

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

M'tzora - Shabbat HaGadol 5782

Hi All,

M'tzora - Torah & Lashon Hara

The Talmud (Eirchin 15b) tells us that Talmud Torah is the corrective (the TIKUN) for the sin of LASHON HARA - negative speech. How are we to understand how the sin of lashon hara is neutralized by Torah?

At the conclusion of the Amida, we recite the well-known prayer composed by the Amora, Rav. It begins with our plea to Gd to help guard our tongue (i.e., our speech) from evil (talk). A few sentences later, we petition for something else. We pray, "Open our hearts to your Torah." The obvious question is: what does it mean to request that HaShem "open our hearts..." Wouldn't it make more sense to beseech Gd for Torah knowledge to help us to deal with this mitzva observance?

Perhaps the answer is that it is precisely the plea to open our hearts - not our minds - to Torah that enables us to fortify ourselves from speaking lashon hara. A person can be a brilliant Torah scholar and yet - tragically - be a vulgar, arrogant, insensitive person. How can that be? Simple. Their vast Torah knowledge remained on the

"surface" of their personalities. It never sunk into their hearts. It was never absorbed into their being; it never integrated into their persona. As such, their Torah was not at all transformative. Their characters remained coarse, foul and plainly nasty. A sad Chilul HaShem!

This is why we beg HaShem to open our hearts to His Torah. It's not at all easy to allow the Torah to sink into our core and transform us. Many would rather keep the wisdom of the Torah at arm's length and avoid implementing its practical imperatives into our lives. But once we allow the Torah to enter our hearts, it generates a religious awareness that expands out and becomes the permanent backdrop, inspiring proper religious and ethical behavior in all our affairs.

And so, before we finished our Amida and begin our day, we turned to HaShem to help us resist the lashon hara temptation. Hopefully, our hearts, now infused with His Torah, can provide the necessary firewall to succeed in that task.

M'tzora - Waiting for the Good

In the Warsaw Ghetto, there lived and died a great rabbi, the Piacezna Rav (R. Kalonimus Kalman Shapira, HY"D). While suffering through the horrors of that dark time, he composed brief insights into the Torah. After the war,

his books were discovered and later printed.

The year was 1940; the place, the Warsaw Ghetto, and this was R. Shapiro's d'var Torah on the Parsha of M'tzora. When Israel entered its Land, the Midrash tells us (Rashi 14:34) that the People were required to take note of any NEGA (blemish) that might appear upon the walls of their homes and if, rendered impure, would have to be demolished. Now, although this appeared to be unwelcome news, the Midrash relates that the Amorites would hide their valuables in the walls of their homes. As such, what initially seemed disheartening would prove to be a great good.

The Piacenza Rav asked: if so, why was it necessary to wait seven days before breaking down the walls (14:38)? Why even wait for the nega to be identified; let's get to the treasures immediately? His answer - especially from one who had every reason to despair - is both uplifting and remarkable (my summary).

"When G-d beats us, it's all for the good. But when we see that the suffering is not only physical but spiritual as well (religious life had all but shut down in the ghetto), a bit of doubt enters. Could this also be for the good? Therefore, we are told in the Torah that there can be great impurity upon entering Israel. There will be

much destruction, and, yes, the good will come, but often we have to wait, often we have to live through the impurity even in its ugliest and vilest forms. But the end, there will be a treasure."

These words were spoken by someone who never did see the "treasure", but yet - even in that hell - he believed it would come.

Clearly, the takeaway from this insight is this: that all too often, in order for the good to come, we have to wait! Not to remain idle, but to fervently believe that all our efforts will one day be vindicated and rewarded in precious treasures. Hopefully, we will all merit to see it happen!

M'tzora - Positive Speech

Even with Pesach so close, we ought not to ignore the central message of these past two Parshiyot. As the Talmud tells us (Eirchin 16b), the skin condition of tzara'at was a consequence of speaking lashon hara (technically, speaking ill of someone even if true).

R. Shlomo Ganzfried, author of the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, offers a fascinating insight as to why the purification of the M'TZORA (the afflicted individual) consisted of two birds, one to be sacrificed and the other to be set free. The bird was chosen because, as Rashi tells us

(14:4), "...LASHON HARA is an act of chattering. It was therefore necessary [that he offer] two birds which constantly chirp." If so, asks R. Ganzfried, why were two birds needed, one would surely have sufficed? And additionally, why was one sacrificed and the other left alive?

He answers by elaborating on the symbolism of the birds. By sacrificing the one, the rebuke was clear. While there are exceptions to the proscription against lashon hara, for the most part, such language is forbidden. The second bird, however, was to promote the importance of good speech. It was set free to remind us that it is not simply sufficient to avoid speaking ill of another, but we are also enjoined to find positive ways to use our speech. The sincere compliment, the "pleases" and "thank yous", the simple courtesies - these expressions from the "good tongue", can often make a "turning point" difference in a person's life. And even if the "good word" doesn't achieve such life-changing results, what can be wrong with expressing a nice and kind remark every now-and-then to cheer up an otherwise gloomy day for a friend, a relative, or just for any stranger?

R. Lord Jonathan Sacks z"tl, offers this additional insight. "It was from another wise woman that I learned another important lesson about praise. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, in

her book *Mindset*, argues that it makes a decisive difference whether we believe that our abilities are innate and determined once and for all (the "fixed" mindset), or that talent is something we achieve through time by effort, practice and persistence (the "growth" mindset). The former tends to be risk-averse, afraid that if they fail this will show that they are not as good as they were thought to be. The latter embraces risk because they take failure as a learning experience from which we grow. It follows that there is good praise and bad praise. Parents and teachers should not praise children in absolute terms: 'You are gifted, brilliant, a star.' They should praise effort: 'You tried hard; you gave of your best.' They should encourage a growth mindset, not a fixed one."

Good speech can also take the form of sincere encouragement, especially when someone is down and out. Rav Soloveitchik points out that notwithstanding the isolation of the m'tzora, the kohein was required to remain in contact with him throughout his ordeal. Why? The sin of lashon hara can ruin the life of another. Noxious speech can wreak terrible damage upon a person's reputation. Often the injury is irreparable. How is it possible for the m'tzora to rehabilitate himself? His self-esteem is shot; he is shunned by his community. Enter the kohein - even the Kohen Gadol himself - should

the m'tzora request it. The kohein, sensitively, with words of genuine encouragement, helps to restore the m'tzora's sense of dignity and self-worth.

The Zohar (Va'eira 68) tells us that during Israel's servitude in Egypt, "speech" was in exile. With the Exodus, "speech" was redeemed; there was PEH SACH, the mouth began to speak once again. Speech was exiled as punishment for the sin of lashon hara. Once the People understood the cause of their misery, they repented and, in that merit, they were delivered from their bondage.

Shabbat HaGadol - Pesach and T'shuva

This Shabbat is not called "great" because of Shabbat. Otherwise, it would have been called Shabbat HaGedola (in the feminine gender, modifying Shabbat). It is Shabbat HaGadol (masculine gender) because on this Shabbat, we read about a great and awesome day, a day that some will dread and others will rejoice in, but a day that, in any case, will surely come. To elaborate:

In Malachi - the source of our Haftara - we read in 3:19 that on that day, HaShem will remove, "the Sun from its sheath". In one instant - so that no one will attribute these events to happenstance - the Sun's intense heat will

devour the perpetrators of wickedness - the malicious sinners, while its inviting warmth will heal and grant salvation to the righteous and the just. In a word, the good will finally be vindicated, and evil - crushed and destroyed.

The Navi unmistakably lays out the choice before each of us. As we close in on redemption, we will each be challenged to identify with one of the above two groups? The great Eliyahu HaNavi will come (3:23) and urge everyone to repent and choose the right one. Incredibly, there will be many who will simply refuse to listen-up. In one of prophecy's most poignant and plaintive calls, G-d pleads, "Remember the Torah of Moshe, My Servant, the laws and statutes I commanded him at Chorev for all of Israel..." (3:22).

Most people do not associate Pesach with repentance. That's for Yom Kippur. Not so; for without the spiritual turnabout in Egypt, the Exodus would not have occurred. And had the Jews in the Purim story not repented - a t'shuva that took place in Nissan, on Pesach - Haman may have (chas v'shalom) succeeded in his nefarious plan. Indeed, redemption is serious business. And lest we forget it, the Haftara of Shabbat HaGadol comes to sober us up to its critical importance.

And so, at our Seder, when we pour that fifth cup and invite Eliyahu to join us, we need think deeply about whether we are truly deserving of the ultimate redemption we pray for at the Seder's conclusion. T'shuva, indeed, is very much a part of the Pesach experience. 🙌