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This Isn't Happening TO Me, But Rather FOR Me

In this week's Torah portion, God tells us that *tzaaras*, a spiritually type of leprosy that is a result of performing certain sins, particularly speaking derogatorily, could also manifest on houses. The owner would have to remove everything inside the house, and a *Kohein*, a Priest, would determine whether or not it was in fact *tzaaras*. And if it was *tzaaras*, then eventually the part of the wall that contained the blemish would need to be cut out and removed.

Can you imagine having to remove everything from your house? What a job! But even more

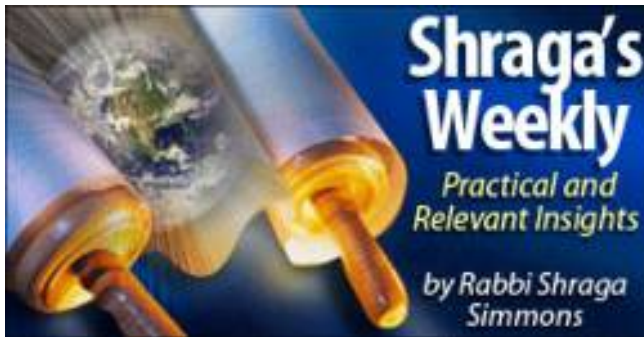
overwhelming would be to start knocking down walls to ensure that no *tzaaras* remained. But something miraculous often happened when walls were removed. Many years previously, when the Canaanites heard that the Jews were going to conquer the land, they hid their valuables in the walls of their houses. As such, when the Jews were knocking down their walls, they often found gold and treasures hidden inside!

How excited do you think the Jews were to find the treasures! When just a few moments prior they were most likely bemoaning their fate of having to break down their house. Instead of thinking this *tzaraas* is happening *to* them, they now see it was happening *for* them! Everything God does is *for* us, for our benefit. However, if we think that we are victims to circumstance, arbitrarily being whisked around from here to there, then we are likely to miss the many opportunities that are being presented *just so* that we can step into the best version of ourselves. If we instead stop and reflect that this isn't happening to me, but rather *for* me, then we can extract the many blessings awaiting us in that moment.

However, we still need to break down the wall. *Tzaaras* was still a result of their sin. But when they recognized their deficiencies and resolved to be better, then God sent them a special reward. So it is with our life as well. Sometimes we need reminders that certain things in our lives or beings require correction and growth. But the reminders are *for* us – for our benefit, for our growth, for us to step into the amazing people God knows that we can be.

The Hebrew word for blemish is *nega*. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for pleasure is *oneg* – the difference between these two words – blemish and pleasure – is where you place the Hebrew letter *ayin*, which means “eye” in Hebrew. It’s all dependent on our perspective. We can see things as either a blemish or as pleasurable; it depends on our perspective. If we see things happening *to* us, it can look like a blemish. However, if we view things as *for* us, out of love from God, it transforms that into a pleasurable experience that allows us to find the treasures hiding beneath the surface.

Exercise: When encountering an inconvenience think that this is happening to serve you and your purpose in this world.



The Power of Speech

*One man spread a rumor about another. He later felt regret, and went to the rabbi to ask how to make amends. "Go to the store and buy a bag of seeds," said the rabbi, "then go to a big open field and **scatter the seeds into the wind**. Do so and report back to me in a week."*

*The man did as he was told, and came back the next week to find out what to do next. "Now," said the rabbi, "go back to the field and **pick up all the seeds**."*

"But," protested the man, "those seeds have scattered far and wide! I'll never find them all. Many have even already taken root!"

"Exactly," explained the rabbi. "Now you understand. When we speak badly about another person, the effect is far and wide. And it is damage that can never be fully undone."

One of the most difficult sections of the Torah to understand is this week's parsha which discusses *Tzarat*, a skin disease commonly mis-translated as "leprosy."

In truth, *Tzarat* is a physical manifestation of a spiritual deficiency. The Talmud (Arachin 16) says that *Tzarat* comes specifically as a consequence of "*Loshon Hara*" — negative speech about another person. For example, we see that when Moses' sister Miriam spoke *Loshon Hara*, she contracted *Tzarat* (Numbers, chapter 12).

What is the connection between speaking badly — gossiping about another — and contracting this skin disease?

To Build or to Destroy

Speech is the tool of creation. Through it we can build individuals and the world. We can praise, encourage, and give others confidence. By making others feel important, we build them up,

as if to say, "Your existence is necessary." This is life-giving and life-affirming.

One of the great American rabbis of the past generation, Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld zt"l, was known to have brought a neighbor back to Torah observance simply by caring enough to say "good morning."

On the other hand, speech can also be used to destroy. Words like "you're worthless" wipes out a person's self-esteem. As King Solomon says, "Life and death are in the hands of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21). The Talmud (Arachin 15b) explains that negative speech is even worse than a sword — since it kills many people, even at great distance.

Remember the expression "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me"? This was clearly not said by a Jew!

Beyond the individual destruction, we have all seen the power of gossip — a vicious rumor — to tear apart relationships, families, and even entire communities.

Of course, just as the Torah prohibits speaking *Loshon Hara*, we are prohibited from even listening to it. (Which makes sense — if I can't listen, then you can't speak it!) By listening to negative talk we fuel the viciousness and become desensitized to its effect on others.

From here we can understand a section of this week's parsha, Leviticus 13:45-46. The Torah says that when someone has been diagnosed as having *Tzarat*, they must go outside the boundaries of the city and shout "Contaminated!" to anyone who approaches. The punishment is

measure-for-measure: If you promote divisiveness amongst others, then you will also suffer the divisiveness of separation from community.

Limits of Loshon Hara

Many people make the mistake of thinking that the Torah prohibition of negative speech is limited only to saying falsity and untruth. But this is not so. Lying falls under a separate prohibition, expressed in Exodus 20:13, 23:7.

Loshon Hara, meanwhile, is the prohibition against saying anything negative or derogatory about another person — even when it's true!

Often, *Loshon Hara* will couch itself in a cloak of rationalizations. It doesn't even matter whether the words are spoken implicitly or implied. If the message can be construed negatively, then it is a violation of *Loshon Hara*.

Be aware of potential *Loshon Hara* situations and stop them before they start. For instance, reunions are particularly rife with gossip: "Oh, did you hear about so-and-so..."

The Talmud says that the human body was constructed to help a person refrain from *Loshon Hara*. The teeth and lips serve as "gates" to regulate what emerges from our mouth, while the tongue lies in a horizontal resting position. Furthermore, while humans have two eyes, two ears and two nostrils — we have only one mouth as a reminder to minimize chatter. And, says the Talmud, for what purpose did God create ear lobes? So that if we find ourselves in a situation where *Loshon Hara* is being spoken, we can conveniently turn the lobes upwards as ear plugs!

Here are some commonly-spoken forms of *Loshon Hara* to watch out for:

1. "But it's true!"
2. "But I didn't even mention his name!"
3. "I wouldn't care if someone said the same thing about me."
4. "Everyone knows about it already, anyway."
5. "He wouldn't mind."
6. "I'd say it even to his face."
7. "Just kidding!"
8. "There he goes again... "
9. (Saying nothing...but rolling your eyes!)
10. "People from that city are so..."
11. "It's all in the name of business competition!"
12. "This may be *Loshon Hara*, but..."
13. "C'mon, you can tell me..."

All these qualify as *Loshon Hara*.

There is one exception to this rule, however. We may speak or listen to negative information if we are absolutely sure it is for the **constructive purpose of preventing future damage**. But before you go ahead and use this exemption, make sure the following conditions apply:

- The information must be objectively true, not a matter of taste or opinion.
- You must have first-hand information, not hearsay.
- You must first give the perpetrator a chance to respond to the allegations.
- You can have no ulterior motive or personal gain from what you say.
- You must avoid mentioning names whenever possible.

Why Do People Gossip?

What would motivate one person to speak badly about another?

Low self-esteem. When a person feels down about himself, there are two ways to feel better – either 1) make the effort to work and build oneself up (this is a lot of hard work!), or 2) put others down. The reasoning being, if I can lower others, then I don't look so bad by comparison! But that's the easy way, the "quick high." And is that the kind of person you want to be?

The media has built an empire around knocking down big targets — like movie stars, politicians and business leaders. For the average person who may see himself languishing in mediocrity, it is a source of aggravation to see others' success in life! So, knock them down — and problem solved!

This may explain as well some basis for anti-Semitism. The nation that holds itself to a higher standard is a constant reminder of the human potential for sanctity and morality. Why is the world so eager to point out every misstep taken by Israel? Because by eliminating respect for that higher standard, the obligation to strive for that standard likewise falls away.

The first step in avoiding *Loshon Hara* is to recognize our own faults and commit to improving on them. When I accept that I alone am responsible for my inadequacies, then I will similarly be less critical and more tolerant of others.

If you find yourself getting "down" about yourself or others, try focusing away from the faults and

instead on the virtues. It will lift you out of your negativity.

The Torah says: Feeling down? Don't take the easy way out. Work hard and improve yourself.

Judge Others Favorably

So what happens if we inadvertently hear *Loshon Hara*? The Talmud says that we should not automatically accept it as being true. Rather, the rule is "innocent until proven guilty."

There is a famous story about the great Talmudic sage the Rashash (Rabbi Shmuel Shtrashun, 19th century Vilna) who had a fund to lend money to poor people. One day while the rabbi was studying Talmud, the local tailor came in to repay his loan of 10,000 rubles. The rabbi was so engrossed in his learning, that he stuck the money in the book and forgot about it.

A week later, the rabbi was reviewing his loan ledger and noticed that the 10,000 ruble loan was never paid. So he called the tailor and asked him to pay it. "But I paid you back last week," said the tailor. "Okay, then where's your receipt?" said the rabbi, who truly had no recollection of being paid back. "You were studying and I didn't want to disturb you," replied the tailor.

Soon enough word got out that the tailor and the rabbi were involved in a financial dispute. "The nerve of this man to pit his word against the rabbi!" they all said. The tailor's reputation was ruined, and he was shunned by the community.

About a year later, the rabbi was reviewing a section of Talmud and came across an envelope containing 10,000 rubles. Then he realized what

had happened! He immediately called the tailor and apologized. "But your apology doesn't help me," he said sadly. "My reputation is ruined forever!"

"Don't worry," said the rabbi. "I'll make a public announcement in the synagogue, letting everyone know that it was I who had made the mistake."

"But that won't help," said the tailor. "They'll think you're just saying it because you feel sorry for me."

The rabbi thought long and hard until he came up with a solution. "You have a daughter and I have a son," he said. "Let's arrange for them to be married. In that way, everyone will be assured that you are fully trustworthy, for otherwise I would never agree to this match." And with that, the harm was repaired.

But it's not always so easy...

Speech and the Process of Redemption

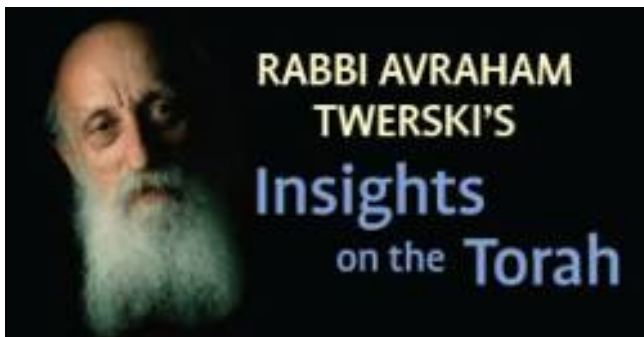
The Talmud asks: Why was the Holy Temple destroyed? Because people spoke *Loshon Hara* about each other. Thus, says the Chafetz Chaim (the 20th century codifier of the laws of *Loshon Hara*), refraining from gossip is the single most effective way to reverse the damage and bring about the redemption!

There is no better time to undertake this challenge than today. We find ourselves in the season of redemption. Passover celebrates our emergence from slavery unto freedom. Also at this time we count the Omer, on the way toward receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. Now is the time to break

the dissent and divisiveness which plague our people.

Two rabbis in Jerusalem have written user-friendly guides outlining the parameters of *Loshon Hara*. They are both excellent sources for further study: "Guard Your Tongue" by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, and "Chafetz Chaim — A Lesson A Day" by Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz. In addition, many cities offer pre-recorded telephone classes dealing with *Loshon Hara*.

Imagine how the world would change ... if all humanity jumped on this bandwagon?!



Passover, Freedom and Shabbat HaGadol

In most years, the Shabbos on which we read Parashas Tzav is Shabbos HaGadol, the "great" Shabbos, which comes before Passover. Countless explanations have been given for the appellation Shabbos HaGadol.

The Midrash states that on this Shabbos, the Israelites in Egypt acquired sheep for the Passover offering. The sheep was an Egyptian totem, and many of the Israelites had fallen under the sway of Egyptian idolatry. Sacrificing the

sheep was a repudiation of paganism and an open defiance of Egyptian rule.

The essence of idolatry is not the worship of an icon. Jews were never so foolish as to believe that an animal, a tree or a statue was a god. Rather, because the ethical and moral teachings of God are restrictive, people may establish a religion and a godhead that allows them to gratify their desires without feeling guilt that they are transgressing a Divine commandment. The Talmud states this very clearly: "The Israelites knew that the idols were without substance. They were simply looking for a sanction to permit them to indulge in forbidden relationships" (Sanhedrin 63a).

People who are driven by powerful cravings may rationalize, and rather than resist the compulsion, they may try to justify their behavior. Idolatry is nothing but a self-deceiving rationalization.

The idea for my Haggadah, *From Bondage to Freedom*, came from a recovered drug addict. Attending his father's seder, he interrupted his father when the latter began reciting *Avadim Hayinu* (we were slaves unto Pharaoh). "Father," he said, "can you truthfully say that you, personally, were ever a slave? You may not be able to appreciate what it is to be free. I can say that I was a slave. When I was in my addiction, I had no freedom at all. I was under the tyranny of drugs. I did many things that I never thought myself capable of doing. I did them because I had no choice. I was a slave to drugs and they were my master. Today I can make choices. Today I am free."

Drugs are not the only form of enslavement to which people are subject. People who smoke in

spite of the knowledge that they are destroying themselves are slaves to nicotine. Some people who are dangerously overweight are a slave to food. Some people are driven mercilessly to achieve acclaim, and others to accumulate more wealth than they could ever consume. All of these drives are essentially tyrannical dictators that control a person.

The sacrifice of the sacred sheep was a rejection of idolatry. It was a repudiation of the compulsivity of our mundane drives. It was our Declaration of Independence, not only of our freedom from the rule of Pharaoh, but also from the ruthless tyranny of our internal drives. We would now be free to choose what is right and proper, even if it is in defiance of a bodily urge.

A child is dominated by bodily drives. He does not have the intellectual capacity to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong. This is why a child is not held legally responsible for his actions. As he matures, he gains intellect, and as an adult, he is held responsible for his actions. The rule of the intellect rather than that of internal drives is what distinguishes an adult from a child.

The Hebrew word for a minor is *katan*, and for an adult, *gadol*. The Shabbos on which we rejected rule of the body in favor of rule of the intellect is the Shabbos on which we asserted our maturity as a *gadol*. Perhaps this is one of the many meanings of Shabbos HaGadol. With the sacrifice of the totem and the repudiation of idolatry the Israelites established themselves as dignified, mature adults.

The festival of Passover is far more than an Independence Day celebration. The Torah

writings say that the happenings of the first Passover set a precedent, and that all subsequent Passovers have the magic of that momentous event.

A high level of spirituality is not easily achieved. It requires much effort in divesting oneself of character defects that are antagonistic to spirituality. Some of these may be deeply engrained and may resist being eliminated.

The Israelites in Egypt were at the lowest possible level of spirituality. The Midrash states that of the 50 levels of *tumah* (spiritual decadence), they were at the 49th, and the Arizal said that had they not been delivered from Egypt at that precise moment, they would have descended into the depths of *tumah* from which they could never have emerged.

Yet in that sorry state, the Israelites were privileged to a Divine revelation, as the Haggadah says, “With great awe’ refers to the revelation of the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence).” Several days later, at the dividing of the Reed Sea, there was a Divine revelation so intense that the least of the Israelites had a prophetic vision greater than that of the prophet Ezekiel (Rashi, Exodus 15:2). For there to be so great a spiritual experience while not having emerged from so lowly a state was a unique phenomenon.

The Chassidic writings say that this set a precedent for the future, that on Passover it is possible for a person to make a leap into spirituality even if one has not yet divested oneself of character defects. They say that this is the meaning of the blessing we recite to commemorate the miracles of Chanukah and

Purim: “Blessed are You . . . Who has wrought miracles in those days at this time.” This time, the present, the days on which the miracles occurred, is a propitious time for miracles. Similarly, the days of Passover are propitious for repetition of the unique phenomenon of achieving spirituality when one is in a state that would make this impossible at other times.

The Haggadah commentaries call our attention to the formula for the order of the seder: *kadesh*, *urchatz*, recite the kiddush and wash the hands. They point out that this may also mean *kadesh*, become holy and *urchatz*, wash yourself. Usually one must cleanse oneself of all defects before one can acquire holiness. On Passover the sequence may be reversed. One may acquire holiness even if one has not prepared oneself adequately.

The Psalmist says, “Desist from evil and do good” (Psalms 34:15). One must first abandon all improper behavior before doing good. However, it can also be read as “Desist from evil by doing good.” “A small amount of light can banish a great deal of darkness” (Tzedah LaDerech 12). Passover is the time when this can best be accomplished.

Passover is *zeman cheirusenu*, which is not simply the time when we became free, but the time when we were freed, the time when God delivered us from enslavement. Just as one may be a slave to a cruel taskmaster, one may also be enslaved by the tyranny of one's bodily drives or by addictive habits. Breaking loose from these may be very difficult, but is much easier on Passover. All that is necessary is a sincere desire

to become spiritual, and the Divine blessing will enable one to achieve that desire.

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