# COVENANT & CONVERSATION
## Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

WOHL LEGACY

*"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

תזריע תש״ף
Tazria 5780

# Words That Heal

**** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK ****

**We need to be careful how we use our words, for they hold great power within them.**

## PARSHAT TAZRIA **IN A NUTSHELL**

Parshat *Tazria* discusses the laws of purity (*tahor*) and impurity (*tamei*) and the key role that the Kohen plays in distinguishing between them. If you were impure, you were forbidden from entering the holy space of the Sanctuary.

These laws show us the difference between God and human beings. God is immortal (exists forever), humans are mortal (will all die one day). God is spiritual, humans are both spiritual and physical. The things that make a person *tamei* are connected to our mortality (that we die) and our physicality (that we have a physical body as well as a soul).

The parsha begins with the laws relating to childbirth and the impurity it brings, and also the command to circumcise a male child on the eighth day. It continues with laws relating to *tsara'at*, often translated as leprosy, but which refers to something larger than a human disease, because it affects not only people but also clothes and houses. It was the job of the Kohen to examine the symptoms, and to declare the person clean or unclean, or to be separated until a clearer decision could be made. The Sages teach that *tsara'at* is a punishment for the sin of *lashon hara* (evil speech).

**QUESTION TO PONDER:**

Why do you think we need laws to remind us that we are physical and mortal (and can therefore become ill and die)?

## THE **CORE IDEA**

According to the Sages, *Tazria* and *Metzora* are about the power of speech to heal or harm. These parshiyot focus on the condition of *tsara'at*, which was a punishment for indulging in *lashon hara*, evil speech. They proved this from the case of Miriam who spoke badly aboutMoshe, and then suffered *tsara'at* as a result (Bamidbar 12).Moshe mentions this incident many years later, urging the Israelites to take it to heart:

"Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam along the way after you came out of Egypt." (Devarim 24:9)

The Rabbis said some powerful things about *lashon hara*. They said that it is worse than the three cardinal sins – idolatry, adultery, and bloodshed – combined. It harms three people: the one who speaks it, the one about whom it is spoken, and the one who listens to it. The story of Joseph began when he spoke negatively about some of his brothers, and their relationship turned bitter. The entire generation that left Egypt was not allowed to enter the Promised Land because they had spoken badly about it. The Sages said thatone who speaks *lashon hara* is like someone who does not believe in God.

In today's world, social media has become a place overflowing with hateful speech, and so we need the laws of*lashon hara* now more than ever.

**QUESTION S TO PONDER:**

1. Why do you think the Rabbis said that *lashon hara* also harms the person speaking it and the person listening to it?

2. Have you ever seen hateful speech on social media? How did it make you feel?

## IT ONCE **HAPPENED…**

*Dear friends,*

*We have been thinking about all the changes happening in all of our lives. We are making a new normal as best as we can.*

*Sometimes it is overwhelming. But we find great comfort in the things that have remained. A grocery store remaining open, the mail being delivered and the trash being taken away.*

*So, we wanted to say thank you. Not just because you are doing your job but because you give everyone a sense of peace. You are keeping the streets clean and safe. You are doing an amazing job by coming to work. We cannot live in a safe, clean city without you!*

*So we want to say **Thank You!** Like our police and medical teams, you are also superheroes!*

*We pray that this virus passes quickly and easily and we pray you and your families are healthy and well.*

*Thank you sincerely,*

*From all of us in the neighborhood!*

[This letter was handed to a team of refuse collectors during the coronavirus pandemic. The recipients were emotional and deeply thankful when accepting the letter.]

**QUESTIONS TO PONDER:**

1. How does this letter connect to the parsha?

2. In uncertain times, why is it even more important than ever to be mindful of our speech?

## THINKING MORE **DEEPLY**

At the risk of disclosing a spoiler, I would like to now discuss the 2019 film, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*. Tom Hanks plays the beloved American children's television presenter Mister Rogers, a legendary figure to several generations of young Americans, famous for his gentle, warm manner, and his musical invitation, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?"

What makes the film unusual is that it is an unabashed celebration of the power of human goodness to heal broken hearts. Today such straightforward moral messages tend to be limited only to children's films (some of them, as it happens, works of genius). Such is the power and subtlety of this film, however, that one is not tempted to dismiss it as simplistic or naïve.

The plot is based on a true story. A magazine had decided to run a series of short profiles around the theme of heroes. It assigned one of its most gifted journalists to write the piece about Fred Rogers.

The journalist was, however, a troubled soul. He had a badly broken relationship with his father. The father sought reconciliation, but the journalist refused even to see him. The jagged edges of his character showed in his writing. Every piece had a critical undercurrent, as if he relished destroying people's reputations. Given his style of journalism, he wondered why the famous children's television star had agreed to be interviewed by him. Had Rogers not read any of his writings? Did he not know the obvious risk that the profile would be negative, perhaps devastatingly so? It turned out that not only had Rogers read every article of his that he could find; he was also the only figure who had agreed to be interviewed by him. All the other "heroes" had said no.

The journalist goes to meet Rogers, first sitting through the production of an episode of his show, complete with puppets, toy trains and a miniature townscape. It is a moment ripe for big-city cynicism. Yet Rogers, when they meet and talk, defies any conventional stereotype. He turns the questions away from himself and toward the journalist. Almost immediately sensing the core of unhappiness within him, Rogers then turns every negative question into a positive affirmation, and exudes the calmness and quiet, the listening silence, that allows and encourages the journalist to talk about himself.

It is a remarkable experience to watch as Hanks' gentleness, immovable even under pressure, slowly allows the journalist – who had, after all, merely come to write a 400-word profile – to acknowledge his own failings with his father and to give him the emotional strength to forgive him and be reconciled to him. Here is a fragment of their conversation, to give you a feel for the tone of the relationship:

***Journalist*:** You love people like me.
***Fred Rogers*:** What are people like you? I've never met anyone like you in my entire life.
***Journalist*:** Broken people.
***Fred Rogers*:** I don't think you are broken. I know you are a man of conviction. A person who knows the difference between what is wrong and what is right. Try to remember that your relationship with your father also helped to shape those parts. He helped you become what you are.

Note how in a few brief sentences, Rogers helps reframe the journalist's self-image, as well as his relationship with his father. The very argumentativeness that led him to fight with his father was something he owed to his father. The film reflects the true story of when the real Fred Rogers met the journalist Tom Junod. Junod, like his character 'Lloyd Vogel' in the film, came to mock but stayed to be inspired. He said about the experience, "My heart felt like a spike, and then, in that room, it opened and felt like an umbrella." This film is a rare and compelling illustration of the power of speech to heal or harm.

Judaism is a religion of words and silences, speaking and listening, communicating and attending. God created the universe by words – "And He said… and there was" – and we create the social universe by words, by the promises with which we bind ourselves to meet our obligations to others. God's revelation at Sinai was of words – "*You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a Voice*" (Devarim 4:12). Every other ancient religion had its monuments of brick and stone; Jews, exiled, had only words, the Torah they carried with them wherever they went. The supreme mitzvah in Judaism is *Shema Yisrael*, "Listen, Israel." For God is invisible and we make no icons. We can't see God; we can't smell God; we can't touch God; we can't taste God. All we can do is listen in the hope of hearing God. In Judaism, listening is high religious art.

Or it should be. What Tom Hanks shows us in his portrayal of Fred Rogers is a man who is capable of *attending* to other people, listening to them, talking gently to them in a way that is powerfully affirming without for a moment being bland or assuming that all is well with the world or with them. The reason this is both interesting and important is that it is hard to know how to listen to God if we do not know how to listen to other people. And how can we expect God to listen to us if we are incapable of listening to others?

This entire issue of speech and its impact on people has become massively amplified by the spread of smartphones and social media and their impact, especially on young people and on the entire tone of the public conversation. Online abuse is the plague of our age. It has happened because of the ease and impersonality of communication. It gives rise to what has been called the disinhibition effect: people feel freer to be cruel and crude than they would be in a face-to-face situation. When you are in the physical presence of someone, it is hard to forget that the other is a living, breathing human being just as you are, with feelings like yours and vulnerabilities like yours. But when you are not, all the poison within you can leak out, with sometimes devastating effects. The number of teenage suicides and attempted suicides has doubled in the past ten years, and most attribute the rise to effects of social media. Rarely have the laws of *lashon hara* been more timely or necessary.

*A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* offers a fascinating commentary on an ancient debate in Judaism, one discussed by Rambam in the sixth of his *Eight Chapters*, as to which is greater, the *chassid*, the saint, the person who is naturally good, or *ha-moshel be-nafsho*, one who is not naturally saintly at all but who practices self-restraint and suppresses the negative elements in their character. It is precisely this question, whose answer is not obvious, that gives the film its edge.

**I believe we need the laws of *lashon hara* now more than almost ever before.** Social media is awash with hate. The language of politics has become ad hominem and vile. We seem to have forgotten the messages that *Tazria* and *Metzora* teach: that **evil speech is a plague. It destroys relationships, rides roughshod over people's feelings, debases the public square, turns politics into a jousting match between competing egos and defiles all that is sacred about our common life. It need not be like this.**

A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood shows how good speech can heal where evil speech harms.

**QUESTION TO PONDER:**

Why is the message of *tsara'at* more relevant than ever today?

## FROM THE THOUGHT OF **RABBI SACKS**

*This is an extraordinary moment for the world, when a virus is sweeping across humanity, bringing it to its knees in a way that the world hasn't known to quite this extent for 100 years. And who knows whether this new technology of allowing us to be close mentally, yet physically distant, was not created for just such a moment as this?*

***A live-streamed shiur delivered by Rabbi Sacks for Vayakhel-Pekudei (March 2020/5780)***

## AROUND THE **SHABBAT TABLE**

1. What can we learn from Fred Rogers and the way he utilised the power of speech?
2. Do you think the technology and social media of our age is a positive addition to our lives or mainly destructive?
3. Do you agree with Rabbi Sacks when he says that we need the laws of *lashon hara* more now than ever before?

## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION
TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

A person who always remembers this is far less likely to become arrogant. They are more likely to realise that life is short, and our actions have an impact on others. The connection between *tsara'at* and this idea is clear. Our words can be powerful (for the good and the bad) and although our time here on Earth may only be fleeting, our words (and actions) can outlive us. So we have to make sure that they are positive words, and actions that we can be proud of.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. *Lashon hara* can destroy lives, but not just the life of the subject of the hateful speech. The person who speaks it and the person who listens are also both negatively impacted by engaging in this behaviour. Their reputations may well be affected too, and the way they perceive the subject will change from discussing them. There is no such thing as a passive, innocent bystander when it comes to *lashon hara*.
2. Anyone who has been on social media has witnessed hateful speech. Researchers believe an extraordinarily high percentage of young people have suffered from this first-hand, and even those that haven't have witnessed it in some form. Perhaps the saddest occurrences are when young people witness adults using this kind of language in their social media posts. Children learn from the behaviours they see exhibited by the adults in their lives.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Our words have immense power which can be harnessed for good or for bad. Although *lashon hara* and the message of *tsara'at* focuses on the destructive power ofour words for the negative, the flip-side of this is how much good they can do. This letter is an example of the power of words for good. Theyexpress gratitude for someone and the role they are playing during a difficult time for all of us. We should all be thinking in these times how we can use our words to strengthen and connect to the people around us.
2. During this period, when we were forced to implement social distancing in order to save lives, we needed to be mindful of those who are feeling lonely, sad or depressed. A simple kind word, or gesture of reaching out to connect, could have a powerful impact for the good in the life of someone, whether a friend, relative, or stranger. A lesson from this time is how important it is to use our words for the power of good.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The nature of social media (which allows us to be more anonymous, and certainly more removed than when engaged in 'in-person' discourse) has led to an intensification in hatefulspeech. The political discourse has also become hateful as personalities are attacked far more often instead of the core issues being discussed and focusing on problem solving. Remembering the power of our words is more important now than ever before.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Fred Rogers was a "rare and compelling illustration of the power of speech to heal or harm." He was a man capable of *attending* to other people, listening to them, seeing them without judgement, and was able to talk to them gently in a way that was powerfully affirming without for a moment being bland or assuming that all is well with the world or with them.
2. Like everything in our lives, it has the potential for good and for bad. "Online abuse is the plague of our age. It has happened because of the ease and impersonality of communication. It gives rise to what has been called the disinhibition effect: people feel freer to be cruel and crude than they would be in a face-to-face situation. When you are in the physical presence of someone, it is hard to forget that the other is a living, breathing human being just as you are, with feelings like yours and vulnerabilities like yours. But when you are not, all the poison within you can leak out, with sometimes devastating effects." However, Rabbi Sacks also highlights the potential for good that social media presents, especially times of crisis like the Covid pandemic (see *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*).
3. Due to the rise of social media (see answer 2) and the direction that political discourse has taken in the United Kingdom, United States, and beyond, the message of the power of speech is more important than ever before. Remembering the power of our words, for bad but even more for good, is more important now than ever before.