

This Week In torah *Tazria/Metsora*

Remember when you were a child and heard that old saying: “I am rubber, you are glue. Whatever you say, bounces off me and sticks to you.”? It was a way we addressed as children name calling and verbal abuses. It is not just children who have to deal with it though, *l’shon harah*/malicious speech-gossiping transcend the ages. The Rabbis commenting on this week’s *parasha* see a direct correlation between *tzara’at*/leprosy and the evil tongue.

According to Rabbi Harvey Fields, the sages move beyond the medical diagnosis and treatments of this skin affliction and focus on the causes. The text states that once a leper is deemed whole again by the Priesthood, they are commanded to offer up a sin offering. What was the sin? Malicious speech!

How do they make that assumption? God gives Moses leprosy in Exodus 4 and in Numbers 12, Miriam gets it for her maligning her younger brother, Moses. In the Talmud, Rabbi Yochanan says in the name of Rabbi Yosi bar Zimra: spreading *l’shon harah* is identical to denying the power of God. God is committed to honesty and truth telling—not gossiping. In our *sedra*, leprosy starts on the outside and effects the inside of a person— just like in the book of Numbers when malicious speech runs thru the Israelites camp, God starts a fire on the outskirts of the camp then moves into the camp. The 20th century Chasidic master known as the Slominer Rebbe notes that this ailment starts on the surface but thru being ostracized and/or isolated, it quickly moves to a period introspection and necessary teshuvah/repentance which leads to the sin offering when they are deemed whole.

Now that the case can be made for the one who says malicious things, what about the victim? We who have had been on the receiving end of name calling or gossip know that it can sting. We know that the words can pierce the soul and have devastating effects. For some reason, it is easier to feel that rebuke rather than relish a compliment. Our friend and former congregant, Rabbi Lynne Goldsmith, used to say that it takes 100 “atta-boys” [compliments] to ease the blow of one nasty comment. To prevent such

mean spirited means from getting to us, we should take a moment each day in personal reflection to list our sense of worth to the world—what qualities do we possess to make another life's better?, What virtues do we have that we flex to create a better community?, Who in our lives truly appreciates us for who we really are? The result is summarized beautifully by a quote by philosopher William James [and this was shared with me by our friend Bob Schnee]: “Each of us literally chooses, by his ways of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit.”

Torah teaches us to choose our words carefully—our evil words can hurt. This week's *parasha*, according to our sages, teaches us that those who speak these words will be punished by leprosy. But for the victims of such rhetoric, the healing comes from another's *teshuvah* and the support of those who love to insure that these words won't linger causing harm.