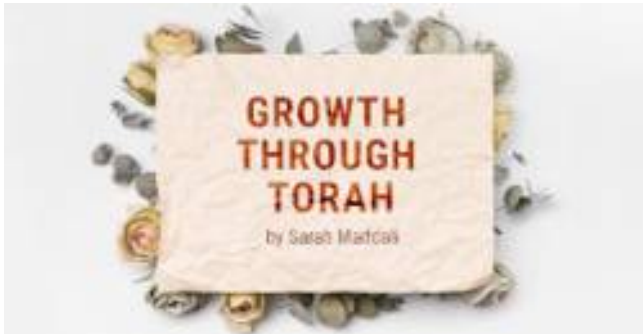


In this Issue

- **Growth through Torah** by Sarah Maddali
- **Shraga's Weekly** by Rabbi Shraga Simmons
- **Torah for Your Table** by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis
- **Rabbi Avraham Twerski's Insights on the Torah** by Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski



Stop Running

This week's Torah portion beautifully illustrates how the physical word reflects the spiritual world.

A spiritual contamination caused by speaking *lashon hara*, negative speech, manifests as a physical blemish on the skin, clothing, or house. The first stage of rectification for this blemish is total confinement. When someone, God forbid, is a physical hazard to society, then confinement away from others seems appropriate. However, why would isolation be a necessary first step in rectifying a spiritual blemish?

Lesson:

We know that eating unhealthy food is harmful to our body. But how would we know if we're doing something unhealthy to our *neshama*, soul? In God's abundant kindness, He sends a physical symptom so that we become aware of our spiritual contamination. Even after the awareness of having done something wrong, God tells us that we need to go into confinement; we need to be with no one except ourselves. This situation lends itself for introspection and self-assessment, necessary requisites to rectify our behavior, and change to become better.

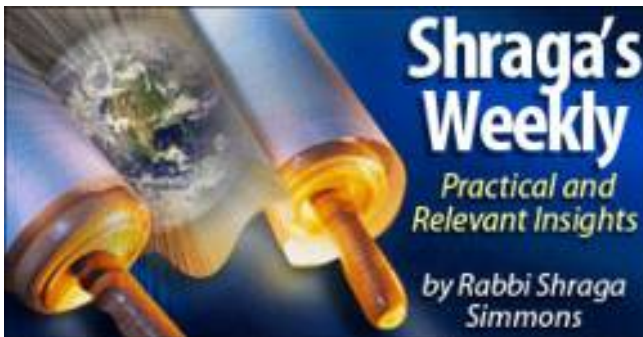
We like to justify our behavior to fit our motives and desires, casting off guilt and responsibility. "That piece of negative speech is justified because that person did something really atrocious; or it was not really so bad to speak negatively about that person because I was just venting about how I felt. Or it's not really so bad because I could have said a lot more, whereas I just hinted at my disdain for someone." We like to rationalize our actions because admitting we were wrong is hard. And just as difficult is holding back what we want to do or say.

It is easier to be distracted than to admit fault within ourselves and create tangible ways to rectify them. By being in total confinement, God is telling the person to be still. Stop running. Stop producing. Stop with distractions, entertainment, and disruptions. Stop thinking about outward things but instead look inward. Reflect on your life. Think about where you are going and where your actions are taking you. Consider areas of your character that require improvement.

Consider relationships in your life that can be mended and enhanced. We can only accomplish this when we are still, alone, quiet.

God gives us all this amazing gift of an opportunity to truly stop, reflect, and make those changes necessary to propel us to the next level of our highest selves. And when we do, we can achieve amazing spiritual heights! If someone wants to eat a cookie, and they refrain, then they have not gained any weight, but they have not lost any either; it is a neutral situation. In God's abundant kindness, not only does holding yourself back from anything negative save you from a transgression but propels you higher spiritually! When we stop and reflect on areas that require improvement and make subsequent positive changes we will be propelled to amazing heights, even more so than before and fulfill our highest, holiest potential, please God.

Lesson: Confine yourself for ten minutes, no phone, no distractions. Think about something you can improve upon and a tangible way to make that happen. Then do it.



Spiritually Pure

One problem that causes difficulty in learning about various concepts in Judaism is the

translation of Hebrew words. Many of these words have no precise English definition because they express spiritual ideas that have no parallel in English culture.

Such is the case with the words "*Tahara*" and "*Tuma*," two concepts which receive prominent treatment in this week's Parsha.

These words are popularly translated as "purity" and "impurity."

In English, the word "pure" implies something perfectly clean, flawless, unpolluted or innocent. Ivory Soap is advertised as "99.44% pure."

A quick check of the word "impure" in your thesaurus will yield synonyms such as contaminated, corrupt, tainted, and unclean.

That is why so many people think that "*Tamay*" means "spiritually undesirable" or "dirty."

This misconception, coupled with the belief that "*Tuma*" applies only to women and sexuality, creates the impression that women are discriminated against in Judaism, and that sexuality is considered "dirty."

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Good and Evil, Life and Death

The central tenet of Judaism is that God is one. Absolutely one. There is no force that exists independent of Him.

Man's struggle in this world – the exercise of his free will – is in choosing either to move toward God and reality, or to move away from God, to illusion or nothingness.

We call these choices "good" and "evil." When man makes a choice that moves him closer to God, he is choosing "good." When he makes a choice that moves him away from God, he is choosing "evil" (see Maimonides, "Guide for the Perplexed" 3:23).

Evil has no intrinsic reality. It is the absence of good, or the absence of an open manifestation of God. God's existence can be open and clear to us, or it can be hidden from us.

The open presence of God is what we call "*Tahara*." A state of God's hiddenness is what we call "*Tuma*."

In other words, "*Tuma*" is really a "*Tahara*-vacuum."

The state of *Tuma* can devolve upon men, women and animals. When the open presence of God – the soul, or life – leaves a man, woman or animal, that body becomes *Tamay*.

Sources of *Tuma*

Let's go back to the English concept of "*Tuma*" as "spiritually undesirable" or "dirty."

Which would you think is more "spiritually unclean" – a dead dog or a dead human being?

Most people would think a dog is more "spiritually unclean" because it is a lower form of existence than a human being.

Actually, the dead body of a human being contains a much greater degree of "*Tuma*."

Because the human being, when it is alive and filled with a soul – the open manifestation of God's presence – has a much greater condition of

Tahara. The manifestation of Godliness within a human being is far greater than that within an animal. Therefore, when the soul departs, it leaves behind a much greater vacuum of *Tahara*, a much stronger *Tuma*, than that of an animal.

Next in the ranks of "*Tuma*" is a *Yoledet*: a woman who gives birth (Leviticus 12:2). The reason she is *Tamay* is that a degree of spiritual vacuum is created by the departure of the extra life within her – the child.

It is interesting that when a woman gives birth to a girl, her state of "*Tuma*" is twice that of when she gives birth to a boy (Leviticus 12:5). That is because the presence of a female child within her gives her a greater state of "*Tahara*." The female bears within her the power to give life, a condition that is an open manifestation of Godliness, and a higher level of "*Tahara*." The departure of a female child, therefore, creates a greater spiritual vacuum. Hence, the woman is *Tamay* for a longer period of time.

Whisper of Death

Next amongst the degrees of *Tuma* is the loss of "potential life." This *Tuma* affects both men and women.

After having marital relations, men are in a state of *Tuma*, because of the loss of the "building blocks" of life within them (Leviticus 15:16). And women incur this state of *Tuma* when they menstruate, because of the loss of potential life within them (Leviticus 15:19).

The Talmud calls this a "whisper of death."

Tuma is not a description of spiritual inferiority, impurity or uncleanness. Rather, it describes a loss of life.

I hope this helps clear up a misconception.

(based on "Eye of the Needle" by Yitzhak Coopersmith)



The Power of Speech: Death and Life Are in the Tongue

This week's *parashah* deals with the illness of *tzaraas* (spiritual leprosy), which in Biblical times afflicted those who spoke *lashon hara*. Most people are under the impression that *lashon hara* connotes speech containing fabrications regarding others, but that is erroneous. *All evil, derogatory talk falls under the category of lashon hara*, even if it is the truth.

Our Torah regards the sin of *lashon hara* as so heinous that those who were guilty of it succumbed to a skin disease known as "*tzaraas*." Since this was a spiritual ailment (albeit with physical manifestations), the afflicted had to be brought before Aaron the High Priest or his

descendants, rather than to a physician, for examination and healing.¹

The question that must occur to us is why the person must be brought, specifically, before Aaron the High Priest. What was so special about him that enabled him to examine and cure the individual who spoke *lashon hara*?

Lashon hara creates divisiveness; it generates animosity and contempt, forces that are antithetic to harmony and well-being. Aaron the High Priest loved people with such intensity that he was able to neutralize those negative forces. *Ethics of the Fathers* 1:12 states, "Aaron loved peace and pursued peace." When he saw two people in conflict, he would approach each of them individually and say, "You know, your friend truly regrets this altercation. As a matter of fact, he beseeched me to approach you on his behalf. He loves you and wants to make peace with you." He would then repeat the very same message to the other party involved and thus would appease them and make peace. To appreciate the awesomeness of Aaron's deed, contrast his way to that which has unfortunately become the norm in our society, in which people are only too happy to repeat gossip and thus further incite and deepen conflicts between others. Throughout his life, Aaron was determined to cement ties and bring harmony and love to fragmented families and broken relationships. When Aaron died, all of Israel, the entire nation, wept and mourned, for at one time or another, everyone had been touched by his awesome love and his passionate commitment to peace, and they realized that that gift was irreplaceable.

AARON'S LEGACY

Perhaps now we can better appreciate why Aaron's descendants were designated to bless the Jewish people through *Bircas HaKohanim* (the Priestly Blessings). Prior to pronouncing these benedictions, the priests are commanded to say, "Blessed are You, O Lord our God, Who has *sanctified us with the holiness of Aaron* and commanded us to bless His people, Israel, with *love*." What is the holiness of Aaron? It is the total devotion and commitment that Aaron felt for each and every Jew, a commitment summarized in one little word: *b'ahavah* - with love. It is Aaron's love that is the unique hallmark of all his descendants, and it is that love that is the most vital qualification for imparting blessing.

CAN LASHON HARA EVER BE JUSTIFIED?

There are those who would justify speaking *lashon hara* by claiming that they are just being honest and forthright and telling the *truth*. But Aaron taught us that there are times when truth must take a back seat, for we cannot and dare not put others to shame. We do have specific laws regarding giving honest information concerning *shidduchim* and business partnerships so that people are not misled. However, even in such cases, we must know how to phrase our words ... what to reveal and what to hold back ... and a Torah authority should be consulted before information is shared.

Lashon hara is such a serious infraction that there are 14 positive commandments and 17 negative commandments regarding it. The great sage, the Chofetz Chaim, warned that *lashon hara* is the

most destructive of all sins, for it literally destroys people. Indeed, "*death and life are in the tongue*."² God created us in such a way that our own organs serve to remind us to be aware of the potential danger inherent in our tongues. Our organs are either external (eyes, ears, etc.) or internal (kidneys, heart, lungs, etc.). The tongue is the *only* organ that is both internal and external. To protect it from misuse, God gave us two gates to guard it: our teeth and our lips, reminding us that, before we use our tongues, we should shut the gates and carefully consider whether we should allow our tongues to speak or whether it would be wiser to remain silent and keep the gates closed.

GUARD THAT WHICH ENTERS AND LEAVES YOUR MOUTH

Parashas Tazria and *Metzora* are usually read together. The word *metzora* is a combination of two words, *motzei* and *ra*, meaning, *to speak evil of others*. The juxtaposition of these *parshiyos* to *Parashas Shemini* is very instructive, for in the previous *parashah* we studied not only the dangers of speaking *lashon hara*, but about forbidden, non-kosher foods as well. By placing these two *parshiyos* - forbidden food and *lashon hara* - next to each other, the Torah reminds us that not only must we be careful about that which *enters* our mouths (that which we eat), but we must be equally careful about that which *comes forth* from our lips (that which we say). We must be ever on guard not to cause pain to anyone with our words. Since this is no small achievement, we pray for God's help and guidance. Therefore, we conclude every *Amidah* service with those

awesome words, "My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully."³

Lashon hara is the equivalent of all three cardinal sins, a concept that might be difficult for us to absorb. In the 21st century, gossip has become a profession. Newspapers employ gossip columnists. Gossip columnists have social cachet and are very much sought after by hostesses and the media, and some of the biggest bestsellers are based on gossip. Our Torah laws are like a beacon of light that illuminates our path and reminds us of our higher calling. Speech is a Divine gift, given only to man. To abuse that gift is to betray that trust.

To what extent we must go to avoid *lashon hara* can be learned from Miriam, the prophetess, who in good faith criticized her younger brother Moses, and for those seemingly innocent words, was afflicted with *tzaraas*. The Torah commands us to *remember* what happened to Miriam and be cautious with our words even when we believe that we are speaking for the benefit of another.

THE HEALING EFFECTS OF THE TORAH

This shall be the Torah [Law] of the *metzora*.⁴ A *metzora* is someone who sins by speaking *lashon hara*. Interestingly, the word "*Torah*" is invoked five times in this regard, teaching us that he who speaks evil about others is considered as if he had transgressed all Five Books of the Torah. Surely, this should impress upon each and every one of us the severity of this transgression.

Contrast this to the childish rhyme that is so popular in our culture: Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.

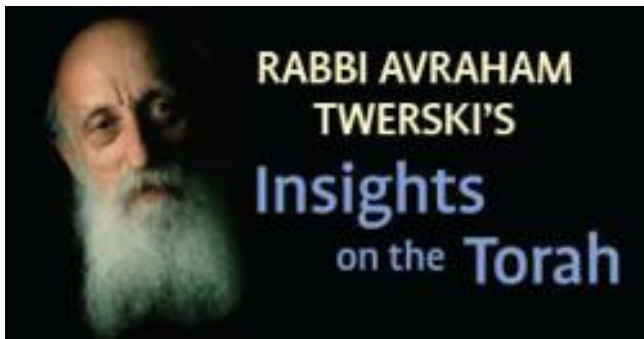
Regarding this rhyme, our mother, Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, would often say that reality proves just the opposite. To mend broken bones, one can always consult an orthopedist, but where can one go with a broken heart? Who can heal scars on the soul?

REMORSE: INDICATION OF TRUE SINCERITY

"This **shall be** the law of the *metzora*" is written in the future tense, teaching us that feelings of remorse and a resolve to refrain from speaking *lashon hora* must characterize the *metzora* even **after** he goes through his purification process. In time of crisis and pain, it is easy to make commitments of *teshuvah*, but maintaining those commitments once the crisis has abated and healing has taken place is the true test of one's sincerity. How can a person hold on to his resolve and keep his promises? The answer is Torah study, the best maintenance program.

When Torah study is undertaken with purity of heart, it elevates, heals, and protects from spiritual malaise. God assures us of this, "I created the *yetzer hara* (the evil inclination), but I created the Torah as an antidote to it."⁵

1. *Leviticus* 13:12.
2. See *Proverbs* 18:21: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue...."
3. See *Psalms* 34:14.
4. *Leviticus* 14:2.
5. *Kiddushin* 30b.



Elixir of Life

If a person (adam) will have on his skin . . . a tzaraas affliction (Vayikra, 13:2).

The Talmud is very clear that the affliction of *tzaraas* (the exact nature of which is unknown to us) is a punishment for having spoken *lashon hara*, derogatory speech.

The Hebrew word the Torah uses for “person” in the above verse is *adam*. There are several other Hebrew words for “person”: *enosh*, *ish*, *gever*. The ethical writings state that each refers to a level of spirituality, and *adam* represents the highest level. We must understand, therefore, the Torah's choice of the word *adam* for a person afflicted with *tzaraas*.

The Chafetz Chaim said that the juxtaposition of this portion of the Torah to that of the previous portion dealing with non-kosher animals is to teach us that people who may be meticulously careful about what goes into their mouths should be equally as scrupulous about what comes out of their mouths. There are sins which a Torah observant person would never do, but as for *lashon hara*, it is a rare person who is saved from

it (Bava Basra 164b). Hence, even a spiritual person, *adam*, is vulnerable to *lashon hara*.

The Midrash relates that a peddler went through the streets shouting, “Who wishes to buy an elixir of life?” R' Yannai, who was engrossed in his Torah study, asked to see his wares. The peddler said to him, “For you I have nothing.” Upon R' Yannai's insistence, the peddler took out a Book of Psalms and showed him the verse, “Who is the person who desires life and loves days that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech” (Psalms 34:13-14). R' Yannai then said, “All my life I have been reciting this psalm, but I never understood it until this peddler pointed it out to me” (Vayikra Rabbah 16:2).

This Midrash has puzzled many Torah scholars. What was in these verses that he had never grasped previously? The words of the psalm could not be any clearer: Guarding one's tongue from *lashon hara* is conducive to long life.

Perhaps we may understand this by examining the Talmudic statement that the remedy for *lashon hara* is the study of Torah (Arachin 15b). A number of commentaries ask, In what way is Torah study a penance for *lashon hara*? The Jewish law is that if you have offended someone, it is essential that you make amends to that person and ask his forgiveness. They answer that it is not the study of Torah per se that constitutes penance. Rather, the study of Torah will enable a person to understand the gravity of *lashon hara* so that he will do what is necessary for penance.

The gravity of *lashon hara* can be seen in the episode of Joseph and his brothers, which was

brought about by his speaking derogatorily about them (Genesis 37:2), and in what happened to the prophetess, Miriam, when she spoke improperly regarding Moses (Numbers 12:1-10). To this very day, we are suffering the consequences of the lashon hara delivered by the spies to Moses (ibid. 13:31-32). This should make one cognizant of how far-reaching the effects of lashon hara can be, and how diligent one must be to do proper teshuvah.

While the mitzvah of studying Torah is extraordinarily great (Shabbos 127a), the Talmud points out that Torah can be a double-edged sword. “If one merits, Torah can be an elixir of life; if one is not virtuous, Torah can be a deadly poison” (Yoma 72b). How penetrating these words are! If used improperly, Torah can be destructive.

The impact of derogatory speech depends on the character of the speaker. If a person who has little credibility makes a negative comment about someone, people are likely to dismiss it as worthless babble. However, if the speaker is a person of stature, a scholar whose opinion carries some weight, the attitude towards his words is, “If he says so, it must be true. He knows what he is talking about.” The more learned a person is and the higher he is held in esteem, the more his words are taken seriously.

The Baal Shem Tov taught that every human character trait can be put to good use. But what about vanity? This is so abominable a trait that it repels the Divine Presence (Arachin 15b). How can vanity ever have a positive application?

We can see, however, that even vanity can have a redeeming feature. Before making a negative comment about someone, do not be humble and think of yourself as an insignificant person whose words will not be heeded. This is the time when vanity can temporarily be put to good use. “I must be careful of what I say. People are not likely to dismiss my words lightly. I am an important person, and my words can have a great impact.”

The greater a Torah scholar a person is, the more he must be careful of his speech. The words of an esteemed Torah scholar will be taken seriously. If he speaks negatively about someone, he has allowed his Torah scholarship to become a negative force. The Midrash says that lashon hara destroys three people: the speaker, the listener and the one about whom it is spoken (Devarim Rabbah 5:10). If Torah scholarship gives credibility to one's lashon hara, it indeed becomes “a deadly poison.”

The man who was peddling the “elixir of life” was not an unlearned person. He was trying to teach people *mussar*, personal growth. He did not believe that a great Torah scholar like R' Yannai was in need of his teaching. When he told R' Yannai that his teaching about lashon hara was not relevant for Torah scholars, R' Yannai remarked, “I was unaware that people had this mistaken impression. To the contrary, it is those who are Torah scholars who have great need for this elixir of life, because Torah has value only if one is virtuous. Negligence on the part of a Torah scholar, particularly in speaking lashon hara, can seriously distort the value of Torah.”



Tazria (Leviticus 12-13) *basic compendium*

We can be spared from lashon hara if we incorporate the second half of the verse, “loves days that he may see good.” In his introductory morning prayer, R' Elimelech of Lizhensk says, “Help us to see the good in our fellows, and not their defects.”

If we concentrate on looking for the good in people, we will have no need to make negative comments about anyone.

**Get more great parsha
content:
[aish.com/weekly-
torah-portion](http://aish.com/weekly-torah-portion)**