a reasonable interpretation of the facts; a rational judgment arrived at by an intelligent human being. A negative interpretation that fits the facts on the ground cannot simply be ignored; the Attribute of Justice will not allow it; it must be refuted. The edict of destruction could only be overturned when the Jews refuted Haman's interpretation of the facts existentially through their sincere repentance.

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

The enormous power of *lashon hara* is not in the repercussions negative remarks have down here on earth but in the impact it has in heaven. Man is the spokesman of the universe. He was the only creature selected by God to be a "communicative

spirit." He is the being who was appointed to interpret creation and communicate its meaning. As such, his definitions superimpose themselves on reality. When man defines an aspect of creation, even God reacts to His own creation on the basis of man's definition.

The Hebrew word for "tongue" is *lashon*, a word that also refers to the balancing bar at the top of the scale, the part of the mechanism that tilts the scales. It is the tongue that weighs all man's ambiguous actions and tips the balance in the direction of innocence or guilt. The 'scales of justice' are under the jurisdiction of the tongue.

Left to its own devices, the heavenly court is always inclined to be lenient and patient. If there are two possible interpretations of motivations and actions, it will always adopt the favorable view. God is never in a hurry. He is always willing to give the benefit of the doubt. However, if down here on earth, a Jew interprets the actions of a fellow Jew in an unfavorable light, the heavenly court is bound by this earthly judgment. It will accept the unfavorable interpretation and proceed accordingly. It is 'Evil speech' that leads to judgment, not the evil action it intends to describe.

THE MEASURE OF A PERSON

But not only is the tongue in charge of the 'scales of justice'. Through the medium of 'good' and 'evil' speech, the tongue measures the balance between physicality and spirituality to be found in each person. We human beings are a mixture of the physical and the spiritual; of bodies and souls.

As bodies we inhabit a world of limitations. We compete with each other for a limited supply of goods and honors. Theoretically whatever our colleagues have are things that could have been or could still be ours instead. In this sort of situation we tend to put each other down. Since everyone's position in a competition is relative to first place, if I bring someone down that puts me so much closer to the front; or at least gives me the comfort of knowing that I am not the only loser. This type of world-view leads directly to evil speech.

As souls we are in a limitless world. Each one of us was sent to the world to accomplish something unique and given the means and the equipment to do it. Our bodies are the suits that we wear in order to be able to function in this physical world. Clothes never define the man. None of us is in competition with each other; it is impossible for anyone to get hold of anything that was written for someone else. There is nothing to be gained from anyone else's failure. On the contrary, one of the elements of my own mission is to assist anyone I possibly can to be successful at theirs. There is nothing to be gained by bringing anyone down. There is no incentive to 'evil speech'.

The amount of *lashon hara* a person speaks provides an accurate existential measure of how much that person sees themselves and other people as primarily spiritual and how much they regard themselves as physical. Spiritual levels cannot be measured by the dogma in people's heads. A person can walk around with the conviction that he is primarily a soul and refute his own convictions by speaking *lashon hara* the

behavior that is only appropriate to someone who is primarily a body.

Judaism is not a dogmatic religion. The tongue is the accurate measuring stick of a person's true spiritual level, not the fancy ideas in his head.

THE POWER OF UNITY

There is one more balance in the hands of the tongue, the balance of power. To demonstrate this thesis we must first establish the correspondence between power and unity. Jews are separate entities only physically. Spiritually, the higher up we explore ourselves the more uniformity we find. We can easily grasp the sense of this. Each person is contained in a separate clearly distinguishable physical envelope. Our heights are different, the length of our noses vary widely, some of us are male some female etc.; it is easy to tell us apart from one another.

If we existed as disembodied characters we would still be distinct from one another although the differences in character are subtler and less noticeable than the physical differences between us. Some of us are more courageous, some more generous, some more humble, etc. But intellectually we are almost entirely alike. The truth is the same for all of us. The objective significance of intellectual information does not vary from person to person. We may not all be equally gifted but all minds work the same. If all of us were pure intellects it would be extremely difficult to tell us apart from one another.

In the *Mincha Amidah* prayer on Shabbat we make the following declaration:

"You [God] are one, Your name is One and who is like Your people Israel, one nation on earth."

Examining this statement in light of our thesis about individual differences, the unity of the Jewish nation referred to is clearly spiritual and reflective of the unity of God. To comprehend this sort of unity fully we must comprehend the unity of God a little better.

When we say God is One we do not mean to assert that there aren't two Gods. That is self-evident. The declaration of God's unity is really a statement concerning His uniqueness. None of us could exist in a state of unity. We need food to eat, air to breath, others to talk to and a million other things before we can be. Thus, if I am conscious of a person's existence I know that there is a world out there, there is a sun and stars and a billion other things as well. Like they say, "No man is an island." It is in this sense that God is unique in being able to exist as One: beyond space or time, without any other existence at all beside His own.

When we say that His Name is One, we are looking at God's unity from our perspective. Names are the way we focus and compress our perception and knowledge of someone into a single word that calls them instantly to mind. A name is the spiritual essence of the person being described, if you will.

The third unity mentioned in the prayer, the unity of Israel is a further reflection of the unity of God. There is God's unity as it is to Himself: You [God] are One; there is His unity as we relate to it through His name: You name is One; finally there

is God's unity as it interacts with the Jewish people who become the physical embodiment of His unity just as His Name is its spiritual embodiment.

Needless to say, we can tap into a limitless source of energy if we become the physical embodiment of God's One-ness. Just as this One-ness is totally independent and requires no help or support from any other source, the Jewish people who connect to this One-ness by serving as its physical embodiment share these qualities, are fully self-sufficient and independent and in a sense omnipotent. But this sort of unity requires an inner harmony between Jews as well. You cannot act as the embodiment of One-ness when you are internally divided.

THE GATEWAY

The gateway to the world of the spirit is in the power of speech, and the drawbridge that provides or denies access is controlled by the tongue. It is in speech that man combines spirituality with physicality. The faculty of speech involves the body. It is based on breath, the vocal chords, the tongue, and so on. Yet speech itself is an expression of the human spirit.

"Good speech" – *lashon hatov* – expresses the unity between the physical and the spiritual parts of man. When parts of man are unified, they form an entity that can plug into the third expression of God's unity, the Nation of Israel and draw energy from the source of all life the One-ness of God.

"Evil speech" – *lashon hara* – closes this gateway to the spiritual world. Man is stuck in the world of the physical, where he only has his own individual resources upon which he can draw.

The centrality of the idea of social unity in Judaism is clearly reflected in that bedrock of statement of Jewish ethics:

"All Jews are responsible for one another." (Talmud, Shvuoth 39a)

The implications are clear; we all benefit from each other's merits and we all suffer from each other's faults. If all Jews truly felt this way, we would feel the same compulsive impulse to conceal the faults of any fellow Jew as we feel toward concealing our own shortcomings. Indeed, we would be so biased, that we would only perceive the flaws in our fellow Jews with the same difficulty we experience in recognizing our own faults.

UNITY AND HOLINESS

Unity and holiness are virtually identical concepts in Jewish thought. God's presence, the *Shechinah*, was manifest in the 1st Temple. The existence of a Temple in Jerusalem testifies to a state of harmony and peaceful coexistence between the spiritual and physical worlds. The first Temple, as the Shechina rested in it, clearly indicated this.

But the Second Temple had no manifest Divine presence. The Shechina never rested its Presence in it. If so, it is legitimate to wonder about the rationale of its existence. What did it represent?

If we think about it deeply, we are once again in the area of the three unities mentioned in the

Mincha Prayer. God is One and His Name is One is the rationale for the first Temple on which the stamp of the Divine Name was clearly visible. But that still leaves the third unity that expresses the unity of God; the unity of the Nation of Israel is the repository of the first two unities. This third unity, the unity of Israel is the secret of the Second Temple. It stood on the unity of Israel with God.

A unified Israel is always connected to the source through the principle of "You are One and Your Name is One and who is like Your people Israel, one nation on earth." As long as this unity is preserved it is possible to draw life from the spiritual to the physical. The unity of Israel automatically renders the world a place that can be inundated with holiness.

The First Temple was destroyed by the cardinal sins of idolatry, licentiousness and murder. But during the Second Temple these sins were nowhere in evidence. The Talmud tells us that the Jews were diligent in Torah study and were generous in helping each other (Talmud Yuma 9b). The Second Temple was destroyed by *lashon hara*. As Jewish unity was the foundation upon which it was built, the dissolution of Jewish unity was its destruction.

When Jews are on a high enough spiritual level, the misuse of the tongue can make itself physically manifest. Death is the severance of the connection between the soul and the body. Severance between the spiritual and the physical is a type of death. *Lashon hara*, the force that severs the connection between the physical and the spiritual causes a type of death that makes a

physical appearance in the form of skin disease akin to leprosy.

The *metzora*, the leper, is like a dead person. By speaking *lashon hara*, he severed the connection between his soul and his body and defined himself as a physical being. He declared himself in competition with everyone else and attempted to isolate people from each other.

When there is a Temple standing that testifies to the state of unity with God, such a person is forced to live out his inner lifestyle. He develops a terrible skin disease that isolates him from the rest of humanity. People avoid him and he becomes a social outcast. He gets to live within the spiritual atmosphere that he was busy generating through his *lashon hara*. He experiences the world as defined by his own tongue. He remains apart until he finds a spiritual cure for the misuse of his Divine attribute of communication. When that happens the gateway to his soul is reopened and the power of holiness pouring in cures him.

If we only learned to speak properly we would open the channels to each other and unlock the spirituality in the universe.



The Measure of Distinction

The affliction of *tzaraas* is not caused by a microbe or by impurities in the water supply. The Talmud tells us (*Arachin* 16a) that it is caused by any of seven sins. The most famous of these is *lashon hara*, improper speech, he was afflicted with *tzaraas* as a not very subtle message from Heaven that he had better shape up and watch his mouth. Such a person would have to seek the assistance of a *Kohein* who would hopefully help him mend his erroneous ways.

Rav Nissan Alpert observed that the word the Torah uses here for a person is *adam*, which generally denotes a person of greater stature and distinction than does the word *ish*. It seems peculiar that when discussing a person who speaks *lashon hara*, the Torah would use language that denotes a person of distinction.

Clearly, the measure of a person that determines whether or not he has stature or distinction is not if he speaks *lashon hara*. Unfortunately, most people fall into the trap of doing so. The opportunities and the snares are so many that it is almost impossible to avoid it altogether without a tremendous focused effort. The measure is rather how a person deals with it. A person of distinction

is mortified that he has spoken *lashon hara*. He wants to improve himself, to fortify himself against any recurrence of such a thing. A smaller person rationalizes or shuts it out of his mind altogether.

A distinguished person can stumble and inadvertently speak *lashon hara*, but as long as he demonstrates a desire to change and improve he can still be considered distinguished. He has to make the effort. The Torah says that “he shall be brought to the *Kohein*.” The language implies a measure of coercion. He has to force himself to go. He has to be ready to take his medicine. That is the measure of distinction.

One Chol Hamoed morning, Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer was sitting in his study with Rav David Finkel, one of his students. They were discussing various subjects when Rav Isser Zalman suddenly touched his forehead as if he had forgotten something.

“Could you please bring me a pencil and a piece of paper?” he asked.

Rav David was perplexed, since it is only permitted to write on Chol Hamoed in case of emergency. Perhaps it had momentarily slipped Rav Isser Zalman’s mind that it was Chol Hamoed. “Ahem,” he said, “isn’t it forbidden to write on Chol Hamoed?”

“This is different,” said Rav Isser Zalman. “It’s practically a matter of life and death.”

“Is something wrong, *Rebbi*?” Rav David cried out. “Is something going on? What can I do to help?”

Rav Isser Zalman shook his head. “You can bring a pencil and paper.”

Rav David hurried off and returned momentarily with a paper and pencil. He gave them to Rav Isser Zalman and stood back, trembling with apprehension.

To his amazement, Rav Isser Zalman wrote out a quotation from *Mishlei* (4:25), “Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids will straighten your path.” Then he put down the pencil.

“That’s it, *Rebbi*?” asked Rav David. “That’s practically a matter of life and death? To write down a few words from *Mishlei* that you already know by heart?”

“In a certain way,” said Rav Isser Zalman, “this is very much a matter of life and death. For me, that is.”

“I don’t understand,” said Rav David.

“I will explain it to you. On Chol Hamoed, hundreds of people here in Yerushalayim come to pay me a visit. Among them are many fine and respectable people, Torah scholars, pious Jews, friends and relatives. But there are also plenty of the less-distinguished residents of Yerushalayim. For some reason, it has become like a ‘thing to do’ on Chol Hamoed. Go visit the Meltzer house.”

He paused for a sip of water.

“If you stay here for a while, you will see the type of people that come visit me on Chol Hamoed, braggarts, nasty people, lunatics, derelicts, fools, and I have to welcome all these people with patience and kindness. I have to sit here patiently

and listen to all of them and smile. Sometimes, I feel my patience being tried sorely. I am tempted to lash out at them with a few well-chosen sharp words. I have to hold myself back. I have to control myself, but I am afraid I will make a mistake and say something I shouldn't say. So I've worked out a system for myself. I write down this verse from *Mishlei*. Here, take a look at it."

Rav David read it and returned it.

"I once heard a homiletic interpretation," continued Rav Isser Zalman, "that reads it as saying, 'When your eyes look at someone else, turn them inward.' When you see someone else's flaws and shortcomings, don't focus on him. Focus on yourself. Look at your own shortcomings. You are also far from perfect. This is what I think about at those moments when I am close to losing control. If I wouldn't have the paper there on my desk, staring me in the face, I am afraid I would just lash out. But then I see the paper, and it stops me. I always write this paper out before Yom Tov, so that it should already be prepared for Chol Hamoed. This year, I forgot. That is why I have to write it now. Otherwise, I would be in trouble."

Rav Isser Zalman was a very great man, and he knew that keeping away from all forms of *lashon hara* is a struggle. He worked hard to avoid criticizing others and looking at their faults. He felt it was practically a matter of life and death.

There are only two types of people in the world, those who view the glass as half empty and those who view the glass as half full. Those who speak *lashon hara* always view the glass as half empty; they only see the faults of others, not their virtues.

Those who look away from the faults of others take a more positive view of the world; they see the glass as half full. In the long run, these people are the happiest. They see the positive in their spouses, their children and their surroundings. But one who speaks *lashon hara* is miserable in the end, because it makes him into a negative and destructive person. As destructive as he is to others, he is most destructive to himself.

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