A Matter of Life and Death

Dealing with these perplexing portions head on, at long last

Tazria -Metzora 5778

Rabbi Joshua Hammerman - Temple Beth El, Stamford CT

ד זֹאת, הַתּוֹרָה, לְכָל-נֶגַע הַצָּרַעַת, וְלַנָּתֶק.	**Lev. 14:54** This is the law for all manner of plague of leprosy, and for a scall;
נה וּלְצָרַעַת הַבֶּגֶד, וְלַבָּיִת.	**55** and for the leprosy of a garment, and for a house;
נו וְלַשְׂאֵת וְלַסַּפַּחַת, וְלַבֶּהָרֶת.	**56** and for a rising, and for a scab, and for a bright spot;
נז לְהוֹרֹת, בְּיוֹם הַטָּמֵא וּבְיוֹם הַטָּהֹר; זֹאת תּוֹרַת, הַצָּרָעַת. {פ}	**57** to teach when it is unclean, and when it is clean; this is the law of leprosy.

"Death and Life are in the power of the tongue" – Proverbs 18:21

Four big questions for the grossest two portions in the Torah...

1) **What do physical things have to do with religion in the first place? If religion is for the soul, for heaven, for God, why does the Torah devote so much space to skin, infection, blisters, leprosy?**
2) **If aspects of the body have to be dealt with, why can't it be like the Song of Songs, where human beauty is presented so pleasantly, so nicely: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness." Tazria and Metzora could not be more unpleasant**
3) **If we have to be physical in order to be spiritual, if disease has to be faced, diagnosed and healed, isn't it dangerous to leave these matters to the priest, the Kohen, the religious figure? How far is this from witchcraft? Is the priest a witch doctor?**
4) **And finally, what does this all have to do with gossip?**

IT'S ALL ABOUT LIFE AND DEATH -- AND THE JEWISH VIEW OF EACH

We'll discuss these questions superficially at the service; here are some notes for a deep dive into each of them on your own....

1) **BODY AND SOUL**: Judaism is about life -- all of life, body and soul. That is why the Torah deals with food, as well as with prayer; with sex as well as with study; with the body as well as the soul.

   - The emphasis on the body in the Jewish concept of *tehiyat ha-meitim* (the quickening of the dead) is not primitive religion, as Maimonides would have us believe, but a healthy appreciation of **the sanctity of the whole person**. I prefer to understand this article of faith not as a claim about what will happen in a time beyond our understanding, but rather as a view on how we ought to conduct our lives here and now.
   - Similarly, the abhorrence of death prompted the Torah to forbid priests to come near the corpse of an Israelite, except for their immediate relatives. And the high priest was denied even that dispensation. Prof. Baruch A. Levine: **the intent of these restrictions was to prevent the appearance in ancient Israel of a cult of the dead,** a form of worship widespread among its neighbors. **By imputing extreme impurity to the dead, the Torah squelched the possibility that the sanctuary and temple could become the locus for any funerary rites.** That selfsame abhorrence induced the Torah **not to invest the afterlife with any religious significance**. In fact, the Torah has no clear notion of what happens after death and surely does not hold out any prospect of personal salvation. Instead, it opted resolutely for embracing the gift at hand:"*I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse*," declares Moses to Israel just before his death. "**Choose life** (Deut. 30:19)." Nor do we have any idea where Moses is buried. His grave was not to become a shrine. Neither death nor the dead were to dominate our lives.
   - **QUESTION**: How does this relate to death practices we know of? (wash hands after cemetery/ Kohen stays outside/ funerals frowned upon the synagogue...**should we do them so often here???** Has that had an impact on us??? (Living next to a cemetery -- death is no longer "other." *Is this a good thing*?)
   - But that view could not long prevail. Gradually, rabbinic Judaism developed clearer notions of individuality, life after death, and personal salvation, while the customs of yahrzeit and yizkor did not emerge until even later, after the First Crusade. In the process **biblical terms had to be shifted from this world to the next**. A particularly striking example is to be found in the delicate and well-known phrase ***"may their souls be bound up in the bond of life***," in the *El Malei Rahamim* prayer recited in memory of the dead. In the context of this moving dirge, the phrase is an elusive expression of hope that the souls of our loved ones will find eternal rest in God, the bond of all life. But the phrase **is borrowed from a biblical context where it has no connection to the afterlife**. David and his men are on the run from Saul's wrath and about to attack a wealthy scoundrel named Nabal. His wife Abigail intercedes to stay David's hand from murder. She assuages David with a munificent gift of her own and acknowledges the righteousness of his cause, which must not be tarnished by innocent blood. She assures David of God's protection in battles to come. "And if anyone sets out to pursue you and seek your life, the life of my lord will be bound up in the bundle of life in the care of the Lord; but He will fling away the lives of your enemies as from the hollow of a sling (I Samuel 25:29)." While both the biblical and liturgical uses of *bi-tzror ha-hayyim* (the

bundle or bond of life) refer exquisitely to God (non-pictorially, I might say**), the biblical instance is decidedly this-worldly.** Because of its antipathy to death, the Bible simply lacked the vocabulary to meet the need of imagining the world-to-come. **Indeed, it triumphed over death by affirming life**.

2) Dirt, sickness, disgust: Is cleanliness next to Godliness??

Bathroom prayer...

Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe who with wisdom fashioned the human body, creating openings, arteries, glands and organs, marvelous in structure, intricate in design. Should but one of them, by being blocked or opened, fail to function, it would be impossible to exist. Praised are You, Lord, healer of all flesh who sustains our bodies in wondrous ways.

- We desire to put religion on a pedestal, and say, incorrectly, that "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." Not since the pristine Garden of Eden has life or religion been clean, pure, fresh, unspoiled and virginal. Ever since Adam and Eve messed around with each other, religion has had to deal, and properly so, with the bedroom and the bathroom, the slaughter house and surgery, with umbilical cords, foreskins, menstrual cycles and leftovers from the beautiful Shabbat meals chucked into the garbage.
- Religion can't win. If it is realistic and deals with life and death, disease and pain, it is called filthy, repellant. If it deals only with pie-in-the-sky, hope and faith, it is accused of wishful thinking and illusion. Tazria and Metzora are in the Torah, and actually read in the synagogue, because the body has to be dealt with, even the diseased body, even disgusting leprosy. **Judaism is real or it is nothing.**
- Jewish belief in this life: skin diseases symbolize death - note Miriam's leprosy in Numbers 12:12 - "*Let her not be as a dead person.*" These thoughts are triggered by the Torah's current preoccupation with the subject of leprosy and illness. The Torah considers the status of new mothers, persons afflicted with a disease of the skin, and persons experiencing abnormal discharges from sexual organs. All three are deemed to be conditions of less than perfect health warranting some degree of separation. For the Torah, which is wholly committed to affirming life, death becomes the ultimate source of impurity. And conditions regarded as life-threatening or a diminution of life likewise contaminate. Prof. Jacob Milgrom explains the Torah's underlying worldview in his Anchor Bible commentary on Leviticus:

...in the Israelite mind, blood was the arch symbol of life. Its oozing from the body was no longer the work of demons [a worldwide view], but it was certainly the sign of death. In particular, the loss of seed in vaginal blood was associated with the loss of life. Thus it was that Israel -- alone among the peoples -- restricted impurity solely to those physical conditions involving the loss of vaginal blood and semen, the forces of life, and to scale disease, which visually manifested the approach of death. All other bodily issues and excrescencies were not tabooed, despite their impure status among Israel's contemporaries, such as cut hair or nails in Persia and India and the newborn child as well as its mother in Greece and Egypt. Human feces were also not declared impure.... The elimination of waste has nothing to do with death; on the contrary, it is essential to life. (p. 767)

3) Of the three challenges the third is the most difficult. Is the Kohen a doctor? Is the Kohen qualified to diagnose, treat and cure the disease? **Are we to use the medicine of the Torah or modern medicine?**

- Let us look at the text. The Kohen only diagnoses**, he does not treat**. There are no ointments, no pills, no cures in Tazria. **Only diagnosis**, on the basis of mere external appearance. If it is white,if it spreads, if it is red, if if it is raised**. The Kohen was not a doctor.** He merely decided when something was wrong, and the patient should be quarantined. Perhaps they had conceptions of contagion in those days. The Torah speaks of a transfer of the state of Tumah, contamination, from person to person, from person to garment or other object. Is this a matter of sterility? Probably not. It is a matter of social and spiritual purity.

- Real medicine is referred to elsewhere in the Torah. With reference to the person who has been hurt in an assault, it says: **Verapo Yerape**. Which means the attacker must pay for the medical expenses suffered by his victim. From this passage the Talmud deduces: **Mikan Shenitan Reshut Lerofei Lerapot**. From here we learn that the physician has permission to heal. We do not say it is God's will that he be sick. From this there flows a distinguished history of Jews in Medicine. Which has nothing to do with the Kohen in Tazria. Tumah and illness are not the same. Tumah has a spiritual dimension to it. The Kohen deals with Tumah, the doctor deals with illness.

- What is the spiritual dimension of Tazria? The Rabbis find hints in the Torah that Tzoraat, leprosy, is associated with pride, arrogance, gossip, the evil tongue. We find this in the story of Miriam who gossips about Moses and her hand becomes white as snow. We find this in the Haftarah of Tazria which tells the story of Naaman, the general who had to wash away his pride in the lowly waters of the Jordan,

4) Words yield worlds. See Shai Held commentary and Shmirat Halashon rules on following pages.

Whether we have answered the four questions adequately is not the point. The point is how we approach Torah. We should not be shocked when it deals with physical things. We should be willing to get into the dirt of life, face the unpleasant, if we expect Torah to be relevant to reality, if we expect to emerge clean and pure from the Mikveh of religious experience. **Its ways are ways of pleasantness, indeed, but its byways are full of garbage.** Just as our kitchens are clean, but a lot of trash is removed from it every day. **Perhaps one of the functions of religion is to teach us the art of Waste Disposal, Proper skin care, and purity of the mouth, as well as the heart and mind.** If we have to read Tazria-Metzora once a year, let us learn what we can from it, and move on to Kedoshim (Holiness) and Behar, the mountain of inspiration and revelation.

Ten Rules Of Shmiras Haloshon

Loshon hora means the making of a derogatory or damaging remark about someone. The Torah forbids one to denigrate the behavior or character of a person or to make any remark that might cause physical, psychological or financial harm.

Here are ten basic rules to remember:

1. It is loshon hora to convey a derogatory image of someone even if that image is true and deserved. (False derogatory statements are called motzi shem ra, slander.)
2. A statement which is not actually derogatory but can ultimately cause someone physical, financial, or emotional harm is also loshon hora.
3. It is loshon hora to humorously recount an incident that contains embarrassing or damaging information about a person even if there is not the slightest intent that they should suffer any harm or humiliation.
4. Loshon hora is forbidden even when you incriminate yourself as well.
5. Loshon hora cannot be communicated in any way, shape, or form (i.e., through writing, body language, verbal hints, etc.).
6. To speak against a community as a whole is a particularly severe offense. Harmful remarks about children are also loshon hora.
7. Loshon hora cannot be related even to close relatives, including one's spouse.
8. Even if the listener has previously heard the derogatory account or the information has become public knowledge and the subject will suffer no further harm by its repetition, it nevertheless should not be repeated.
9. R'chilus, which is telling one person a derogatory statement that another person said about them, is forbidden because it causes animosity between people.
10. It is forbidden to listen to loshon hora or r'chilus. If someone inadvertently hears loshon hora, it is forbidden to believe that it is true. One should give the person the benefit of the doubt. Assume the information is inaccurate or that the person does not realize they are doing something wrong.

NOTE: There are times when loshon hora is permitted or even required, i.e., when warning a person about potential harm, for example, a potential business or marriage partner. On the other hand, secondhand information and baseless impressions have momentous implications. The questions of when you are allowed or even required to speak loshon hora are complicated. A Rabbinic authority with expertise in the field of Shmiras Haloshon should be consulted in any of these cases.

Call the "Shmiras Haloshon שאלה Line" at (718) 951-3696 from 9–10:30pm to ask Halachic questions.

The Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation, 620 Coney Island Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11218

For an additional copy of this card, please send the donation of your choice to the above address.

withdraw psychologically; the one who is suffering from an illness so closely associated with death and impurity all the more so. But the Torah invites such a person not to grant stigma and shame the final word: One who needs divine mercy should ask for it, and one who yearns to know that others care for him or her should ask for expressions of love and concern. Those who are unafflicted may be tempted to look down at those who are, to see those whose illness is suggestive of death as less than fully human and thus as unworthy of their compassion. So the (Rabbinic interpretation of the) Torah reminds them that the ill are no less human than the well: To be asked to pray for someone is to be charged with affirming their humanity totally and unconditionally, and with cultivating empathy for them.

From a modern perspective, the laws concerning the *metzora* are troubling; I have tried not to gainsay or step around that simple fact. But a close reading of the text itself, and of the history of its interpretation, suggests a somewhat more complicated picture—the text stigmatizes the *metzora* even as it tries to limit that very stigma: When the afflicted reenters the community, his return is marked by a ceremony that validates him by associating him with the holy.

Rabbinic interpretation goes one step further, reminding both the *metzora* and the community that despite his illness and impurity, the *metzora* is still a human being who deserves and is entitled to the care and concern of the community as a whole.

Metsora' #2

Life-Giving, Death-Dealing Words

Words may create worlds, as R. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72) insisted, but they can just as surely destroy them. Rabbinic interpretation of Parashat Metsora' focuses sharply on this sobering reality.

Genesis 1 tells us that God created the world through the power of speech: "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). Accordingly the morning liturgy opens its extended praise of God by acknowledging just this: "Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came into being."

What can we learn from Genesis about the nature of divine speech? When God says, "Let there be a light," God is not addressing a staff of assistants who will get to work making the boss's plans come to fruition. Something very different, almost magical seems to be at play: God speaks and things happen. God's speech is not just powerful but also life-giving: God speaks and life emerges.[107]

Having completed the task of speaking things into being, God speaks again, conferring the blessing of fertility on both animals and people (Gen. 1:22,28). God's speech thus not only creates life but also encourages God's creation to do the same. Crucially, then, in Genesis 1 God's speech is both life-giving and blessing-conferring. To be sure, God will use words in very different ways over the course of Tanakh—to command and appoint, to summon and promise, to warn and reprimand—but something of God's ideal use of speech is evident in the opening verses of Genesis: God's words give life and confer blessing.

The God who creates humanity in God's image bestows the capacity for speech on us. Genesis 2 announces that "the Lord formed Adam from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being (*nefesh hayyah*)" (Gen. 2:7). Onkelos (c.

35–120) renders "living being" as "speaking spirit" (*ruah memalela*), thus suggesting that speech is constitutive of what it means to be human—a core part of our humanity is our ability to communicate with words. Moreover, since the power of speech comes directly from God's breath, it is a uniquely precious divine gift. Expanding upon Onkelos's words, Rashi (1040–1105) comments: "Cattle and beasts were also called living souls, but the soul of the human being is the most alive of them all, because the human being was additionally given intelligence and speech" According to Rashi speech is thus not only central to who we are as human beings; it is also key to our uniqueness. Alone among God's creations, Jewish tradition affirms, human beings are capable of speech.

All of this points to a critical dimension of walking in God's ways (*imitatio dei*). Created in God's image and blessed with the power of speech, we are asked to use language in the ways that God does—to give life and confer blessing.

If speech is closely entwined with creation, it is also, R. Joseph Soloveitchik (1903–93) argues, intimately linked with redemption. The talmudic sage R. Yohanan insists that at prayer one must adjoin the blessing commemorating the redemption of Israel from Egypt (*ge'ulah*) to the Amidah prayer (*tefillah*)—that is, that one must not allow any interruption or disruption between them (BT, Berakhot 4b). Why is it so important to R. Yohanan to tie redemption and prayer so closely together?

R. Soloveitchik suggests that there is an intrinsic connection between slavery and silence, on the one hand, and between redemption and speech, on the other. The slave has been reduced to anonymity, muteness, and wordlessness; the free person, in contrast, speaks, communicates, and has a story to tell and an audience interested in what he or she says. If slavery is about being deprived of speech, then redemption, in contrast "is identical with communing, or with the revelation of the word, i.e. the emergence of speech." What this means, according to Soloveitchik, is that "a mute life is identical with bondage [whereas] a speech-endowed life is a free life." In learning to speak, therefore, a person participates in his or her own redemption. The liturgy connects the theme of redemption with the act of prayer, in other words,

because the very movement of articulating our needs and yearnings in the Amidah is itself part and parcel of the process of redemption.[108]

But if speech can be life-giving and redemptive, it can just as easily be death-dealing and destructive. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can kill us outright.

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue," the Proverbs teaches (Prov. 18:21). A talmudic sage interprets the verse as instructing us in the damage disparaging words can inflict upon others. Picking up on the literal meaning of the Hebrew—death and life are in the hand of the tongue (*be-yad lashon*)—R. Hama b. Hanina notes that the tongue is in fact very similar to the hand: Just as the latter can kill, so too can the former. But R. Hama goes even further: The tongue is in fact far more deadly than the hand because whereas the hand can only kill those in close proximity to it, the tongue can kill even those far away. The tongue is thus in a sense more like an arrow than a hand (BT, Arakhin 15b).

But the context of this verse in the Proverbs suggests that it is focused on the consequences of speech for the speaker—rather than for the one spoken of, or spoken to. "A man's belly is filled by the fruit of his mouth," says the verse immediately preceding ours; "he will be filled by the produce of his lips" (Prov. 18:20).

The point seems clear: We ourselves are profoundly shaped by the things we say. (Note the deliciously paradoxical image: We digest and internalize the things that come out of our mouths, rather than [only] the things that go into them.) The ways we use language have life-and-death consequences for us, the speakers. What it means to say that "death and life are in the power of the tongue" is, thus, that "people will experience [life or death] depending on the quality of their words."[109] Death and life here refer not to clinical states but to qualities of being: "The deadly tongue disrupts community and by its lethal power isolates its owner from community and kills him. The life-giving tongue[, in contrast,] creates community and by its vitality gives its possessor the full enjoyment of the abundant life within the community."[110] If language can be a bridge that makes human connection possible, it can just as easily become a fortress, enforcing disconnection and isolation.

These two readings of our verse can and should be brought together, since one who habitually speaks ill of (and to) others inevitably diminishes herself in the process.[111] In speaking mean-spiritedly, R. Hama says, we effectively take the life of another. But in some profound sense, says Proverbs, we also effectively take our own.

This may be one of the deepest truths of interpersonal relations: When we degrade others, we necessarily degrade ourselves in the process; when we violate another's dignity, we violate and sully our own as well. One could argue that this is especially the case where speech is involved, precisely because, as we have seen, speech is constitutive of our humanity. To engage constantly in derisive or belittling speech is to launch an assault on our very nature.[112]

Leviticus 13 and 14 deal with the ritual impurity of a person suffering from a scale disease (*tzara'at*, usually—though erroneously—rendered as leprosy). Rabbinic tradition understands the skin ailment involved as a punishment for one who speaks derogatorily of another—what in Rabbinic Hebrew is called *leshon hara*, or the "tongue of evil." Although the text of Leviticus offers no hint of a connection between disparaging speech and *tzara'at*, another biblical text makes the link: When Miriam speaks ill of her brother Moses's choice of wife, Numbers informs us that as a result Miriam "was stricken with snow-white scales" (*metzora'at ka-sheleg*). Like the one who is afflicted in Leviticus, she is shut out of the camp until her affliction is healed (Num. 12:1–15).

A talmudic sage explains why one who speaks wrongly is forced to "dwell apart," why "his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Lev. 13:46): "He separated a husband from his wife, a man from his neighbor—therefore the Torah said, 'He shall dwell apart'" (BT, Arakhin 16b). On one level, of course, this Rabbinic interpretation is about poetic justice (*midah ke-neged midah*): One who destroys community is actively punished by herself being excluded from the community. But at another, deeper level, her punishment is really just a legal reflection of a human truth she has created for herself. One who consistently speaks in demeaning ways banishes and exiles herself. The legal penalty merely concretizes this deeper reality.

The Talmud states that one afflicted with *tzara'at* is considered as dead (BT, Nedarim 64b) and appeals to Miriam's story for support. After all when Aaron begs his brother Moses to pray for their sister's recovery from tzara'at, he pleads: "Let her not be as one dead" (Num. 12:12). R. Chaim Shmuelevitz (1902–79) insightfully explains that one who speaks ill of others "cuts himself off from the living" and thus renders himself dead.[113] Both the physical affliction he endures and the ostracism he faces are thus but reflections of a deeper truth the speaker has himself enacted. *Tzara'at* and its consequences are manifestations of a profound moral and religious truth: When we hurt others with words, we poison and pollute our very being.

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Our verse from Proverbs is not only concerned with the insidious effects of malicious speech; it is focused on something more general: The momentous realization that the ways we speak shape both the worlds around us and the worlds within us.

We live in a time when words seem utterly debased, when we accept as given that "talk is cheap" and that much of what people say is "just words." But in reality talk is priceless, and words are the fabric out of which both God and we build the things that matter most. Large swaths of our culture have abandoned their commitment to the "accord of assertion and conviction";[114] it is considered quaint to say just what we mean and mean just what we say. In a world where words are so often wielded as weapons, it is an act of resistance to remember that words can also be a source of healing (Prov. 15:4). In a time when words are routinely devalued, it requires countercultural defiance to commit to the beauty of language and the preciousness of speech.

Reading parashat Metsora' each year, tradition bids us remember that each time we speak we create the worlds we are destined to inhabit.