



WOHL LEGACY

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

"With thanks to *The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation* for their generous sponsorship of *Covenant & Conversation*. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humility. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving."

בס"ד

מצורע תש"ף
Metzora 5780

**Othello,
WikiLeaks,
and
Mildewed
Walls**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

We should avoid saying anything in private that we would be ashamed to have others know we had said about them.



PARSHAT METZORA IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Metzora continues with the themes we started to see in parshat Tazria, including the process of purification for *tsara'at*, the decay that causes skin disease in humans and discolouration in garments and the walls of houses. This parsha concludes with the process of purifying after various types of bodily discharges.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

The phenomenon of *tsara'at* no longer exists as far as we know. Why is it still important to learn about it in the Torah?



THE CORE IDEA

It was the Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, that translated *tsara'at*, the condition whose identification and cleansing occupies much of Tazria and Metzora as "lepra", giving rise to a long tradition identifying it with leprosy.

That tradition is now widely acknowledged to be incorrect. First, the condition described in the Torah simply does not fit the symptoms of leprosy. Second, the Torah applies it not only to various skin conditions but also to mildew (mould or fungus) on clothes and the walls of houses, which certainly rules out any known disease. The Rambam puts it best: "*Tsara'at* is a comprehensive term covering a number of dissimilar conditions. Thus whiteness in a person's skin is called *tsara'at*. The falling off of some of his hair on the head or the chin is called *tsara'at*. A change of colour in garments or in houses is called *tsara'at*." (Hilchot Tumat Tsara'at 16:10)

Seeking to identify the nature of the phenomenon, the Sages looked for clues elsewhere in the Torah and found them

readily available. Miriam was afflicted with *tsara'at* for speaking badly about her brother Moshe (Bamidbar 12:10). The Torah later gives special emphasis to this event, seeing it as a warning for all generations: "Be careful with regard to the plague of *tsara'at*... Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam along the way after you came out of Egypt" (Devarim 24:8-9).

It was, in other words, not a normal phenomenon in nature, but rather a specific Divine punishment for *lashon hara*, evil speech. The Rabbis drew attention to the similarity between the words *metzora*, a person afflicted by the condition, and *motzi shem ra*, someone guilty of slander.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How do we know that *tsara'at* is a punishment?
2. Why do you think the Rabbis made this word-play, connecting the Hebrew words for someone suffering with *tsara'at* and someone guilty of slander?



Close your eyes and imagine.

Imagine yourself in your friend's house. Their parents are out of town for the day and they have invited a group of friends over, so you have the house to yourselves. Take a look at who is there. What are you doing? What are you talking about? Spend a few moments imagining what the conversation is about.

Now imagine that you hear a knock on the door, and it is your parents, who walk straight in and sit on the edge of the room (awkward... have they lost their minds?!) "You kids carry on as if we weren't here," they say to you all. Is this possible? How does your behaviour or your conversation change now that your parents are there?

You usher them out (enough is enough!) and they go back home. But a couple of minutes later, your friend's grandparents knock on the door and join the party. "We just wanted to check in on you all. You kids carry on as if we weren't here," they mumble as they sit down on the couch. (What is it with all these old people? FOMO?!) How does

their presence in the room change everyone's behaviour and conversation?

Your friend's grandparents suddenly realise they have a Bridge game to get to, so they soon leave, but then, inexplicably, your local Rabbi turns up at the door. "I just came to borrow a book from your father," he says to your friend as he sits down in the middle of the room... (this guided imagination exercise has got out of hand now!) "You kids carry on as if I wasn't here," he says. Do you? How does your behaviour and the group conversation change?

Now open your eyes, and reflect on the relief that this has all been a bizarre day dream!

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do we sometimes behave differently depending on who is watching?
2. Imagine if someone was always watching (check out the movie *The Truman Show*!) Is 'Someone' always watching?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Rambam, on the basis of rabbinic traditions, gives a brilliant account of why *tsara'at* afflicted both inanimate objects like walls and clothes, and human beings:

It [tsara'at] was a sign and wonder among the Israelites to warn them against slanderous speaking. For if a man uttered slander, the walls of his house would suffer a change. If he repented, the house would again become clean. But if he continued in his wickedness until the house was torn down, leather objects in his house on which he sat or lay would suffer a change. If he repented they would again become clean. But if he continued in his wickedness until they were burned, the garments which he wore would suffer a change. If he repented they would again become clean. But if he continued in his wickedness until they were burned, his skin would suffer a change and he would become infected by tsara'at and be set apart and alone until he no more engaged in the conversation of the wicked which is scoffing and slander. (Hilchot Tumat Tsara'at 16:10)

The most compelling illustration of what the tradition is speaking about when it talks of the gravity of *motsi shem ra*, slander, and *lashon hara*, evil speech, is Shakespeare's tragedy Othello. Iago, a high ranking soldier, is bitterly resentful of Othello, a Moorish general in the army of Venice. Othello has promoted a younger man, Cassio, over the more experienced Iago, who is determined to take revenge. He does so in a prolonged and vicious campaign, which involves among other things tricking Othello into the suspicion that his wife, Desdemona, is having an adulterous affair with Cassio. Othello

asks Iago to kill Cassio, and he himself kills Desdemona, smothering her in her bed. Emilia, Iago's wife and Desdemona's attendant, discovers her mistress dead and as Othello explains why he has killed her, realises the nature of her husband's plot and exposes it. Othello, in guilt and grief, commits suicide, while Iago is arrested and taken to be tortured and possibly executed.

It is a play entirely about the evil of slander and suspicion, and portrays literally what the Sages said figuratively, that "Evil speech kills three people: the one who says it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is said" (Talmud Bavli, Arachin 15b).

Shakespeare's tragedy makes it painfully clear how much evil speech lives in the dark corners of suspicion. Had the others known what Iago was saying to stir up fear and distrust, the facts might have become known and the tragedy averted. As it was, he was able to mislead the various characters, playing on their emotional weaknesses and envy, getting each to believe the worst about one another. It ends in serial bloodshed and disaster.

Hence the poetic justice Jewish tradition attributes to one of the least poetic of biblical passages, the laws relating to skin diseases and mildew. The slanderer spreads his lies in private, but his evil is exposed in public. First the walls of his house proclaim his sin, then the leather objects on which he sits, then

his clothes, and eventually his skin itself. He is condemned to the humiliation of isolation:

'Unclean! Unclean!' he must call out... Since he is unclean, he must remain alone, and his place shall be outside the camp.

(Vayikra 13:45-46)

Our Rabbis explained: *It is because his words separated husband from wife and brother from brother that his punishment is that he is separated from human contact and made an outcast from society.*

(Talmud Bavli, Arachin 16b)

WikiLeaks is an large organisation that publishes news and classified information provided by anonymous sources. It began in 2006 in Iceland and within 10 years it had released at least 10 million confidential documents online, covering insider information from the film industry to national security and war. There has been much discussion about whether or not this is a legal and moral organization, and who is behind it.

At its highest, WikiLeaks (and other examples of whistleblowers often seen in the news and on social media) aims at being today's functional equivalent of the law of the *metzora*: an attempt to make public the discreditable things people do and say in private. The Sages said about evil speech that it was as bad as idolatry, incest, and murder combined, and it was Shakespeare's genius to show us one dramatic way in which it can contaminate human relationships, turning people against one another with tragic consequences.

I believe that we should never say or do in private what you would be ashamed to have others see in your public social media posts or read about on the front page of tomorrow's newspapers. That is the basic theme of the law of *tsara'at*, updated to today.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

What can we learn from this message for our world where social media is so ever-present (see *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks* below)?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

[Social media is] a new chapter in the world's oldest story, the use of words as weapons by people seeking to inflict pain. New – because in the past most communications were face to face and set in some kind of social context, in which parents, teachers or friends were aware of what was going on and could intervene. There were the occasional anonymous letter writers; but at least the pain they caused was private, not public the way social networking messages often are. By allowing people facelessly to make threats or be offensive or spread false rumours, the new sites are offering the demons of our nature the maximum of temptation combined with the maximum of opportunity...

The technology is new, but the moral challenge is old. Judaism's sages were eloquent on the dangers of what they called evil speech, by which they meant derogatory, demeaning or offensive words. They called this a cardinal sin and said that it destroys three people, the one who says it, the one he says it against and the one who listens in. Words injure; they hurt; they wound. And every new technology that allows us to share words more widely calls for a renewed insistence on the ethics of communication. Free speech does not mean speech that costs nothing. It means speech that respects the freedom and dignity of others. Forget this and free speech will prove to be very expensive indeed.

Free Speech, (Thought for the Day, 9th August 2013), in The Power of Ideas, pp. 27-28



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think people often speak *lashon hara*?
2. What is the impact of *lashon hara* on society?
3. Why is *tsara'at* an appropriate punishment for *lashon hara*?



IN A NUTSHELL

The Torah has messages for us that are timeless and relevant for every generation. Even if the exact details of the phenomenon that is being described no longer apply to our generation, the lessons we can learn from them in the Torah certainly do.

THE CORE IDEA

1. As the diverse types of occurrences of *tsara'at* cannot be connected to each other scientifically (in the words of Rambam: “*Tsara'at* is a comprehensive term covering a number of dissimilar conditions”), we must conclude these unrelated phenomena are punishments for sins. But for which sin? The rabbis looked for clues in the Torah. Miriam was afflicted with *tsara'at* for speaking badly about her brother Moshe (Bamidbar 12:10) and from this they conclude that *tsara'at* is a punishment for *lashon hara*.
2. The word-play is for educational pedagogic reasons only. There is no etymological connection between the two words. But because they sound similar, the rabbis connected them to help us remember the theological connection between them – *tsara'at* is the punishment for slander and evil speech.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. There are people in our lives who remind us of who we are and how we should be behaving. Whether they be our parents, teachers, or other people we look up to. When we are around them we try to be our best selves, and when we are not we sometimes forget to. People who we do not want to think badly of us inspire us to be better.
2. The Truman Show is a movie about a TV show that follows the life of a man who does not realize that the world around him is manufactured (for the show) and all the people in his life are actors. There are cameras following him everywhere he goes (unbeknownst to him) and millions of people around the world watching him on television. He does not know he is being watched (although he eventually realizes and escapes) but if he did, can you imagine how this would impact his behaviour? How would you act if you knew there was always someone watching you? We do believe there is always someone, and that person is God. But it is a constant effort to remember this and ensure our behaviour is befitting.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

According to Rabbi Sacks, the message behind *tsara'at* being the punishment for *lashon hara* is “never say or do in private what you would be ashamed to read about on the front page of tomorrow’s newspapers”. In *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks* the dangers of social media as a semi-anonymous form of communication so often used for destructive communication is explored. It can be argued that this is the message of *tsara'at* for our age – we must be careful of the way we use social media as a medium for communication. We have to ensure not to hide behind its anonymity and forget about the impact of our words and our moral responsibility when using them.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. While it may be a part of human nature to use words for destructive means, this urge is something that we have a moral obligation to overcome, and this is what God demands of us. *Lashon Hara* could be motivated from jealousy, insecurity, or pain of some other sort. These emotions are all normal and natural, but as the rabbis said, this hateful language can destroy the lives of the person speaking, listening and the subject of the evil speech.
2. Destructive speech can destroy lives and lead to a cycle of hate and devastation. This is why all societies have legislation protecting citizens from slanderous speech. But the rabbis noted that *lashon hara* doesn’t just impact the subject of the evil speech, but the person speaking and listening are also impacted negatively.
3. *Tsara'at* is an example of a *mida keneged mida* (measure for measure) approach to punishment. *Lashon hara* is spoken in whispers behind backs, but the punishment for it is highly public and impossible to cover up.