

Bird Is The Word

Tazria Metzora 5781

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In my second year at RIETS, I had the privilege of enrolling in the legendary Homiletics class of Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, he should live and be well. The first semester was about how to deliver a sermon; the second semester was about how to conduct lifecycle events. One memorable session was focused on eulogies, and addressed a unique conundrum. How do you eulogize a person no one liked- and justifiably so? Can you extol the virtues of a person who had none? I've been thinking of this since the passing of Bernie Madoff. To be sure, he is not the first scoundrel brought to a Jewish burial. *Someone* officiated the funerals of Bugsy Siegel, Arnold Rothstein or Louis "Lepke" Buchalter. Rabbi Lookstein suggested that, instead of looking for a positive trait to extol, it would be more appropriate to focus on lessons learned from the life of the deceased. If there is one lesson learned from the malevolent and misbegotten life of Bernie Madoff, who engaged in the worst forms of affinity fraud, it is that there is a dark side to friendship and social interconnectedness.

¹ Prepared in partnership with Rabbi Shaanan Gelman

Indeed, this is a primary theme of the two parshiyot we read this morning. Chazal suggest that *tzara'at* arises from a host of antisocial behaviors, but most well-known is that it results from *lashon hara* and *rechilus*. But to really understand the nature of the sin, we need to look at the cure prescribed for the *metzora*.

ויקרא פרק יד פסוק ד

וְצִוָּה הַכֹּהֵן וְלָקַח לְמִטְהַר שְׁתֵּי־צִפְרִים חַיִּים טְהוֹרוֹת וְעֵץ אֶרֶז וְשָׁנִי תוֹלַעַת וְאַזְבִּי:

The priest shall order two live clean birds, cedar wood, crimson, and hyssop to be brought for him who is to be cleansed.

Each of these components represents what was at the heart of the sin of *Lashon Hara*. The *אזוב* represents humility (and the *תולעת שני*). You may recall that the hyssop, or *אזוב*, is used in other purification contexts as well. It is dipped into the water containing the ashes of the red heifer, and was used to paint blood on the doors and lintels of Jewish homes in Egypt prior to the plague of the First Born. The Medrash Rabbah explains that the hyssop was chosen for these exalted rituals because of what it represents:

שמות רבה (וילנא) פרשה יז

וכן יש דברים שהן נראין שפלים וצוה הקב"ה לעשות מהן כמה מצות, האזוב נראה לאדם שאינו כלום וכחו גדול לפני האלקים

There are things that appear insignificant, and that God commanded to do several commandments with them. Hyssop appears insignificant- it is shrubbery you step over and don't pay attention to. A gossip lords him/herself over others, sharing damaging information about people whom they consider irrelevant or inferior. The Torah reminds us how the Metzora arrived at his current station, and reminds him that he is no better- and is currently worse- than the person about whom he spoke so callously and casually.

If the message of purification is to become more humble, and to avoid hubris, one might wonder why the cedar tree is used. Isn't the cedar the mightiest of trees? Just a few moments ago, we described the mighty voice of God as (Psalms 29:5)

"קול ה', שִׁבַּר אֲרָזִים; וַיִּשְׁבַּר ה', אֶת-אֲרָזֵי הַלְּבָנוֹן"

God's voice breaks the cedars, and He will break the cedars of Lebanon- the very symbol of might and dominance. If we are trying to avoid arrogance, why are we trying to involve it in the cure? To this, the Chidushei HaRim, Rav Yitzchak Meir Alter- the first Gerrer Rebbe- suggested that some people engage in idle gossip not out of a surfeit of haughtiness, but out of a surfeit of humility. There are those who feel so inferior to others that they gossip about others as an artificial way of bolstering their own self esteem. Alternatively, we don't feel important enough, principled

enough or religious enough to take a moral stand in the presence of gossip- or of any other violation of Torah values and precepts. If only we knew we were cedars, we would discover the inner courage to stand up tall in the face of treachery. This is what is behind the “Upstander” awards that are found in so many of our schools, Akiba Yavneh Academy included, awarded to kids who show moral courage especially when difficult. It is one thing not to bully; it is quite another not when one takes a stand against bullying by others. This is what we want from our kids, isn't it? We want them to be cedars, to know they are sturdy and majestic. This knowledge will guide them in life, whether in high school classrooms confronting social aggression, on college campuses defending Israel or anywhere, as a voice for those who have been abused or cast aside.

Finally, the two birds. According to Rav Moshe Alshich, these birds represent actual, literal “tweeting”- the incessant chatter of people that leads to idle gossip. It is no surprise that social media- like twitter- is a valuable form of connection, a terrific way to disseminate valuable information and ideas, and simultaneously the most successful forum for lashon hara and a toxic forum for discourse. It can be the very definition of social interactions gone awry.

This third point has particular relevance to the times we are living through, when social interactions have been curtailed and, in many cases, completely erased from our lives. As we return to some semblance of normalcy and, for those comfortable, expand our social circles once again, it is easy to place socializing on a pedestal, as if it was inherently good and intrinsically virtuous. This is mistaken. Yes, there are positives provided by social interactions, but there are plenty of downsides as well, as demonstrated and exploited by Bernie Madoff. Even if we are not robbing orphans and widows of their life savings, we run the risk of exaggerating the value of a social life, perverting the blessing of relationships and relegating a religious life to the back burner. This includes taking a broad view on speaking *lashon hara*, or what shul had become in many places- a place to shmooze, drink and be merry. We can do better than seeing “social Orthodoxy” as an ideal, if we focus on ways to sanctify our relationships, uplift our conversations and engage in Torah. Let us embrace the cure for *tzara’at*: be humble, be confident and above all, be holy.

