

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Words Can Be Forgiven But Not Forgotten



Words have the capacity to create, inspire, and educate. However, psychologists note that words can also cause emotional pain.

Recipients of inappropriate comments may experience embarrassment, rejection, and acute trauma that can result in suicidal thoughts. This is especially troubling in a digital age

when it is easy to post hurtful comments and difficult to retract them. As the saying goes, “Words can be forgiven but not forgotten.”

The influence words wield is expressed further in the aphorism, “Words have the power to heal, and words have the power to hurt.” Thousands of years ago, King Solomon wisely, and perhaps originally, put it this way, “*The tongue [לשון–lashon] has the power of life and death*” (Proverbs 18:21).

Considering the destructive potential of words, the Torah commands, “*Distance yourself from a false matter [דבר–word]*” (Exodus 23:7). More specifically, we are instructed, “*Do not spread slanderous gossip*” (Leviticus 19:16). These prohibitions warn us to guard ourselves against evil talk, referred to as [לשון הרע–lashon hara] an “evil tongue.”

King David addressed the importance of this commandment when he said, “*Whoever desires life, guard your tongue from evil*” (Psalms 34:12–13). Furthermore, King Solomon stated, “*Whoever guards his mouth and tongue guards himself from trouble*” (Proverbs 21:23).

The sage Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra (Arakhin 15b) sites *lashon hara* [evil talk] as one of the causes of the biblical malady known as צרעת–*tzara’at*. This association to *lashon hara* is also derived from the incident in Numbers 12 relating that Miriam was afflicted with *tzara’at* after speaking disrespectfully about her brother Moshe.

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continued...

Tzara'at (commonly and unfortunately mistranslated as leprosy) is not a natural or contagious disease. It is a supra-natural bodily affliction that resulted from a spiritual flaw in righteous people like Miriam. To call attention to their flaw, stemming, for example, from inappropriate speech, God caused a white blemish to appear on their skin. This blemish hinted at their internal spiritual blemish and provided an opportunity for them to rectify their shortcomings through a process of remorse and purification.

Last week's Torah portion contained the signs of *tzara'at*, and this week's portion, *Metzora* (Leviticus 14:1–15:33), provides the details of the purification process for the individual with *tzara'at*, who is referred to as a *metzora*.

Although any qualified individual can inspect the *metzora's* symptoms and determine if he is impure from *tzara'at*, only a Kohen [priest] could issue the final verdict. This decision is extremely crucial because the afflicted individual, who caused division through his slanderous talk, is similarly separated from the community for a seven-day quarantine period outside the city, away from other inhabitants. After the quarantine period ended, the *metzora* was reinspected to determine if he was healed and could be pronounced pure or if he needed to remain in isolation (Leviticus 13:24-28).

Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, of blessed memory, explains why the status of a *metzora* is pronounced by a Kohen and not a sage (*Laws of Tzara'at Impurity* 9:2; Deuteronomy 21:5).

Since *tzara'at* causes a person to be banished from the community while undergoing a purification process, this painful and embarrassing judgment, which ostracizes an individual, can be pronounced only by someone whose decisions are driven by compassion. Kohanim are predisposed to love and kindness, because they inherited these predispositions from Aaron, the first High Priest, who our sages say exemplified the motto, “*Loving peace and pursuing peace, and loving people and drawing them to the Torah*” (Ethics of the Fathers 1:12).

Today, we encounter many Jews who have separated themselves from the community, whether by choice or due to outside influences, including cult and missionary activity. We can learn an important lesson from the Kohen/*metzora* relationship. We must try to assist those who are “outside the community” with compassion, drawing them close to the Torah by demonstrating its warmth, truth, and spiritual beauty.

Shabbat Shalom,

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