

## What's Wrong with Gossip That's True?

Levit., Chapter 13

1. And the L-rd spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:
2. If a man has a se'ith, a sappachath, or a bahereth on the skin of his flesh, and it forms a lesion of tzara'at on the skin of his flesh, he shall be brought to Aaron the kohen, or to one of his sons, the kohanim.
3. The kohen shall look at the lesion on the skin of his flesh, and [if] hair in the lesion has turned white and the appearance of the lesion is deeper than the skin of his flesh, it is a lesion of tzara'at. When the kohen sees this, he shall pronounce him unclean...
6. And the kohen shall see him on the seventh day a second time. And, behold! the lesion has become dimmer, and the lesion has not spread on the skin, the kohen shall pronounce him clean. It is a mispachath. He shall immerse his garments and become clean.
59. This is the law (Torat) of the tzara'at affliction...

*A person to whom shall occur in the skin of his flesh... the plague of tzara'at(13:2)*

### Midrash Rabbah; Talmud; Rashi

The plague of tzara'at comes only as a punishment for lashon harah (evil talk).

### Talmud, Erachin 15b

The word metzora is a contraction of *motzi rah*, one who spreads slander.

### Talmud, Erachin 16b

Why is the metzora different from all other ritually impure persons in that the Torah said, "He shall dwell alone; outside the camp shall his habitation be"? With his gossip and slander, he separated a husband from his wife, a man from his neighbor; therefore said the Torah: "He shall dwell alone."

### R' Hirsch

The symptoms of tzara'at are different from leprosy and the quarantine had nothing to do with preventing the spread of the illness. If that were the case, many laws would be different (for example, a newlywed is not examined for tzara'at in order not to interfere with the festivities, but at a time of such mingling even worse spread would occur). Tzara'at is not a bodily disease but the physical manifestation of a spiritual malaise, a punishment designed to show the malefactor that he must mend his ways.

### Midrash Rabbah

The Psalmist compares slanderous talk to "Sharp arrows of the warrior, coals of brooms" (Psalms 120:4). All other weapons smite from close quarters, while the arrow smites from the distance. So is it with slander: it is spoken in Rome and kills in Syria. All other coals, when extinguished, are extinguished without and within; but coals of brooms are still burning within when they are extinguished without. So is it with words of slander: even after it seems that their effects have been put out, they continue to smolder within those who heard them.

### Midrash

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel asked his servant, Tavi, to buy him something good from the market. The servant returned with some tongue. Rabbi Shimon then asked his servant to buy something bad from the market. The servant returned with more tongue. "How can this be? I asked you to buy something good, you bought tongue; I asked you to buy something bad, you also bought tongue?" Replied Tavi, "It has good

פרק יג

א. וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל  
 אֶהֱרֹן לֵאמֹר: ב. אָדָם כִּי יִהְיֶה  
 בְּעוֹר בְּשָׂרוֹ שָׂאֵת אוֹ סַפְחַת אוֹ  
 בַּהֲרַת וְהָיָה בְּעוֹר בְּשָׂרוֹ לְנֹגַע צָרְעַת וְהוּבָא אֶל אֶהֱרֹן  
 הַכֹּהֵן אוֹ אֶל אֶחָד מִבְּנָיו הַכֹּהֲנִים: ג. וַרְאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֶת  
 הַנֹּגַע בְּעוֹר הַבְּשָׂר וְשַׁעַר הַנֹּגַע הַפֶּה לְבָן וּמְרֹאֵה הַנֹּגַע  
 עֲמֹק מֵעוֹר בְּשָׂרוֹ נֹגַע צָרְעַת הוּא וַרְאָהוּ הַכֹּהֵן וְטָמְא  
 אֹתוֹ: ו. וַרְאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֹתוֹ בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׂבִיעִי שְׁנִית וְהָיָה  
 כִּהְיָה הַנֹּגַע וְלֹא פָּשָׂה הַנֹּגַע בְּעוֹר וְטָהַרוּ הַכֹּהֵן מִסַּפְחַת  
 הַיָּא וְכִבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְטָהַר ... נט. זֹאת תּוֹרַת נֹגַע צָרְעַת...



and bad. When it is good, it has a lot of goodness. When it is bad, it is very bad.”

## **Yalkut Shimoni**

To what may the tongue be compared? To a dog tied with an iron chain and locked in a room within a room within a room, yet when he barks the entire populace is terrified of him. Imagine if he were loose outside! So too the tongue: it is secured behind the teeth and behind the lips, yet it does no end of damage.

## **Orchot Tzadikim**

Before you speak, you are the master of your words. After you speak, your words master you.

## **Talmud, Erachin 15a**

Evil talk kills three people: the speaker, the listener, and the one who is spoken of.

## **The Lubavitcher Rebbe**

The speaker obviously commits a grave sin by speaking negatively of his fellow. The listener, too, is a partner to this evil. But why is the one who is spoken of affected by their deed? Are his negative traits worsened by the fact that they are spoken of? Indeed they are. A person may possess an evil trait or tendency, but his quintessential goodness, intrinsic to every soul, strives to control it, conquer it, and ultimately eradicate its negative expressions and redirect it as a positive force. But when this evil is spoken of, it is made that much more manifest and real. By speaking negatively of the person's trait or deed, the evil speakers are, in effect, defining it as such; with their words, they grant substance and validity to it. But the same applies in the reverse: speaking favorably of another, accentuating his or her positive side, will help him realize himself in the manner that you have defined him.

## **Story**

A man once came to see Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch and proceeded to portray himself as a villain. After describing at length his moral and spiritual deficiencies, he begged the Rebbe to help him overcome his evil character. “Surely,” said the Rebbe, “you know how grave is the sin of speaking evilly of a human being. Nowhere, to my knowledge, does it say that it is permissible to speak lashon harah about oneself.”

*This is the law (Torat) of the tzara'at affliction...(13:59)*

## **Sifsei Kohen**

In concluding the chapter of tzara'at, the Torah juxtaposes Torah with tzara'at affliction. This teaches that if one has earned the punishment of tzara'at, he should occupy himself with Torah study, because the Torah is a spiritual fire that purges impurity. One who studies Torah absorbs the potential for purity but one who neglects it opens the door to impurity.

## SUMMARY

- Tzara'at was a punishment for someone who spoke slander. This individual is removed from all three camps of Israel and was separated even from those who shared his condition. This unique degree of his isolation was a punishment for the fact that he created isolation and rifts between people so part of his rehabilitative process involved becoming an outcast among outcasts.
- Every person has negative qualities, which he naturally tries to suppress and redirect. When he is labeled by this negative character, it is made that much more real, defining him, and accentuating it. Conversely, speaking favorably about someone, helps that person to realize the positive qualities and grow accordingly.
- Words are potent. Can you imagine a world bereft of evil talk, rumors, slander and gossip? What would it look like?

