

Evil Speech

Shabbat Metzora 5779

April 12, 2019

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Everybody's favorite Torah portion: *Metzora*, the name of our weekly assignment also being the name of the disease that is its focus. Some translate *metzora* as leprosy, but that's difficult to prove. Houses and fabrics, not only humans, can be stricken with *metzora*. We do well to leave the word untranslated.

Metzora is apparently as much a spiritual ailment as it is a physical one. After all, the priest and a series of rituals are required for remedy. Often, progressive rabbis preach against the text, because it stipulates that people suffering a physical ailment be excluded from the community. What better occasion to advocate inclusion? Barring an illness communicable by casual contact, we open our hearts and work to make our facility, our programs, our services accessible to all.

Many of us are old enough to remember a time when people suffering from HIV infection were excised from communities, even long after we learned that the virus couldn't spread through a cough or handshake. In those days, *Parashat Metzora* was a painful reminder that our human species has long rejected the physically weakest among us and an occasion to demand that ancient strictures not be perpetuated. That latter call was heard here: Congregation B'nai Israel was among the first to establish outreach to AIDS patients who had been rejected by their own families and were desperately in need of human touch, caring, and sharing.

We should note, though, that our ancient sages might have been no more eager than we are to exclude persons afflicted with physical ailments. Rabbinic texts go to great lengths to insist that *metzora* is merely the physical manifestation of a spiritual illness. Most often, the rabbis point to the word *metzora* itself. Divided into two words, with different vowels, *metzora* could be read, *motzi ra*, one who brings forth evil, a sin more often referred to as *lashon ha-ra*, which literally means "evil speech" and usually referring to gossip.ⁱ

On the one hand, we recoil from the notion that illness is the result of sin, which could suggest that everyone who is ill is a sinner. But I wonder if that's what our rabbis meant. One commentator points to the birds that are the first

sacrifice brought by the person with *metzora*. The birds, the rabbi writes, are the perfect recompense for the sin of evil speech, since birds tend to twitter indiscriminately.ⁱⁱ In other words, perhaps the purification isn't for any actual skin disease at all, but for the sin of malicious gossip, a point made explicit by yet another commentator.ⁱⁱⁱ

Judaism takes evil speech seriously. A midrash suggests that slander is more serious than murder, for it “kills” three people: the one who utters it, the one who hears it, and the subject of the malicious lies.^{iv}

Rabbis tell a Chasidic story about the lasting damage: “[A] man...went through his community slandering the rabbi. One day, feeling remorseful, he begged the rabbi for forgiveness and said he was willing to do penance. The rabbi told him to take several feather pillows, cut them open, and scatter the feathers to the winds. The man did so, but when he returned to tell the rabbi that he had fulfilled [the] request, he was told, ‘Now go and gather all the feathers.’ The man protested, ‘But that is impossible.’ [The rabbi replied:] ‘Of course it is. And though you may sincerely regret the evil you have done and truly desire to correct it, it is as impossible to repair the damage done by your words as it will be to recover the feathers.’”^v

Our rabbis emphasize that a statement need not be false in order to be prohibited *lashon ha-ra*, “evil speech,” which includes, “speaking disparagingly of one’s friend, even if what is said is true.”^{vi} An example the rabbis often offer is Miriam, stricken with *metzora* for speaking ill of Moses on account of his Cushite wife. Torah does not suggest that Moses doesn’t have a Cushite wife, only that Miriam and Aaron sin when they disparage Moses for that.^{vii}

In my research to prepare tonight’s sermon, I found an interesting comment on one Orthodox web site: “When non-observant people talk about how difficult it is to observe Jewish law, they usually mention the difficulty of observing Shabbat or keeping kosher or other similarly detailed rituals. Yet the laws that are most difficult to keep, that are most commonly violated even by observant Jews, are the laws regarding improper speech. This is a very important area of Jewish law; entire books have been written on the subject.”^{viii}

Once we get past the irritation at the tone of the Orthodox assertion, we will acknowledge that regulating what we say is even more challenging for most people than restricting what we eat or our activities on Shabbat.

Without thinking, we disparage a colleague who has a different way of doing things. We commiserate with one neighbor about another's lackadaisical lawn care. We speak ill of those whose political leanings differ from our own, as if their political views negatively impact on their worth as human beings.

Thankfully, *lashon ha-ra* is not a capital crime. Our rabbis suggest that a person with that disease, *metzora*, would never be permitted to rejoin the community under a strict application of law. However, the Torah ensures that even the prescribed exile isn't permanent. The sages teach that the principle function of the priest in this ritual is to go outside the camp, to usher the healed *metzora* back into the community. No, the feathers cannot all be collected and stuffed back into the pillow. Still, the sinner can be forgiven.

Even better is the opportunity to avoid our evil speech, or at least to reduce it. Therefore, we pray, in the supplication we shall now sing, "Let the words of my mouth...be acceptable to You, O God, my Rock and my Redeemer."

Amen.

ⁱ *Midrash Tanchuma* Buber, *Metzora* 2:1, Babylonian Talmud Arachin 16a, *Vayikra Rabbah* 16:2, *inter alia*.

ⁱⁱ *Or HaChayim* to Leviticus 14:2:3.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Torah T'mimah* to Leviticus 14:2:6.

^{iv} *Midrash Tanchuma* Buber, *Metzora* 4:1.

^v As told by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, "Words that Wound: The Rabbinic and Hassidic understandings of gossip focus on the impossibility of repairing the damage it causes," *My Jewish Learning*, accessed on April 12, 2019 at <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/words-that-wound/>.

^{vi} Chofetz Chaim, "Introduction, Negative Commandments 1," *Laws of the Prohibition of Lashon Hara and Rechilut*, 1873, Silverstein translation, accessed via *Sefaria*.

^{vii} Numbers 12:1-15. See also Chofetz Chaim, "Introduction, Negative Commandments 3," *Laws of the Prohibition of Lashon Hara and Rechilut*, 1873, Silverstein translation, accessed via *Sefaria*.

^{viii} "Speech and Lashon Ha-Ra," *Judaism 101*, accessed April 12, 2019 at www.jewfaq.org/m/speech.htm.