

Naamah Lampert

April 28, 2017

NYHS Family Shabbat Dinner

D'var Torah - Tazria & Metzora

This week we have a double parsha: Tazria and Metzora. In these parashot, we discuss the condition of *tzaraat* (leprosy). This condition is the result of behavior called *lashon hara* (evil speech). Though there is not a direct prohibition in the Torah regarding *lashon hara*, our people regard it as a terrible sin, worse than even idolatry, murder, and incest combined. In the Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Deot, our sages say that when a person speaks *lashon hara*, the sin kills three people: The one who says it, the person who it was said about, and the person who listened. What makes *lashon hara* **so** terrible? Why are these three people so affected? And why do our sages regard it as one of the worst possible sins? The answer to this question is embarrassment.

In the famous book Gates of Repentance, it is said that the pain of shame is even worse than death itself. In the Talmud, Bava Metziah 58b, Rabbi Nachman ben Isaac says, “He who publicly shamed his neighbor it is as though he shed blood.” In Bava Metziah 59a, Rabbi Yochanan says, “Better to throw oneself into a furnace

rather than embarrass another.” From these sources, we can see that shaming a friend is one of the worst possible sins we can commit. Perhaps this is why our sages regard lashon hara as such a terrible sin.

Throughout the Torah, we see the sin of *lashon hara* and its negative effects. We can see how dangerous evil speech can be with the story of Yosef and his brothers. In Sefer Bereshit, perek lamed-zein, pasuk beit, it says, “וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת־דִּבְרֵתָם” (and Yosef brought an evil report to his father about some of his brothers). There were many factors involved that led to Yosef’s brother to try to kill him, and this was one of them. The derogatory gossip that Yosef told Ya’akov did not endear him to his siblings and made it so his brothers built up even more animosity towards him.

Another place where we see the dangers of *lashon hara* is with the story of the *Meraglim* (spies.) When sent to go explore the Land of Israel, the spies came back with a *diba*, an evil report about the land and its inhabitants. As a result of their *diba*, no one in their generation could enter the Land of Israel.

It is clear from these examples in the Torah that when *lashon hara* is involved, Hashem deals severe consequences. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says that there is a reason for this. He says that Judaism is less a religion of holy people and holy places, rather it is a religion of holy words. When G-d created us, he created a

“speaking soul.” Rabbi Sacks says that language is life, and that words can be creative and beautiful but also destructive. If good words are holy, then evil words are a desecration.

However, despite all these stories and sources, *lashon hara* remained a problem through Jewish history and is still a major problem today. Unfortunately, *lashon hara* is one of the most often violated prohibitions in today's world. Every person from children to adults says *lashon hara* at some point.

In our modern world today, we have a wonderful thing called the internet. The web helps us connect with people, and makes communication very easy. As a student who boards in Seattle to attend NYHS, I use the internet very often to FaceTime with my family in Israel and it is a very useful tool for me. However, just like language can be both beautiful and harmful, so too the internet can also be both good and bad. With the internet today and social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, it is even easier to gossip about people. The internet is a tool that can be used for hate-speech, cyberbullying and other forms of *lashon hara* that ruins people's lives. Not only does it make communication much easier, but it saves gossipers the face-to-face encounter that requires them to exercise self control.

And now I would like to circle back to this week's parsha and the topic of tzaraat. We have discussed lashon hara, the sin that causes tzaraat, and why this sin is so terrible. But why is this disease specifically used to punish those who speak lashon hara?

Tzaraat can appear in different forms: a discoloration of garments, skin disease, or even house walls. It is a disease that is immediately visible, that attracts attention. If you think about it, this is a very fitting punishment for lashon hara. When people engage in hate-speech they think they can get away with it. “After all,” they think to themselves, “it’s just words.” Rabbi Sacks says that by using tzaraat as a punishment, the Torah is telling us that malicious speech uttered in private must be stigmatized in public, and that those who engage in it are worthy of being openly shamed themselves.

We should learn from this that the way we behave and the words we speak have a great impact on those around us and on ourselves. When we speak lashon hara, it hurts the person who is cruel enough to say it, the person who becomes embarrassed, and the listener who is too submissive to walk away. We can only expect kindness from others when we ourselves are kind to them. “ואהבת לרעך כמוך” (and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.) We must embrace these values and do our best to create environments in which lashon hara is not tolerated.

We must commit to speaking in a way that will build up and strengthen our communities. Let's come together and be more kind and more loving towards our fellow Jews. Let's be part of a religion that is more than just of holy people and holy places - let's be part of a religion that is of holy words.

Thank you, and Shabbat Shalom!!