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To Love Another
Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Metzora

This, G*d tells Moses at the beginning of this week's *parshah*, **is the Torah of the Metzora**. And *Metzora* (one who is afflicted with *tzara'at*) is the name of this *parshah*.

Our tradition teaches that *tzara'at*, traditionally (but inaccurately) translated as "leprosy," is a consequence of *lashon hara*, of speaking ill of another. (And let us note that *Halachah*, Jewish religious Law, unlike secular law, does not recognize truth as a valid defense; speaking ill of another is a transgression, even if every word is true!) But this *parshah* does not provide us with a direct connection between *tzara'at* and *lashon hara*. Whence, then, did the rabbis derive the connection?

A person who suspects s/he might have *tzara'at* is directed to have a Cohen, a priest, examine the lesion. If it is, in fact, *tzara'at*, the sufferer is quarantined until s/he is healed. After healing, s/he brings a special offering.

Our *parshah* discusses in great detail what the *metzora* is obligated to do – how the illness is diagnosed, how it is determined that it has been healed, and what one must do after being healed – but it does not explain why one would be so afflicted. In order to understand the spiritual lesson of this reading, we need first to examine the spiritual cause of the disease.

The Talmudic sage Rabbi Yossi ben Zimra says (*Eruchin* 15b), "One who speaks *lashon hara* will suffer *tzara'at*, as it is written [Psalms 101:5], 'One who slanders another in secret I will smite.'"

Resh Lakish, another sage of the Talmudic era, then asks, "Why does the Torah say, **This is the law of the *metzora*?**" Resh Lakish examines *tzara'at* by an etymological examination of the word *metzora*. He reasons that *metzora* is a sort of shorthand for *motzi shem ra*, one who gives another a bad name by speaking ill of the other. Thus, a person is afflicted with *tzara'at* because s/he has spoken ill of someone else.

But there is something missing, even from Resh Lakish's brilliant explanation. *Metzora* contains *motzi* (we do not quibble over the vowels) and *ra*, but where is the *shem*? Well, we note that *Metzora* is the name (*shem*) of the *parshah*, and that will suffice. And *metzora* is also the title (*shem*) given to the one who has *tzara'at* (or perhaps we should say the one whom *tzara'at* has). So, since *metzora* is a name, that will provide us with the *shem* to round out the *motzi* and the *ra* and connect *metzora* with *motzi shem ra*.

But it does feel a bit forced. Is there not some more direct connection that we can find between *tzara'at* and *lashon hara*? In fact, there is, although it comes later in the Torah.

We learn the connection between speaking ill of others and *tzara'at* from the story of Miriam, Moses' sister, who spoke ill of Moses. In Numbers 12:1, we read, **Miriam . . . spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom Moses had wed – for Moses' wife was, indeed, dark-skinned . . . and Miriam was afflicted with *tzara'at*.** And then, when we reach *Parshat Ki Tetze* (Deuteronomy 24:9), we are instructed, to **remember what thine Eternal G*d did to Miriam.** We are told, then, to be constantly aware of what happened to Miriam after she spoke ill of Moses – even though what she said of Moses was truth – and, we hope, this constant memory will stop us from speaking ill of others.

We now have a basic understanding of the cause of *tzara'at*, but there is a deeper understanding and lesson as well. Even though it is clear that speaking ill of others is a terrible action, that fact alone does not explain all of what is taught concerning the *metzora*.

The Talmud (*Eruchin* 15b, where we find Yossi ben Zimra's remark) says, "Whoever speaks *lashon hara* is as if s/he had sinned greatly all the way up to Heaven, as it says [Psalms 73:9], **They set their mouth against heaven.**" The Talmud is telling us that when a person speaks ill of another it is equivalent to speaking ill of G*d!

Another Talmudic sage, Rav Hisda, says in the name of Mar Ukba, "Of one who speaks *lashon hara*, the Blessed Holy One says, 'He and I cannot be together in this

world.” What a terrifying statement! The Creator is unwilling – nay, unable! – to be in the same world as the person who speaks ill of another! We need to understand why speaking *lashon hara* is so terrible as to deserve these harsh statements.

Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac Sher of Slobodka (1875-1952), in his book *Leket Sichot Mussar*, reminds us of the basic but unfortunately often forgotten truth that we – all of us, no matter who we may be, no matter what we may do – are children of the Creator. Not only are we ourselves G*d’s beloved children; every other person is also a beautiful and beloved child of G*d. And our master and teacher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says, “When I hurt a human being, I hurt G*d.” A person who speaks ill of another is speaking ill of the Creator, for, as every parent will affirm, if, Heaven forbid, a child is hurt, the pain felt by the parents is at least equal to and usually much greater than that felt by the child.

Furthermore, we are not only G*d’s children; we are – all of us, whoever we may be, whatever we may do – created in G*d’s Image. And speaking ill of another human being – or even of ourselves – is thus speaking ill of G*d’s Image and therefore of G*d!

Now we can understand what the Talmud says about a person who speaks ill of any of G*d’s children. It is clear that such a one deserves *tzara’at*, for s/he is speaking ill and causing pain not only to another human being but also to the Creator, the person’s loving Parent.

And this lesson applies to all our dealings with other people. We are obliged to refrain from harming or causing pain to a fellow human being – even one we do not particularly like – lest we cause pain to his or her (and our) Divine Parent.

And the lesson may be taken even further. How can we fail to love every single human being – whoever s/he may be and whatever s/he may do – knowing and remembering that s/he is a beloved child of G*d, created in the Image and after the Likeness of our Creator! This is truly an awesome lesson. May we and the entire world merit to live always with this understanding and love.

Shabbat Shalom.