

The Path To Follow

Tazri'a Metzora'a

489

A Hevrat Pinto Publication

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Iyar 3rd, 5773

April 13th, 2013



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The Sin of Lashon Harah

In general, Parshiot Tazria and Metzora are read together. To explain the connection between them, we note that at the beginning of Parsha Tazria it is written: “When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male...” (Vayikra 12:2), while in Parsha Metzora it is written: “This shall be the law of the metzora [leper]” (ibid. 14:2). The Gemara understands the latter to mean, “This shall be the law of one who motzei shem ra [brings up an evil name]” (Arachin 15b). Parsha Tazria also contains laws concerning the leper. As we have said, one who speaks Lashon Harah gives rise to much more of it, and from his few words a great deal of Lashon Harah ensues, which leaves permanent traces.

We know that Hashem punishes and rewards man measure for measure (Sanhedrin 90a). Hence someone who speaks Lashon Harah causes others to distance themselves from the people he has disparaged. This is why the Holy One, blessed be He, punishes him measure for measure by striking him with leprosy, which leaves his body covered with lesions and causes everyone to distance themselves from him. Thus we read, “The leper in whom there is the affliction...he shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside the camp” (Vayikra 13:45-46).

This week witnessed Rosh Chodesh Iyar, and this Shabbat we read Parshiot Tazria and Metzora together. Our holy books have already mentioned that man is renewed on Rosh Chodesh, and that all his sins are forgiven. Yet in regards to this month, the Sages have said that 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died – not because they spoke Lashon Harah – but solely because they lacked respect for one another (Yebamot 62b).

The Sages also said that King David's soldiers, when they went off to war, were killed in battle despite being completely righteous. However the soldiers of King Achav, despite being evildoers and idolaters, emerged victorious in battle. The reason for this discrepancy is that among the soldiers of King David, there were some individuals who slandered, whereas none of King Achav's soldiers spoke Lashon Harah, which is why they did not die. From here we learn just how serious Lashon Harah is, worse even than not showing respect for others.

In that case, however, we need to understand something: If the punishment for Lashon Harah is leprosy, then why did King David's soldiers die rather than being struck by leprosy for having spoken Lashon Harah? Furthermore, since it is worse to speak Lashon Harah than not to respect others, why were Rabbi Akiva's students – who did not speak Lashon Harah, but simply lacked respect for one another – punished so severely that they died before Shavuot, without even celebrating this holiday, the festival of the giving of our Torah?

We can explain this in the following way: Not respecting others is a grave sin, one capable of leading to the start of a disaster. This means that it is barely the start of Lashon Harah. Especially among talmidei chachamim, when someone is not careful about showing respect for others, it is as if he has spoken Lashon Harah. In fact everyone will see that this talmid chacham is not careful about showing respect for others, and he will go and talk about what he has seen, the result being that it will lead to actual Lashon Harah. Hence for Hashem, whoever neglects the honor of others is considered to have spoken Lashon Harah, and his punishment is very serious. In fact when we fail to show respect for others, we will eventually speak Lashon Harah and become liable to death.

The first letters of Tazria Metzora (tet mem) form the term met (“death”), and the last letters of Tazria Metzora (ayin ayin) have the same numerical value as the term kam (to arise). Furthermore, the numerical value of met combined with the word itself is equal to that of emet (“truth”). This means that a person who speaks Lashon Harah brings into existence (mekayem) his words which are truth (emet), resulting not only in the death of others, but in his own death as well, since everyone dies by the sin of Lashon Harah, the speaker included. He brings about the same results for others, and those who listen to him are also punished.

This is why the Torah comes to warn us against Lashon Harah. One who speaks ill of others is punished by leprosy, for he has caused his death. However if he guards himself from speaking Lashon Harah and only speaks good of others, then kam, he will arise, for he has overcome this grave sin and not spoken Lashon Harah. Woe to

those who speak ill of others and will have no way to arise! That is why it is extremely important to be vigilant in regards to the sin of Lashon Harah.

All this, however, concerns ordinary individuals. For tzaddikim who harbor the sin of Lashon Harah and do not respect others, Hashem will demand an accounting from them in regards to the smallest of things, as the Sages have said (Yebamot 121b, Bava Kama 50a), punishing them severely, even with death. He does not warn them through leprosy, for the Torah has already enjoined them to respect one another and not speak Lashon Harah. That is why King David's soldiers, who were tzaddikim, and Rabbi Akiva's students, who were also tzaddikim, died rather than being struck by leprosy, for they spoke Lashon Harah and did not respect one another.

We find an indication of the gravity of this sin for tzaddikim with Miriam, who did not really speak Lashon Harah about Moshe, but only the “dust” (avak) of Lashon Harah. Nevertheless, she was struck by Lashon Harah, as it is written: “Behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow” (Bamidbar 12:10). Why? Because in light of her greatness, her words were considered as if they were Lashon Harah. This means that had she spoken actual Lashon Harah about Moshe, she would have died. This is clear.

From all these things, we see just how careful we must be in regards to the “dust” of Lashon Harah, and even more so in regards to actual Lashon Harah. This is especially true in our time, when this sin seems so insignificant to people that everyone feels free to say whatever they please, thinking that it is not Lashon Harah. Even if there is no metzora in our time, we must still pay close attention to not speaking Lashon Harah. Who knows whether all the accidents and illness that kill thousands of people every week are not due to Lashon Harah! In fact King David's soldiers and Rabbi Akiva's students died for having caused Lashon Harah. As a result, how much more does this apply to actual Lashon Harah!

May it be G-d's will that by the sanctity of Rosh Chodesh and Shabbat Tazria-Metzora, a love for others will renew itself in us – as well as permissible and sanctified words – and may Hashem say “enough” to all of our ills. Amen, may it be so!

The Words of the Sages

It is written, “On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised” (Vayikra 12:3). This is how the mitzvah of circumcision, which is valued by everyone and for which Jews sacrifice themselves, is formulated in the Torah. This mitzvah is adorned by numerous customs whose goal is to build a protective wall around a child as soon as he enters the world, as soon as he enters the covenant with the Creator, and which is to last his entire life. The joy associated with it does not stop there. In the Diaspora there are numerous customs (some of which differ by their make-up and character) that have been preserved. Each community has its own customs, and each family follows those of their fathers. Each custom is specific, but combined they create a unique symphony accompanied by sounds of joy for the mitzvah, by drums and orchestras, songs, music, and expressions of gratitude.

The first of these customs appears in tractate Bava Kama, and it consists of organizing a meal on the Friday night following the birth of a boy. This gathering is called a shavua haben (“week of the boy”) or yeshua haben (“deliverance of the boy”), for the newborn was delivered from the innards of his mother. This meal usually takes place on Friday night because, generally speaking, it is a time when the entire family gathers together.

Later on, this meal became known as a shalom zachar, a name whose meaning we will explore.

In his book Migdal Oz, the Gaon Ya'avetz writes that this meal was instituted in order for people to come and console the soul of the newborn, which is saddened because it had to descend into this world, a place of danger where it will have to spend a given time. Perhaps this meal is called seudat zachar, in connection with the term zechira (“remembrance”), because just before the child is born, an angel makes it forget all the Torah that it learned in its mother's womb. This meal takes place precisely on Shabbat because we are told to zachor (remember) Shabbat.

In addition to the sweets that are served to guests, some people customarily eat nuts during this reception, for the Midrash states that the verse, “I went down to the garden of nuts” (Shir HaShirim 6:11), refers to the mitzvah of circumcision.

Another widespread custom is to offer guests chick peas, a food of mourners. This is because the goal of this reception is to console the child, who is mourning over the Torah that he has forgotten.

Among most Sephardic communities, there was no custom for relatives to gather together

for a shalom zachar on the night of Shabbat.

On the other hand, different customs occur on the Shabbat preceding the circumcision, primarily during the solemn prayers in honor of the newborn's father. Among eastern communities, this Shabbat is known as Shabbat avi haben (“Shabbat of the father of the boy”). On this Shabbat, the father is called up to the Torah and people sing various liturgical songs for him. After the prayer service, he is accompanied home and the shamash distributes rose water to the faithful.

On the night before the circumcision, there is a Brit Yitzchak – or in Yiddish, a vach nacht (“night watch”) – for it is a time when the Satan tries to harm the newborn in such a way that he cannot undergo the mitzvah of circumcision. In fact Satan cannot stand to see Israel accomplishing this beautiful mitzvah, which saves from Gehinnom. In the book Mateh Moshe, the author finds support for this custom in the verse: “You shall guard [tishmor] My covenant” (Bereshith 17:9). In other words, from the moment that he enters the brit (“covenant”), shemira (“guarding”) is needed.

According to the Shlah, this “guarding” essentially consists of “remaining awake until the time of the circumcision, to learn Torah and perform good deeds.” In the book Yesod Yitzchak, he also states that on the day before the circumcision, known as vach nacht, people usually hire teachers to sing and read praises and tehillim, the goal being to drive away forces of evil and to cut off the thorns that surround the supreme rose.

In his book Shem HaGedolim, the Chida illustrates the importance of Torah learning on this night by the following story, one recounted by a Torah scholar who personally heard it from an elder who witnessed it:

Rav Tzemach Tsarfati was ill for two years in Damascus, during which time it was impossible for him to move. G-d then had pity on him, and sent him an angel that healed him. Thus he miraculously regained his health and was among us once again. Exactly how this happened was astounding: The Rav said that Eliyahu HaNavi had appeared to him, announcing that he would heal him if he committed himself to learning on the day before the circumcision of all the newborns in the city. The Rav agreed, at which point he immediately found himself in good health. Since that day, he made it a custom to go the place where a circumcision would take place on the following day, and there he would study for the entire night.

Among Ashkenaz communities, the custom is for teachers to accompany children on the day before the circumcision, towards evening, to the home of the woman who gave birth. There they

read the verses Vihi noam [Tehillim 90:17] and Hamalach hagoel [Bereshith 48:16], and distribute some sweets to the children. Others do the same, but only on the night before the ceremony.

An Honorable Place

The following story is taken from Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (ch. 29):

The mitzvah of circumcision was properly observed by all Jews until the breakup of the kingdom of Israel, at which point it was abandoned by the tribe of Ephraim. Eliyahu HaNavi was overtaken by great zeal for G-d, and he made the heavens swear not to let rain fall or allow dew on the earth. When Jezebel heard this, she sought to kill Eliyahu, who turned to Hashem in prayer.

G-d said to him, “Are you better than your ancestors? Jacob fled and was saved, as it is said: ‘Jacob fled into the field of Aram’ [Hosea 12:12]. Moshe also fled and was saved, as it is said: ‘Moshe fled from before Pharaoh’ [Shemot 2:15]. The same for David, as it is said: ‘David fled’ [I Samuel 19:10].”

Eliyahu then arose, fled from Israel, and was saved, as it is said: “He arose, ate, and drank” (I Kings 19:8).

G-d appeared to him and said, “What are you doing here, Eliyahu?”

He replied, “I have acted with great zeal.”

G-d responded: “You have always acted with zeal! You acted with zeal at Shittim because of adultery, as it is said: ‘Pinchas, son of Elazar’ [Bamidbar 25:7], and now you have acted with zeal. By your life, no circumcision will take place without you seeing it with your own eyes!”

It is for this reason that our Sages instituted the custom of reserving a place of honor for the angel of the covenant, as it is said: “The angel of the covenant, for whom you yearn, behold, he comes” (Malachi 3:1).

Perhaps He Will Bless Him for Me?

In his book Orchot Chaim, Rabbi Aharon HaCohen of Lunel recounts an interesting story concerning the laws of circumcision: The elders told Rabbeinu Nissim Zatzal that on the day when his father brought him into G-d's covenant, he sat down on the “reserved” chair, then arose and sat on the another chair. Afterwards, he was asked about what he did, for nobody has ever seen anyone doing that. He replied, “I learned from the early Sages that this ‘reserved’ chair is meant for Eliyahu, the angel of circumcision. That is why I sat on it with the baby, for perhaps he will bless him for me and grant him wisdom on account of his blessing.”

The Suffering of Others

It is written, “A young dove or a turtledove for a sin-offering” (Vayikra 12:6).

The Ba'al HaTurim notes that Scripture always mentions the turtledove before the young dove, except in this verse. This is because only one bird is brought for a sin-offering, and if a person finds a young dove, he will not take a turtledove because its mate would mourn its loss and not take another.

We can therefore understand why, further in the passage, it is written: “If she is not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtledoves or two young doves” (v.8). Here the Torah mentions turtledoves before young doves, the reason being that two birds are required in this case. That said, in principle it is better to bring turtledoves because they are larger than young doves. However if one cannot afford to bring turtledoves, young doves can be brought instead.

The ethical lesson that we learn from this, writes Rabbi Shimon Miller Shlita in his book *Shai LaTorah*, is how greatly the Torah obligates us to feel for others, to the point of taking any pain felt by animals into consideration. That is why, since G-d infused turtledoves with the nature of taking only one mate, the Torah ordered us to bring a young dove, not a turtledove, as an offering. This is because a young dove is younger and its mate is not affected by its loss as much as the older turtledove, whose pain is therefore greater. That said, how much more careful should we be in regards to the feelings of people!

A Divine Warning

It is written, “This shall be the law of the leper” (Vayikra 14:2).

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch Zatzal raises an objection here: We know that a one-day old baby is rendered impure by leprosy (Niddah 43b). Yet this is in contradiction to the reason for leprosy, which serves as a punishment for sins between man and his fellowman!

He gives the following response: Just as leprosy in a garment and the human body serve as a warning, the same goes for leprosy afflicting children and the innocent. Such leprosy serves as a warning to parents, pushing them to better themselves in order to serve as a good example to their children when they grow up.

There is no doubt that leprosy on the forehead of a child is a Divine warning that is much more effective than leprosy that strikes the parents themselves.

Two Mouths

It is written, “The kohen shall command, to take for him who is to be cleansed, two living clean birds” (Vayikra 14:4).

Since only one of these birds is slaughtered, why must the person who is to be cleansed take two of them?

In his book *Od Yosef Hai*, Rabbi Yosef Haim Zatzal answers this by saying that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai initially believed that it would have been better for man to have been created with two mouths: One for learning Torah and another for mundane matters, since it is not fitting to use the same mouth for both sacred and profane. Yet after seeing that most people speak Lashon Harah, he said that Hashem had done well to create man with but a single mouth.

This is what the two birds allude to. In general, man should have been created with two mouths: One for the sacred and the other for the mundane. However since it was foreseen that man would sin, he was created with only one mouth. Hence a person who seeks to purify himself must bring two birds, which correspond to the two mouths that he should have had.

He then slaughters one of them, allowing the other bird to go free, which corresponds to the cancelling of the second mouth.

Because of Stinginess

It is written, “I put a plague of leprosy in a house in the land of your possession” (Vayikra 14:34).

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: “The plague of leprosy is incurred on account of seven things... [the last being] stinginess.” ... Because of stinginess, as it is said: “Then he who owns the house shall come” [Vayikra 14:35]. (“If one devotes his house to himself exclusively, refusing to lend his belongings by pretending that he does not own them, the Holy One, blessed be He, exposes him as he removes his belongings” [Yoma 11b].)

This refers to what the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: He who would reserve his house for himself [will suffer from leprosy afflicting his house].

– Arachin 16a

The Ways of Our Fathers From Rabbi David Pinto Shlita

Controlling the Evil Inclination

The Sages say, “Annul your will before His will, so that He may annul the will of others before your will” (Pirkei Avoth 2:4).

When a man serves G-d with devotion and controls his evil inclination, the Holy One, blessed be He, will help him by annulling the power of the evil inclination so that it no longer controls him. Thus we find that King David killed his own evil inclination (Yerushalmi, Sotah 5:5), and the Gemara recounts how several Tannaim conquered theirs. In fact every day Pelimo used to say, “An arrow in Satan’s eyes!” (Kiddushin 81a), for it tested him because it had no influence over him.

It is possible that this is what the Tanna meant by mentioning “others,” an allusion to the evil inclination which stems from the forces of impurity, and which is called “the other god,” as we find in the Gemara: “Who is the other god that resides in man himself? Say that it is the evil inclination” (Shabbat 105b).

Man cannot control the evil inclination all on his own, but only with the help of Hashem, as it is said: “Were the Holy One, blessed be He, not to help [man], he would be unable to prevail against it” (Kiddushin 30b). This is because the evil inclination is made of fire, whereas man is made of matter, of flesh and blood. Yet when a person starts by making an effort below to conquer and control his desires, G-d helps him from above measure for measure, completely annulling his evil inclination for him.

– From Kerem David on Pirkei Avoth

Guard Your Tongue!

He is Called a Criminal!

If a person knows the character of certain individuals, and he is well-aware that they habitually speak Lashon Harah and constantly seek to disparage others, and yet he still wants to be in their company, then even if he does not get involved in their conversations, he is still called a criminal because he has transgressed the words of the Sages, who commanded us to avoid listening to things that are not permitted.

How much more is this true if he is prepared to listen to what they say. It is an unforgiveable sin, and it is inscribed above in the Book of Remembrance.

– Chafetz Chaim

Clotting Factors on the Day of Circumcision

It is written, “G-d said to Abraham, ‘And as for you, you shall keep My covenant – you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. At the age of eight days, every male among you shall be circumcised throughout your generations – he that is born in the household or purchased with money from any stranger who is not of your offspring. He that is born in your household or purchased with your money shall surely be circumcised. Thus My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. An uncircumcised male who will not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin – that soul shall be cut off from its people; he has invalidated My covenant’ ” (Bereshith 17:9-14).

A heavenly promise is strongly and steadfastly attached to the cherished mitzvah of circumcision, namely that this mitzvah will be observed by the Jewish people for all time, in every generation and all eras. Without a doubt, it is the most celebrated mitzvah in Judaism, and even Jews who do not yet observe Torah and mitzvot are careful to fulfill it at all costs.

We should reflect upon this mitzvah, for the holy Torah does not command us to immediately circumcise a baby within a few days of its birth, nor does it command us to circumcise him starting from the eighth day on. Rather, “On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised” (Vayikra 12:3) – it must be done precisely on the eighth day.

Naturally, with our limited intelligence we cannot claim to understand the true reasons for the holy Torah’s directive. However it is fitting to consider a new and amazing scientific discovery that relates to the eighth day of a child’s life, the day when the Torah commands us to fulfill the mitzvah of circumcision.

In his book *HaMahpach*, Rav Zamir Cohen Shlita cites an impressive passage from the comments of Dr. Ila Abramov in an article entitled *The Problems of Coagulation and Hemorrhaging in Newborns*. Before we do that, however, we must mention something important.

We need to realize that it is not because the eighth day is the best time for circumcision that we have received the commandment to practice it on that day. On the contrary, it is because circumcision must occur on the eighth day – for reasons known only to G-d – that the Creator arranged things such that on the eighth day, a newborn’s body has sufficient clotting ability to avoid hemorrhaging, thus allowing for the performance of the mitzvah. As the Sages have said, “When the Holy One resolved to create the world, He guided Himself by the Torah as by a plan” (Zohar II:161a). This means that the world was created in accordance with the demands of the Torah, not the other way around.

A Sufficient Degree of Clotting

What follows is an astonishing statement from Dr. Abramov:

“The process of coagulation depends on a group of proteins, created in the liver, called clotting factors. These factors are specified by Roman numerals (I to XIII), and they activate one another in an

enzymatic chain until a stable clot, known as a fibrin, is formed. In the first days following birth, the liver has not yet sufficiently developed to have this ability, and it is clear that it could not tolerate a surgical intervention, which could result in the baby’s death following a massive hemorrhage, against which it would be powerless. Physiologically speaking, until the age of eight days, the liver becomes progressively stronger, functioning more and more effectively, until at eight days it has a clotting ability that is capable of preventing a hemorrhage.”

Dr. Armand James Quick, who for numerous years was the chairman of the biochemistry department at Marquette Medical School in Wisconsin, specialized in blood component research. He made a number of important discoveries in this field, as well as developing tests that carry his name. His test to determine the time needed for coagulation to occur, as well as a test to determine the quantity of prothrombin in the blood, are considered important achievements that opened a new era in blood research.

In his writings, Dr. Quick mentioned that during the first few days of a baby’s life, clotting factors in the blood are low, and a small cut can easily cause a serious hemorrhage. Towards the eighth day, however, the body’s clotting ability has increased. From his point of view, he said: “It isn’t a coincidence that in the religion of Moses, the circumcision ceremony is set precisely for the eighth day.”

The Leaves of the Bible

In this context, we must underline that even non-Jewish doctors such as Dr. Quick, who was considered one of the most important researchers in American medical history, expressed their astonishment at the timing of a newborn’s clotting ability and the day of circumcision.

In the summer of 5760, an updated version of Dr. S.I. McMillen’s bestseller *None of These Diseases* was published. In it, he notes with amazement that during the first days of a baby’s life, there is a significant lack of clotting factors in the blood, while after the eighth day they reach a sufficient and fixed amount, which maintains itself throughout life (100%). Yet towards the eighth day, they increase at a rapid pace and reach 110%!

This means that on the eighth day of life – and only the eighth day – clotting factors in the blood reach their maximum, a level greater than the ordinary level that accompanies a person throughout his life on earth.

Since Dr. McMillen, a scientist, recognized these biological findings, he did not hide his enthusiasm for medical discoveries. He writes, “We should commend the many hundreds of workers who labored at great expense over a number of years to discover that the safest day to perform circumcision is the eighth. Yet, as we congratulate medical science for this recent finding, we can almost hear the leaves of the Bible rustling. They would like to remind us that 4,000 years ago, when [G-d] initiated circumcision with Abraham, He said: ‘He that is eight days old shall be circumcised.’ Abraham did not pick the eighth day after many centuries of trial-and-error experiments. ... It was a day picked by the Creator of Vitamin K.”

A person with eyes can certainly see the clear hand of G-d in this, the One Who directs all of Creation, Who gave the Torah, and Who accurately linked the day when these clotting factors in the blood would reach their maximum to the day of the mitzvah of circumcision.