



Covenant & Conversation

FAMILY
EDITION

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

TAZRIA-METZORA • תזריע-מצרע

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צז

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah.

An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

The Plague of Evil Speech

● This summary is adapted from this week's main essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/tazria/the-plague-of-evil-speech/

The Rabbis gave a moral element to the condition of *tzara'at* – often translated as leprosy – the subject that dominates the *parshiyot* of Tazria and Metzora. It was, they said, a **punishment** rather than a **medical condition**. Their interpretation was based on the stories found in the Torah itself. Moshe's hand became temporarily white with *tzara'at* when he expressed doubt about the willingness of the people to believe in his mission (Shemot 4:6-7). Miriam was struck by *tzara'at* when she spoke against Moshe (Bamidbar 12:1-15). So therefore, reasoned the Sages, when one spoke *lashon hara*, they were punished with *tzara'at*.

Evil speech, *lashon hara*, was considered by the Sages to be one of the worst sins of all. Here is how Rambam summarises it:

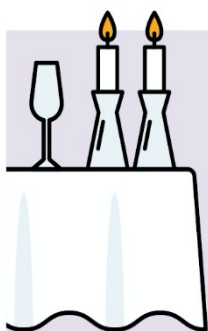
The Sages said: there are three transgressions for which a person is punished in this world and has no share in the World to Come – idolatry, adultery, and bloodshed. **And *lashon hara* is as bad as all three combined.** They also said: whoever speaks with an evil tongue, it is as if he denied God . . . Evil speech kills three people – the one who says it, the one who accepts it, and the one about whom it is said. (Hilchot Deot 7:3)

There are many examples from Jewish history when, unable to resolve their own conflicts civilly and graciously, Jews slandered their opponents to the civil authorities, with results that were disastrous to the Jewish community as a whole. Despite the fact that the whole of rabbinic Judaism is a culture of argument; despite the fact that the Talmud explicitly says that the school of Hillel had its views accepted

because they were 'gentle, modest, and respectfully taught their opponents' views on a matter even before they taught their own' (Eruvin 13b) – despite this, Jews have continued to criticise, denounce, even excommunicate those whose views they did not understand, even when the objects of their scorn were among the greatest ever defenders of Orthodoxy against the intellectual challenges of their age (for example Rambam and the Malbim, among many others).

Of what were the accusers guilty? Only evil speech. And what, after all, is evil speech? Mere words. Yet **words have consequences.** Diminishing their opponents, the self-proclaimed defenders of the faith diminished themselves and their faith. They gave the impression that Judaism is simple-minded, narrow, incapable of handling complexity, helpless in the face of challenge, a religion of bickering, resulting in excommunication instead of reasoned debate. Rambam and Malbim took their fate philosophically. Yet one weeps to see a great tradition brought so low.

What an astonishing insight it was to see *tzara'at* – that disfiguring disease – as a symbol and symptom of evil speech. **For we truly are disfigured when we use words to condemn, not communicate; to close rather than open minds; when we use language as a weapon and wield it brutally.** The message of Tazria-Metzora remains. Linguistic violence is no less savage than physical violence, and those who afflict others are themselves afflicted. Words wound. Insults injure. *Lashon hara* destroys communities. **Language is God's greatest gift to humankind and it must be used wisely if it is to heal, not harm.**



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why would *tzara'at* be a fitting punishment for *lashon hara*?
2. Why do you think people are often tempted to speak *lashon hara*, either about their leaders or about their peers?
3. How is language "God's greatest gift to humankind"? How can it be used for the good?



Feathers in the Wind

as told by **Simon Lawrence**

A Chassidic tale is told of the man who spoke badly of the people in his town. Gossip, slander, nasty words; nothing was too much for this wayward chap.

One day, realising the error of his ways, he went to the Rabbi of the town for advice on how to make up for his poor conduct. The Rabbi said to him, “Go home, take your feather pillow, cut it open, and scatter the feathers into the wind.” The confused man did so, and then returned to the Rabbi.

“I have scattered the feathers. Am I forgiven?” asked the man.

“Not yet,” replied the Rabbi. “Now go back and gather all the feathers, every last one of them, and return them into the pillowcase.”

The man replied swiftly, “But Rabbi, that’s impossible! They have blown far and wide, across the town and beyond!”

“Precisely!” replied the Rabbi. “You may have a sincere desire to correct your ways, but just as you cannot collect all those feathers, neither will you be able to fully make up for the damage done by spreading those nasty words.”

Rabbi Sacks reminds us in this week’s article that ‘language is God’s greatest gift to humankind’. Choose kind words, choose healing words, choose welcoming words. Think before you speak, or don’t speak at all! Shabbat Shalom!

● Simon Lawrence is Director of Jewish Studies at Carmel School in Western Australia, and a member of our inaugural cohort of Sacks Scholars.



A CLOSER LOOK

● **Simon Lawrence** now reflects on some of the deeper ideas he learnt from Rabbi Sacks.

What lesson did you learn from Rabbi Sacks himself that connects to the message in this week’s article?

I was privileged to spend a little time with Rabbi Sacks during his visit to Perth, Western Australia in 2012. It was remarkable to observe that before he spoke, there always seemed to be a slight pause, a moment of reflection. When others spoke, he carefully considered his response. He embodied the core message of appreciating the power of words.

How is this idea reflected in Jewish life?

The ‘Shema’, our most famous *tefilla*, begins with a call to ‘listen’. It is this emphasis on listening, hearing the voice of others, that reverberates through Jewish thought. Conversation, dialogue, sensible, constructive discussion, even argument is encouraged, but this must always be accompanied by rational thinking and active listening as well as respect for the views of others. Furthermore, it is fascinating that the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, begins with ‘Kol Nidre’. Why begin this most special of times with the seemingly dull topic of promises and vows? The emphasis here, once again, is on the words that we say. Words are powerful. Words have meaning. Words matter. ‘Kol Nidre’ reminds us to pause and reflect before we make promises and before we speak.

What is this week’s main ‘takeaway’ message for the next generation?

We humans are blessed with the power of speech. This is what distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom. Consider this, and ensure that you wake up each day with the intention to use this power constructively.



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: What hint might person who had been cured be given, to indicate that they would contract *tzara’at* again?

▲: On the day of their purification, the *metzora* – an individual suffering from biblical leprosy – is commanded to take “two live clean birds, cedar wood, scarlet of the worm, and hyssop” (Vayikra 14:4). Later on, after the water is sprinkled seven times on the *metzora* for purification, one living bird is set free and sent away from the house. If this bird then returned to the same house that day, the cured *metzora* could see this as a warning that they would contract *tzara’at* again. (See Targum Yonatan on Vayikra 14:7.)

● Adapted from Torah IQ by David Woolf, a collection of 1500 Torah riddles, available worldwide on Amazon.