

Parashat Metzora / פרשת מצרע

Shabbat Nisan 7, 5768, Apr. 12, 2008
MATSATI.COM / Rightly Dividing The Word of G-d
<http://www.matsati.com> | matsati@matsati.com

Do you know how leprosy is related to lashon hara?

This Weeks Reading List:

Torah: Leviticus 14:1-15:33

Haftarah: 2 Kings 7:3-7:20

B'rit HaChadashah: Matthew 8:1-17

These last two parshiot deal with various laws of “tumah v'tahara” which regulate who is permitted and who is forbidden to enter the Mishkhan (tabernacle). (see *Leviticus chapters 11 – 15*). This week I don't want to discuss the complicated laws concerning tumah and tahara that the Torah details in Parshiot Tazria and Metzora, rather I would like to discuss how tzara'at (leprosy) and lashon hara (evil talk) are tied together.

According to the Torah, the various reasons one might become ritually impure are summarized by the following:

Tumah (ritual impurity) is caused by

1. Eating or touching dead animals (see *Leviticus Chapter 11*)
2. The birth of a child (see *Leviticus Chapter 12*)
3. Tzara'at (leprosy or some kind of skin disease) on a person's skin or garment (see *Leviticus Chapter 13*)
4. Tzara'at in a house (see *Leviticus Chapter 14*)
5. Various emissions from the human body (see *Leviticus Chapter 15*)

These last two Parshiot (Tazria and Metzora) offer a very stern warning to be careful with regard to the laws concerning a “nega tzara'at” (a type of skin infection) and to do exactly as the Levitical priests instruct. I believe chapter 13 and 14 lays the groundwork for the relationship between tzara'at and lashon hara. We can see this later on in sefer Bamidbar (book of Numbers) with Miryam Moshe's sister. To begin, let's look at a few verses from this week's parsha.

Leviticus 14:1-8

14:1 ADONAI said to Moshe, 14:2 "This is to be the law concerning the person afflicted with tzara'at on the day of his purification. He is to be brought to the cohen, 14:3 and the cohen is to go outside the camp and examine him there. If he sees that the tzara'at sores have been healed in the afflicted person, 14:4 then the cohen will order that two living clean birds be taken for the one to be purified, along with cedar-wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop leaves. 14:5 The cohen is to order one of the birds slaughtered in a clay pot over running water. 14:6 As for the live bird, he is to take it with the cedar-wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird slaughtered over

running water, 14:7 and sprinkle the person to be purified from the tzara'at seven times.! Next he is to set the live bird free in an open field. 14:8 He who is to be purified must wash his clothes, shave off all his hair and bathe himself in water. Then he will be clean; and after that, he may enter the camp; but he must live outside his tent for seven days.

Reading these verses have you ever wondered why the person was required to remain outside of the camp for seven days after being healed from tzara'at before being allowed to return to the community? While thinking upon this the first thought that entered my mind was the reason why a person contracted tzara'at; generally it was because of sin. I believe there are three reasons HaShem commanded that a man/woman remain outside of the camp; (i) so there was adequate time for the person to reflect upon their sin and what they have done, (ii) to reflect upon the grace of G-d for being healed, and (iii) to reflect upon rejoining the community of believers as a changed person to live ones new found life according to the ways of the Lord.

I said earlier these two parshiot laid the groundwork for the relationship between leprosy and lashon hara (evil speech). We see this in sefer Bamidbar is *Numbers 12:1-14*.

Numbers 12:1-14

12:1 Miryam and Aharon began criticizing Moshe on account of the Ethiopian woman he had married, for he had in fact married an Ethiopian woman. 12:2 They said, "Is it true that ADONAI has spoken only with Moshe? Hasn't he spoken with us too?"ADONAI heard them. 12:3 Now this man Moshe was very humble, more so than anyone on earth. 12:4 Suddenly ADONAI told Moshe, Aharon and Miryam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting."The three of them went out. 12:5 ADONAI came down in a column of cloud and stood at the entrance to the tent. He summoned Aharon and Miryam, and they both went forward. 12:6 He said, "Listen to what I say: when there is a prophet among you, I, ADONAI, make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. 12:7 But it isn't that way with my servant Moshe. He is the only one who is faithful in my entire household. 12:8 With him I speak face to face and clearly, not in riddles; he sees the image of ADONAI. So why weren't you afraid to criticize my servant Moshe?" 12:9 The anger of ADONAI flared up against them, and he left. 12:10 But when the cloud was removed from above the tent, Miryam had tzara'at, as white as snow. Aharon looked at Miryam, and she was as white as snow. 12:11 Aharon said to Moshe, "Oh, my lord, please don't punish us for this sin we committed so foolishly. 12:12 Please don't let her be like a stillborn baby, with its body half eaten away when it comes out of its mother's womb!" 12:13 Moshe cried to ADONAI, "Oh God, I beg you, please, heal her!" 12:14 ADONAI answered Moshe, "If her father had merely spit in her face, wouldn't she hide herself in shame for seven days? So let her be shut out of the camp for seven days; after that, she can be brought back in." (CJB)

Miryam was punished with tzara'at for speaking "lashon hara" (evil talk) against her brother Moshe. Here the Torah reminds us concerning tzara'at not to slander (the Torah uses the laws of tzara'at as a reminder not to speak lashon hara). The question is however, why doesn't the Torah just tell us not to speak lashon hara? Why does the Torah use this conclusion from the story of Miryam and the laws of tzara'at? Does it make sense for the Torah to recall a bad story concerning Miryam in order to teach us not to tell bad stories about other people? The Torah

does not mention Miryam to tell us how bad her sin was, on the contrary, the incident of Miryam emphasizes how careful we must all be in all matters which involved the slightest degree of lashon hara.

I believe the Torah uses this roundabout way to teach on “lashon hara” because “lashon hara” as a sin is treated roundabout today in our lives, especially in the privacy of our hearts!

Like during the time of the giving of the Torah, today lashon hara is not considered a sin that is so significant. We find out however, from Miryam’s example, lashon hara is a very serious sin. Miryam was discussing her brother Moshe with Aharon, not in a public setting, but privately so Moshe would not be embarrassed in front of others. Nonetheless, even things which are said in private are still a sin, what about what is said in the privacy of your heart?

What if I have good intentions by passing along information (gossip)?

The problem with good intentions

We find in various places in the Torah the good intentions of people which resulted in disastrous consequences. For example, despite Aharon’s good intentions in Parashat Ki-Tisa, his actions lead to a disaster with the sin of Chet Ha’Egel (sin of the golden calf), and caused the K’vod HaShem (G-d’s Glory/Shekhina) to be taken away (see *Exodus 24:17 and 33:1-7*). Miryam in Numbers chapter 12, probably had good intentions when she spoke with Aharon in the Mishkhan about Moshe marrying a Cushite woman, but having committed lashon hara HaShem afflicted her with tzara’at (leprosy, a skin disease which left her skin white/dead).

Notice also how the mitzvah (commands) on tzara’at of the home is juxtaposed with that of the skin. Could the uncleanness of a home be connected to HaShem’s Ruach (Spirit) making a home in our hearts? Lashon hara makes our hearts unclean along with our bodies which are HaShem’s temple.

Conclusion

Ultimately the Torah is the blueprint which guides our life. From ethics to moral lessons, the Torah contains the guidelines for how we should examine ourselves. When we are able to study the Torah allowing it to inform our lives, change us, and help us to grow we have fully received the gift of the Torah which connects us to others, to ourselves, and to G-d. In my own experience, I know that the soul and the body are closely knit together; we see this in lashon hara, its spiritual and physical consequences in the Torah. Our relationship with G-d begins with understanding how G-d wants us to relate to Him. The Torah explains to us how we are to relate to G-d and how not to relate to G-d. The process of doing this requires that we closely examine our hearts and our ways. And in Yeshua Hamoshiach, HaShem’s Ruach Hakodesh (the Holy Spirit) is changing us and working in us in the process of sanctification.

Be Blessed in Yeshua our Messiah!

הללויה לאדוננו מורנו ורבינו ישוע מלך המשיח לעולם ועד:

Hallelujah for our Lord, our Teacher, our Rabbi,
“Yeshua” King Messiah forever and ever