

Weekly Parsha TAZRIA 5782

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

In this week's Torah reading, we are informed, almost in passing, of the commandment regarding circumcision of male children at the age of eight days. This commandment, which has existed forever in Jewish life, is the symbol of the covenant with our father Abraham between the Lord of Israel and the people of Israel and is one of the core rituals of Judaism.

The circumcision ceremony itself is called a brit – a covenant. It is the dedication of Jews to their faith and tradition that has remained, despite all the various attempts to destroy it in each century of Jewish existence. Throughout Jewish history, this ritual of circumcision, like the Jewish people itself, has always been under attack and criticism from the outside world.

The Romans and the Greeks, who worshiped the human body in its physical form and for its prowess, abhorred the idea of circumcision. They felt that it was a mutilation that defiled the body and its perfection. Jews, however, felt that circumcision sanctified the body, and represented the better nature of human beings – the spiritual and eternal side of human life.

Jews always believed that inevitably the body weakens, withers, and eventually disappears, and it is only the intangible parts of our existence – memory, spirit, and creativity, that endure and can be passed on from generation to generation. As such, circumcision was not so much a defilement of the human body, as it was and is a testimony to the enhancement and eternity of the human spirit. Every circumcision was a statement of renewal of the original covenant with our father Abraham, and is a testimony to the values of monotheism, human kindness, and hospitality that he represented and introduced into a pagan and hostile world environment.

Even today, there are many forces in the world that seek to deny the rights of the Jewish people to perform this core basic commandment. These groups always cloak themselves in the piety of self-righteousness. They claim to represent the eight-day-old infant, who apparently has no say in the matter. Mixed into this specious argument is the old Roman and Greek idea of the holiness of the human body and the necessity to protect it from mutilation, which still exists.

There are so-called democratic countries that even have legislated against circumcision, all in the name of some higher good and greater morality, that only they possess and understand.

It must be noted that in the Moslem world, also claiming the heritage from our father Abraham, circumcision is also an enshrined ritual and one of its tenets of faith, but it is usually performed only when the child is much older than eight days. One of the decrees against Judaism instituted by the tyrannical Soviet Union government of the past century was the banning of circumcision. Yet, when the Soviet Union collapsed, an enormous number of Jews who were already adults, chose to undergo circumcision, to show their solidarity with their people and with the tradition of our fathers.

This phenomenon attests to the strength and permanence of this commandment amongst all Jews, no matter what their status of religious observance may be. It is this supreme act of loyalty and commitment that binds the Jewish people together with each other, and with our past, our present and our eternity.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

TAZRIA - The Circumcision of Desire

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l

It is hard to trace with any precision the moment when a new idea makes its first appearance on the human scene, especially one as amorphous as that of love. But love has a history.[1] There is the contrast we find in Greek, and then Christian, thought between eros and agape: sexual desire and a highly abstract love for humanity in general.

There is the concept of chivalry that makes its appearance in the age of the Crusades, the code of conduct that prized gallantry and feats of bravery to “win the heart of a lady”. There is the romantic love presented in the novels of Jane Austen, hedged with the proviso that the young or not-so-young man destined for the heroine must have the right income and country estate, so as to exemplify the “truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”[2] And there is the moment in Fiddler on the Roof where, exposed by their children to the new

ideas in pre-revolutionary Russia, Tevye turns to his wife Golde, and the following conversation ensues:

Tevye: Do you love me?

Golde: I'm your wife!

Tevye: I know! But do you love me?

Golde: Do I love him? For twenty-five years I've lived with him, fought with him, starved with him. Twenty-five years, my bed is his...

Tevye: Shh!

Golde: If that's not love, what is?

Tevye: Then you love me!

Golde: I suppose I do!

The inner history of humanity is in part the history of the idea of love. And at some stage a new idea makes its appearance in biblical Israel. We can trace it best in a highly suggestive passage in the book of one of the great Prophets of the Bible, Hosea.

Hosea lived in the eighth century BCE. The kingdom had been divided since the death of Solomon. The northern kingdom in particular, where Hosea lived, had lapsed after a period of peace and prosperity into lawlessness, idolatry, and chaos. Between 747 and 732 BCE there were no less than five Kings, the result of a series of intrigues and bloody struggles for power. The people, too, had become lax:

There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing and committing adultery; they break all bounds and murder follows murder. Hos. 4:1-2

Like other Prophets, Hosea knew that Israel's destiny depended on its sense of mission. Faithful to God, it was able to do extraordinary things: survive in the face of empires, and generate a society unique in the ancient world, of the equal dignity of all as fellow citizens under the sovereignty of the Creator of Heaven and Earth. Faithless, however, it was just one more minor power in the ancient Near East, whose chances of survival against larger political predators were minimal.

What makes the book of Hosea remarkable is the episode with which it begins. God tells the Prophet to marry a prostitute, and see what it feels like to have a love betrayed. Only then will Hosea have a glimpse into God's sense of betrayal by the people of Israel. Having liberated them from slavery and brought them into their land, God saw them forget the past, forsake the covenant, and worship strange gods. Yet He cannot abandon them, despite the fact that they have abandoned Him. It is a powerful passage, conveying

the astonishing assertion that more than the Jewish people love God, God loves the Jewish people. The history of Israel is a love story between the faithful God and His often faithless people. Though God is sometimes angry, He cannot but forgive. He will take them on a kind of second honeymoon, and they will renew their marriage vows:

"Therefore I am now going to allure her;

I will lead her into the desert

and speak tenderly to her . . .

I will betroth you to Me forever;

I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion.

I will betroth you in faithfulness,

and you will know the Lord." Hos 2:16-22

It is this last sentence – with its explicit comparison between the covenant and a marriage – that Jewish men say when they put on the hand-tefillin, winding its strap around the finger like a wedding-ring.

One verse in the midst of this prophecy deserves the closest scrutiny. It contains two complex metaphors that must be unraveled strand by strand:

"On that day," declares the Lord,

"You will call Me 'my Husband' [ishi];

You will no longer call Me 'my Master' [baali]." Hos. 2:18

This is a double pun. Baal, in biblical Hebrew, meant 'a husband', but in a highly specific sense – namely, 'master, owner, possessor, controller.' It signalled physical, legal, and economic dominance. It was also the name of the Canaanite god – whose prophets Elijah challenged in the famous confrontation at Mount Carmel. Baal (often portrayed as a bull) was the god of the storm, who defeated Mot, the god of sterility and death. Baal was the rain that impregnated the earth and made it fertile. The religion of Baal is the worship of god as power.

Hosea contrasts this kind of relationship with the other Hebrew word for husband, ish. Here he is recalling the words of the first man to the first woman:

This is now bone of my bones

And flesh of my flesh;

She shall be called "woman" [ishah],

Because she was taken from man [ish]. Gen. 2:23

Here the male-female relationship is predicated on something quite other than power and dominance, ownership and control. Man and woman confront one another in sameness and difference. Each is an image of the other, yet each is separate and distinct. The only relationship able to bind them together without the use

of force is marriage-as-covenant – a bond of mutual loyalty and love in which each makes a pledge to the other to serve one another.

Not only is this a radical way of reconceptualising the relationship between man and woman. It is also, implies Hosea, the way we should think of the relationship between human beings and God. God reaches out to humanity not as power – the storm, the thunder, the rain – but as love, and not an abstract, philosophical love but a deep and abiding passion that survives all the disappointments and betrayals. Israel may not always behave lovingly toward God, says Hosea, but God loves Israel and will never cease to do so.

How we relate to God affects how we relate to other people. That is Hosea's message – and vice versa: how we relate to other people affects the way we think of God. Israel's political chaos in the eighth century BCE was intimately connected to its religious waywardness. A society built on corruption and exploitation is one where might prevails over right. That is not Judaism but idolatry, Baal-worship.

Now we understand why the sign of the covenant is circumcision, the commandment given in this week's parsha of Tazria. For faith to be more than the worship of power, it must affect the most intimate relationship between men and women. In a society founded on covenant, male-female relationships are built on something other and gentler than male dominance, masculine power, sexual desire and the drive to own, control and possess. Baal must become ish. The alpha male must become the caring husband. Sex must be sanctified and tempered by mutual respect. The sexual drive must be circumcised and circumscribed so that it no longer seeks to possess and is instead content to love.

There is thus more than an accidental connection between monotheism and monogamy. Although biblical law does not command monogamy, it nonetheless depicts it as the normative state from the start of the human story: Adam and Eve, one man, one woman. Whenever in Genesis a patriarch marries more than one woman there is tension and anguish. The commitment to one God is mirrored in the commitment to one person.

The Hebrew word emunah, often translated as "faith," in fact means faithfulness, fidelity, precisely the commitment one undertakes in making a marriage. Conversely, for the prophets there is a connection between idolatry and adultery. That is how God

describes Israel to Hosea. God married the Israelites but they, in serving idols, acted the part of a promiscuous woman (Hos. 1-2).

The love of husband and wife – a love at once personal and moral, passionate and responsible – is as close as we come to understanding God's love for us and our ideal love for Him. When Hosea says, "You will know the Lord," he does not mean knowledge in an abstract sense. He means the knowledge of intimacy and relationship, the touch of two selves across the metaphysical abyss that separates one consciousness from another. That is the theme of The Song of Songs, that deeply human yet deeply mystical expression of eros, the love between humanity and God. It is also the meaning of one of the definitive sentences in Judaism:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. Deut. 6:5

Judaism from the beginning made a connection between sexuality and violence on the one hand, marital faithfulness and social order on the other. Not by chance is marriage called kiddushin, "sanctification." Like covenant itself, marriage is a pledge of loyalty between two parties, each recognising the other's integrity, honouring their differences even as they come together to bring new life into being. Marriage is to society what covenant is to religious faith: a decision to make love – not power, wealth or force majeure – the generative principle of life.

Just as spirituality is the most intimate relationship between us and God, so sex is the most intimate relationship between us and another person. Circumcision is the eternal sign of Jewish faith because it unites the life of the soul with the passions of the body, reminding us that both must be governed by humility, self-restraint, and love.

Brit milah helps transform the male from baal to ish, from dominant partner to loving husband, just as God tells Hosea that this is what He seeks in His relationship with the people of the covenant. Circumcision turns biology into spirituality. The instinctive male urge to reproduce becomes instead a covenantal act of partnership and mutual affirmation. It was thus as decisive a turn in human civilisation as Abrahamic monotheism itself. Both are about abandoning power as the basis of relationship, and instead aligning ourselves with what Dante called "the love that moves the sun and other stars." [3]

Circumcision is the physical expression of the faith that lives in love.

[1] See, e.g., C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960. Also Simon May's, *Love: A History*, New Haven: Yale UP, 2011.

[2] The famous first line of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

[3] *The Divine Comedy*, 33:143-45

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Insights Parshas Tazria - Nissan 5782

Yeshiva Beis Moshe Chaim / Talmudic University Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Rochel bas Yosef. "May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

All the days that the affliction is upon him he shall remain impure. He is impure and he shall stay in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside of the camp (13:46).

In this week's parsha, the Torah introduces the laws of tzora'as – commonly mistranslated as leprosy due to the fact that tzora'as shares a similar symptom where white splotches appear on the skin of the afflicted.

In fact, tzora'as isn't merely a disease caused by a bacterial infection (which is what leprosy is); it is a very specific punishment sent from heaven for the sin of loshon hora (see Rashi in his comments on this possuk). The Torah first introduced this concept in Parshas Shemos when Moshe's hand turned white "like snow" from tzora'as (Shemos 3:6) and Rashi (ad loc) explains that it was because he spoke loshon hora on the Jewish people. Similarly, Miriam is afflicted with tzora'as when she speaks negatively about Moshe at the end of Parshas Beha'aloscha (Bamidbar 12:10).

Loshon hora is considered one of the worst sins a person can commit, as heinous as murder, adultery, and idol worship (Talmud Arachin 15b). Yet the punishment, tzora'as, seems to be a minor one. After all, the size of the tzora'as discoloration can be relatively small, around the size of a nickel. While the consequence of having tzora'as is related to the sin of loshon hora (see Rashi 13:46), it is difficult to understand how a relatively small mark on one's body is a fitting punishment. We know that Hashem punishes in a very strict system of quid pro quo, nothing more and nothing less than a transgression

deserves. How is this small discoloration a proper punishment for the terrible sin of loshon hora?

One of the most famous photos of the 20th century was taken by famous war photographer Eddie Adams. The photo, named "Saigon Execution," depicted a general in the S. Vietnamese army (America's ally) killing, in appalling cold blooded fashion, a Vietcong prisoner. Beyond the Pulitzer Prize that Eddie Adams won, this photo deeply contributed to the American public's conflict as to whether or not to support the Vietnam war.

The New York Times (when they still had a conscience) was extremely hesitant to publish his photo for it depicted the brutality of America's ally, and only consented to run it side by side with a photo of a child slain by the Vietcong. Nonetheless, Eddie Adams' photo was the one burned into the American psyche.

Yet, Adams himself lamented, "Two people died in that photograph: the recipient of the bullet and General Nguyen Ngoc Loan. The general killed the Vietcong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapons in the world. People believe them; but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths."

The actual circumstances from the incident (obviously not captured on film) were that the prisoner had just ambushed this general's regiment and murdered three of his soldiers. It was a hot and miserable day and tempers were running very high. The general, who actually had a reputation for compassion, made the decision to execute the prisoner for he feared he would lose control of his regiment who were furious that this Vietcong had just murdered three of their fellow soldiers. Because of the terrible backlash from that photo, the general was stripped of his command and discharged from the army. Eddie Adams felt so guilty that he supported him and his family until the end of his life.

Loshon hora, while technically true, is actually the most horrible kind of lie. Loshon hora is exactly like a photograph – a fleeting glimpse of a terrible act that a person committed. But what are the circumstances? Who is that person in reality? Is it fair to paint that person's entire being by that fleeting act; is that who they really are? No one is proud of every moment of his life (there is a well-known saying that no one growing up in the digital era will ever be elected to public office because there are photographs of just about everyone in compromising circumstances).

This is why the punishment for *loshon hora* is *tzora'as*. A little discoloration, even the size of a nickel, comes to define the whole person as a *metzora*. This is the perfect *quid pro quo*; for it is exactly what the person speaking *loshon hora* did – took a relatively small (when compared with a person's entire life) and embarrassing vignette and portrayed that to be the entirety of an individual's identity. So too *tzora'as*, a small discoloration, comes to define the entirety of the sinner.

Partners in Creation

This week we read *Parshas Hachodesh*, the last of the four *parshios* that were instituted to be read on *Shabbos* in the weeks prior to *Pesach*. *Parshas Hachodesh* discusses the *mitzvah* of blessing the new moon, *Kiddush Hachodesh*. *Moshe* was instructed to set the Jewish calendar by the new moon and to regard *Nissan* as the head of all the months of the year. Hashem even showed *Moshe* exactly the standard by which the new moon is to be identified and gave him the exact calculation of a lunar month (29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes, 3 and 1/3 seconds).

This *mitzvah* holds a special significance as it was the first one given to the Jewish people as a nation. In fact, the very first *Rashi* at the beginning of the Torah points out that the Torah should have logically begun with this very *mitzvah* instead of the story of creation. *Maharal* explains *Rashi's* rationale: the Torah is a book of *mitzvos*. For this reason, *Rashi* questions if perhaps it would be more sensible for the Torah to begin with the first *mitzvah* given to *Bnei Yisroel*.

Still, this assertion seems odd for a few reasons. Based on the assumption that the Torah is a book of *mitzvos*; wouldn't it be more logical for the Torah to begin with the mass revelation at *Sinai*, when the entire Jewish people received Hashem's commandments? The Torah could have begun with the Ten Commandments, which encapsulate all of the 613 *mitzvos*, and then filled in the remaining information afterward.

This would seem to be far more appropriate than beginning with a revelation experienced by two individuals (*Moshe* and *Aharon*). After all, every religion in the world is based on a supposed "revelation" experienced by a single individual or a small group of people. However, the very foundation of our knowledge of the Torah's truth is based on the fact that the giving of the Torah was witnessed by millions of people. Following *Maharal's* explanation of *Rashi's* reasoning, it would be much more logical to begin the Torah with the story of the revelation at

Mount Sinai. So what does *Rashi* mean that the Torah should have begun with this *mitzvah*?

The answer lies in understanding what the significance of this *mitzvah* is and why Hashem chose it to be the first one given to the newly formed nation of *Bnei Yisroel*.

In fact, the *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hachodesh*, that of establishing the new month, really goes far beyond merely establishing a Jewish calendar. This *mitzvah* establishes Hashem's intention for *Bnei Yisroel* to be His partners in running the world. The *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hachodesh* is the very definition of the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people.

Hashem created the world and everything in it, but the management of this world, and Hashem's interaction with it, is in the control of the Jewish people. Giving the Jewish people the power (and responsibility) to establish the calendar and to determine when each month begins means that we have control over time.

In other words, if we decide that today is *Rosh Chodesh*, *Yom Kippur* falls out on one day. If we determine that tomorrow is *Rosh Chodesh*, *Yom Kippur* falls out on a different day.

This is incredibly significant. In essence, we are the arbiters of how and when Hashem interacts with the world because we hold power over time. We can actually imbue days with holiness based on our decisions. This is a profound statement of the trust Hashem has in the Jewish people and defines the depth of our relationship with Him.

This is why it was the first *mitzvah* given to the Jewish nation; it defines our role within creation and the role Hashem expects us to play within His divine plan for the world. It is for this reason that *Rashi* suggests that the Torah should have begun with the section of the Torah known as *Parshas Hachodesh*.

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Parshat Tazria

So Far Away

"The Kohen shall look, and behold! the affliction has covered his entire flesh, then he will declare the affliction to be pure." (13:13)

Tzara'at, frequently mistranslated as leprosy, was a disease caused by spiritual defects, such as speaking lashon hara (slander). (Nowadays we are on such a low level spiritually that our bodies do not reflect the state of our spiritual health in this way.)

The verse here is puzzling for if "the affliction has covered the entire flesh" of the person that must mean that he is far from pure, and yet the Torah tells us that the Kohen shall "declare the affliction pure". How can he be pure if the affliction covers his whole body?

The answer is that he is so far from being cured, having ignored all the warnings to do teshuva repentance, that the disease ceases to perform any further purpose. Thus the Torah specifically says not that the Kohen shall declare him pure, rather that "the affliction is pure" he, on the other hand, is as far from purity as is possible.

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Drasha Parshas Tazria - Self Destruction Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

There is an underlying theme to the message of the Metzora. This spiritual disease that causes discoloration of the skin or of hairs upon the skin, in unpredictable patches is caused by sins of speech - gossip, slander and the like. When a person notices the discoloration, he is to immediately approach a kohen and show him the abnormality. It is up to the kohen to not only to determine the status of the affliction, but to actually invoke the status of impurity on the man through his rendition of his adjudication on the matter. The physical affliction of tzora'as is definitely not a contagious one. In fact, the Torah teaches us that there are times that the kohen can hold off on his declaration; e.g. a groom during the week of wedding festivities is spared the humiliation of isolation. If tzora'as were a communicable disease it would surely warrant immediate isolation despite the circumstances. Yet when a man is declared as tamei (impure) he is kept in isolation. The Torah explicitly explains: "All the days that the affliction is upon him he shall remain contaminated; he is contaminated. He shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:46).

The question is simple. If the sins of anti-social behavior cause the malady, why is the man isolated? Would it not be better if he is embarrassed within the community and learns to better himself through

communal interaction? How will solitude help him cure his societal ills?

There is a classic tale of the gentleman who purchased a plane ticket from New York to Los Angeles. The man was quite finicky about traveling, and asked the agent for a window seat. Somehow, he was not placed by the window, rather in the aisle.

During the entire trip, he fidgeted and squirmed. Immediately after the long journey the man went straight to complain.

"I specifically asked for a window seat," he exclaimed. "Your agent in New York assured me that I would be getting a window seat. Look at this stub. It placed me right in the aisle!"

The customer relations agent in Los Angeles was not fazed. Unfazed she asked the man, "Did you ask the person in the window seat to trade places?"

This time the man was irate. "I was not able to!" "And why not?"

"There was no one in the seat."

My grandfather, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, in his classic work *Emes L'Yaakov* explains. People often blame the ramifications of their doings on everyone else but themselves. Truth be told, a person who is afflicted can circumvent confinement by not reporting the negah to the Kohen, or even by pulling out the hairs that are discolored. It is akin to a man who is sentenced to house imprisonment. His hands are tied together with the rope attached to his teeth. He is told to watch himself and not escape.

In essence, a negah is merely a Divine wake-up-call. It is heaven's way of letting an individual know that there is something wrong. It is a personal message and must be taken personally. And so in solitude the man sits and ponders what exactly needs correction.

If a person wants to correct himself, he need not cavort with others to do so. If one can remove the barriers of false flattery and social mendacity, he can do a lot better for himself: because self-improvement is dependent upon self-motivation. Without the truth meeting the self, any attempt toward self-improvement may lead to nothing more than self-destruction.

*Dedicated in memory of Judah Leib (Jerry) Lipschitz
by Mr. and Mrs. Ben Lipschitz.*

Good Shabbos

Rabbi M. Kamenetzky is the Dean of the Yeshiva of South Shore.

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Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Tazria
Why Was the Metzora Put Into Solitary Confinement?

Tzora'as – which is one of the primary topics of this week's parsha – is a consequence of a variety of sins, such as Lashon HaRah (gossip), Tzarus Ayin (miserliness), and Gayvah (arrogance). But for whatever reason, when a person has become a Metzora – “his clothes must be torn, he must let the hair of his head grow long, he shall cloak himself up to his lips; and he is to call out: ‘Contaminated, contaminated!’” (Vayikra 13:45). There are many parallels here to the halacha of mourning. A person who is a Metzora goes into a form of Aveilus, similar to an Avel.

The next pasuk continues: “All the days that the affliction is upon him, he shall remain contaminated; he is contaminated. He shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (Vayikra 13:46). Beyond everything else, the Metzora is placed into solitary confinement—outside the camp—until his Tzora'as is cured.

Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky, in his sefer Emes L'Yaakov, wonders why isolation is an appropriate punishment for a Metzora. Rav Yaakov suggests that perhaps solitary confinement does not seem appropriate for a Metzora. The halacha is (even though this is Biblically prohibited to do) that if a Metzora rips off his signs of Tzora'as, he is no longer Tameh. This means that if a Kohen will examine him again and there is no more Tzora'as, he will be proclaimed Tahor. So perhaps if we put this fellow in confinement, we should maintain some kind of surveillance such as a video camera to ensure that he does not surreptitiously peel off his Tzora'as and try to be m'Taher himself! Why do we leave him out there in the middle of nowhere where he can do anything he wants?

Rav Yaakov rejects the possibility that he is placed in confinement because he has a contagious condition that we are concerned might spread to others. He insists that Tzora'as is not contagious. It is a spiritual disease, not a physical disease that we might consider as contagious.

Ironically, I found that the Meshech Chochma in Parshas Tazria in fact says that Tzora'as is a communicable disease. He brings several proofs from the Talmud and the Medrash that this is the case. The Meshech Chochma points out that this is why it was the Kohanim who had to deal with the Metzora—

because the Kohanim were on a higher spiritual level and had elevated merit, which would hopefully grant them added protection from such contamination.

Be that as it may, Rav Yaakov says that Tzora'as is not a communicable disease, which leads him to the problem: Why was the Metzora put into solitary confinement? Rav Yaakov explains that the purpose of this confinement is that we want to send the Metzora a message from Heaven that based on his behavior, he should be incommunicado. The Ribono shel Olam is not happy with him. He is in a form of excommunication—the Ribono shel Olam does not want him around. By putting him in solitary confinement in this world, we are actualizing what is happening in Heaven. The hope and intent are that his isolation and confinement should bring him to Teshuva. Sitting in solitary confinement should help him recognize why he is in this type of situation.

I was thinking that perhaps there is another approach which might explain why the Metzora must be placed in confinement “outside the camp.” A person who is a Metzora, who has engaged in Lashon HoRah is a menace to society. His presence harms the community. We always think of a “danger to society” as someone who attacks or harms other people. But a Metzora is just as much a menace to society. He destroys society because when people speak ill of one another and spread rumor—whether true or not true—about other people, it destroys the fabric of interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, his punishment is “You cannot be in society.” I heard an interesting chiddush in the name of Rav Yaakov Galinsky. If we consider the Ten Plagues, we may ask ourselves, “Which was the worst of the Makos?” A case could be made that Makas Bechoros was the worst of the plagues. But what was the most difficult plague to withstand—not in terms of the numbers who were killed or the damage, but simply the most difficult maka to endure?

Rav Yaakov Galinsky says the most difficult maka was the Plague of Darkness. The reason for that, he maintains, is that it says by Makas Choshech that “One man could not see his brother” (Shemos 10:23). This means that it was impossible to commiserate with someone else. By all the other makos, everyone suffered together. Everyone experienced Blood. Everyone experienced Lice. Everybody experienced Wild Animals.

Everyone complains about their problems. There was a city-wide blackout a couple of years ago due to a

major storm. Everyone complained how tough they had it. I lost my freezer, I lost this, I lost that. Everyone commiserates with each other. When there is a blizzard... “Oy! It was gefairlich! I had so much snow on my drive way, I could not move my car for two weeks!” But at least you could talk to people about it, and everyone could share their personal problems. “You think that was bad? You should have seen what happened by me!”

Misery loves company. By every other plague, as bad as it was, at least there was company. However, during the plague of Darkness, people sat alone for three days and could not talk to anyone! It was impossible to tell anyone how bad it was! Nobody could tell you that he had it worse than you! “One man did not see his brother.” They all had to sit alone by themselves! To deal with a maka and not be able to share it with anyone is the most difficult maka to take.

This is what we do to the Metzora. We tell the person “You are a menace to society. You do not belong among people. You cannot have the comfort of being with other people to console you and commiserate with and comfort you. That is your punishment.” We deny the Metzora, who is a menace to society, the benefit of society—which is to have someone else there to comfort him.

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Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parashat Tazria – 5782

Life and Death Are in The Power of Speech!

Parashat Tazria deals extensively with tzara’at (a progressive skin disease that can take on many forms). When the Temple stood, a person afflicted with tzara’at would come to the kohen (priest) who would determine if the affliction was pure or impure. If it was determined to be impure, the afflicted person would remain outside the camp until enough time passed for him to be pure.

The Talmud reveals that the affliction of tzara’at we learn about in our parasha came as punishment for speaking lashon haraI (slander or libel) about another person:

Reish Lakish says: What is that which is written: “This shall be the law of the leper (metzora)?” This

means that this shall be the law of a defamer (motzi shem ra). (Arachin 15B)

This saying of Reish Lakish’s joins those of Chazal who added a different layer to our ordinary understanding of tzara’at. While in the ancient world, tzara’at was a known disease, according to our sages, it was not a natural phenomenon or bodily impurity, but rather it appeared as punishment for speaking ill of others.

The Talmud continues to explain that someone who slanders is punished with tzara’at because he separates people, therefore he should be separated from people. The Ba’al Shem Tov reveals another layer in the relationship between the sin – lashon hara, and the punishment – tzara’at.

A person who guards their tongue shows that he is good to the core. However, a person who speaks maliciously about others reveals that there is evil inside him. That evil is so strong that it causes him to let it out in the form of speaking badly of others. There are those who are physically sick and those who are spiritually sick. The person who speaks badly of others reveals that his soul is ill. It is so full of evil that it leaks out.

A person who sees the shortcomings in others actually is seeing the shortcomings in himself, but since he cannot admit to them, he seemingly identifies them in someone else. Based on this, it is clear that someone who speaks badly of someone else is revealing his own evil. Therefore, this inner flaw manifests itself as a physical affliction – tzara’at.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (rabbi of Frankfort and one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of his generation, 1808 – 1888) explained the sin and punishment in a different way. The skin is where the person comes in contact with the outside world. Whoever has a problematic and faulty encounter with the outside world, and instead of seeing the good around him, keeps focusing on the bad, becomes afflicted with tzara’at – rot that spreads through the body.

What kind of repair does the Torah suggest for someone who sinned in lashon hara? How can a person be cured of tzara’at?

If a man has...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... The kohen shall look at the lesion... the kohen shall quarantine the [person with the] lesion... the kohen shall pronounce him clean... The kohen shall pronounce him unclean...(Leviticus 13, 2-8)

The kohen is the one who diagnoses tzara'at and is the only one who can cure it. Usually, when someone suffers from an illness, it is a doctor who cures it. The fact that tzara'at was both diagnosed and treated by a kohen teaches us that it was a somatic/spiritual illness. It manifested itself physically in the body, but it was a spiritual person who treated it.

The kohens, the sons of Aaron who loved peace and pursued peace, were noted for using the power of speech positively. Therefore, a person who used his power of speech detrimentally by speaking badly of others is forced to meet the kohen in order to learn from him what is allowed and what is forbidden in speech, what is constructive and what is destructive, and from that to learn to use the power of speech in a positive and constructive manner.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Rav Kook Torah

Tazria: Man versus Mosquito

Rabbi Chanan Morrison

Why does the Torah discuss the laws of taharah (ritual purity) for humans only after teaching the analogous laws concerning animals, differentiating between those animals which may be eaten and those which are unclean? Should not humanity, the crown of creation, come first?

Third-century scholar Rabbi Simlai explained:

“Just as mankind was created after all the animals... so too, the laws pertaining to mankind were given after the laws regarding animals.” (Vayikra Rabbah 14:1)

In short, the order here in Leviticus parallels the account of Creation in Genesis. But is there a deeper significance to this order? The Midrash elaborates the lesson to be learned from this:

“If one is deserving, he is told: ‘You came before all of creation.’ But if not, he is reminded: ‘[Even] the mosquito preceded you.’”

What sort of a contest is this, between man and mosquito?

Quantity versus Quality

We find in Psalms two nearly identical verses, but with small - and significant - differences:

מִהֲרִבּוֹ מַעֲשֵׂיךָ ה' כִּלְמֵם בְּחֻכְמָה עָשִׂיתָ מְלֵאָה הָאֶרֶץ קִנְיָנֶךָ:

“How many are Your works, God! The earth is full of Your creations.” (Psalms 104:24)

מִהֲגָדְלוֹ מַעֲשֵׂיךָ ה' מֵאֵד עֲמָקוֹ מִחֻשְׁבְּתֶיךָ:

“How great are Your works, God! Your thoughts are very profound.” (Psalms 92:6)

What is the difference between these two similar verses? The first verse expresses our wonder at the variety and diversity of God's works. “How many are Your works!” The second verse expresses our amazement at their greatness and profundity. “How great are your works!” The first verse refers to quantity; the second, quality.

In other words, we may look at the world in two ways. We can be amazed by its detailed, multifaceted nature - its abundance of species and life forms, the remarkable diversity in the world of nature. This viewpoint focuses on the diverse physical aspect of the universe. “The earth is full of Your creations.”

Or we may reflect on the universe's inner side. We may perceive its wonderful sophistication and delicate balance, a reflection of the profundity of its design and purpose. This view perceives the underlying spiritual nature of the universe, focusing on the preliminary design - God's ‘thoughts’ - which preceded the physical creation. “Your thoughts are very profound.”

Back and Front

The Midrash which contrasts man and mosquito opens with the verse, “You formed me back and front” (Psalms 139:5). What does it mean that humanity was formed with two aspects, “back and front”?

‘Back’ refers to the culmination of the world's physical manifestation. This is the process of creation by contraction (tzimtzum), step by step, until a detailed physical universe, filled with multitudes of diverse creatures, was formed. From this viewpoint, the ubiquitous mosquito is the superior species. If we are not deserving - if we lack our qualitative, spiritual advantage - then we are reminded: “The mosquito preceded you.” In a contest of numerical strength and survival skills, the mosquito wins hands down. From the viewpoint of “How many are Your works,” even the lowly mosquito comes before us.

‘Front,’ on the other hand, refers to the conceptual design that preceded the actual physical creation. If we are deserving - if we put our efforts into developing our spiritual side - then we belong to the realm of God's thoughts that transcend the physical world. On the qualitative basis of “How great are Your works,” we may take our place before the rest of creation.

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Shema Yisrael Torah Network
Peninim on the Torah - Parashas Tazria
Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

פרשת תזריע תשפ"ב

וביום השמיני ימול בשר ערלתו

On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (12:3)

The eighth day following birth plays a critical role concerning both a human male and a sacrifice. It also is the day that the *Kohanim* were inducted into service at the Sanctuary. [Aharon and his sons were instructed to wait in the *Ohel Moed* for seven full days while Moshe *Rabbeinu* performed the inauguration service. The inauguration service concluded with the induction of Aharon and his sons as *Kohanim* on the eighth day.] What is so special about the eighth day? *Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl*, cites the *Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 27:10)* which states that both an animal and a human must live through a *Shabbos* before achieving offering/circumcision status. Apparently, *Shabbos* plays a pivotal role in the preparation of both the child and the *korban*. *Rav Moshe* explains that *mitzvah* performance, if it is to have any value, must be predicated upon our belief in Hashem. Indeed, if one who does not believe in Hashem were to recite a *berachah*, blessing, we may not answer *amen*. Such a person believes that Hashem is merely a term, a word without significance. Furthermore, *Rambam (Hilchos Yesodei Torah 6:8)* writes that a *Sefer Torah she'kasvah min*, a Torah scroll written by an apostate, should be burned. It lacks intrinsic sanctity. The term *min*, apostate, applies not only to one who completely denies the existence of Hashem, but also applies to one who (like Aristotle) believes that Hashem is the Master of the world, but not its Creator.

Shabbos attests to Hashem as the Creator of the world. Thus, the requirement is that a sacrifice must experience a *Shabbos* prior to its being offered up to Hashem. This implies that a *korban* is acceptable only from one who realizes and acknowledges that the offering is not his per se, but actually belongs to Hashem, the Creator of the world. This idea applies to all *korbanos*. One must affirm his belief in Hashem as Creator.

Likewise, the *kedushah*, sanctification, of the *Kohanim* and the *Mishkan* is contingent upon the belief that everything belongs to Hashem, because He is the Creator. To support this, we see that Hashem commanded the Jews (*V'yikchu Li terumah*; "And take for Me a portion" *Shemos 25:8*) without

specifying its purpose. If everything that one has belongs to Hashem, however, it is not necessary for Hashem to state the reason that He wants the contribution. After all, it has always been His money. The *Mishkan* can be built only if people realize that Hashem is the true owner of all one's possessions. [We may suggest that this concept applies to any *davar she'b'kedushah*, holy endeavor. If it is to achieve success, the contributor should realize that, in this endeavor, he is paying back, channeling back that which belongs to Hashem. The problem begins when he thinks that his check licenses him to offer an opinion, exert control and make demands.]

The same concept of acknowledging Hashem as Creator applies with regard to *Bris Milah*, at which time the *chinuch*, Torah education, of a Jewish boy, commences. The message is clear and unequivocal: A child must be made aware of the fundamentals of Judaism, specifically that Hashem created the world *ex-nihilo*. Whatever exists is from Him. Whatever we succeed in creating/making is only with His "assistance." [If such a term even applies, since Hashem does not assist, He does it all! He allows us to think that we are doing something.] Hence, *Bris Milah* is performed once a child has experienced a *Shabbos*, which attests to Hashem's creation of the world.

והובא אל אהרן הכהן או אל אחד מבניו הכהנים

He shall be brought to Aharon the Kohen, or to one of his sons the Kohanim. (13:2)

Aharon *HaKohen* was destined to live another forty years at the most. The chances are that in the future the *metzora* will present himself to one of Aharon's descendants. Why is Aharon mentioned here for posterity, when, in fact, his tenure was short? The *Tiferes Shlomo* explains that the achievements of *tzaddikim* inspire for generations to come – long after they have left this world. He relates an incident that occurred concerning the *Arizal*, one time when he was sitting surrounded by his students. In came *Horav Shmuel DiOzida, zl*, author of the *Midrash Shmuel*, who was a young man at the time. He came to speak with the *Arizal*. When the *Arizal* saw him, he immediately rose from his chair and stood up for the young *Rav Shmuel*. He sat him down by his side and spoke with him endearingly and with great respect. When *Rav Shmuel* left, *Horav Chaim Vital, zl*, primary student of the *Arizal*, asked his revered *Rebbe* why he had shown favor to the young man. He had observed many distinguished *Rabbanim* come and go and never did the holy *Arizal* express himself in such

a manner. The *Arizal* explained that it was the *neshamah*, soul, of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair that had entered into *Rav Shmuel*, so he deferred to him. Apparently, *Rav Shmuel* had performed a *mitzvah* in such a special manner that was consistent with the way in which Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair acted. Therefore, it was decided that the *neshamah* of the holy *Tanna* had transmigrated into *Rav Shmuel*, so that he would be inspired to continue acting in such a manner.

Rav Chaim immediately took leave of his *Rebbe* and pursued *Rav Shmuel*. “What *mitzvah* did you perform that created such a stir in Heaven?” he asked. *Rav Shmuel* explained, “My practice is to go to *shul* early, so that I can be among the first ten worshippers to form the *minyan*, quorum. As I was on my way, I walked by a house from which I heard loud weeping. I entered immediately to see a family without clothes on. (They were obviously concealing themselves behind whatever makeshift furniture they had.) They said that robbers had broken in, ransacked their house and taken anything of value. They even took their clothing off their backs. I took pity on them and removed my clothing which I gave to the head of the household. I ran home to put on my *Shabbos* clothes which you can see I am now wearing.” When *Rav Chaim* heard this story, he immediately kissed *Rav Shmuel* and returned to the *Arizal*, who verified the story.

The *Tiferes Shlomo* explains that (according to the *Zohar HaKodesh*) Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair exemplified himself in the performance of *chesed*. When one follows in the ways of our Patriarch, Avraham *Avinu*, and reaches out with love and kindness to others, the Patriarch arises and stands in his behalf before Hashem. Aharon *HaKohen* was a paradigm of *chesed*, pursuing peace and reaching out to his fellow Jews to bring them closer to Torah. This is the epitome of *chesed*. Thus the nomenclature, *ish chasidecha*. (*Tumecha v'urecha l'ish chasidecha*; “Your *Tumim* and *Urim* befit Your devout one”) (*Chasidecha* is translated here as devout) [*Devarim* 33:8, Moshe *Rabbeinu's* *berachah* to *Shevet Levi*]. Their every focus was on seeking and pursuing peace and reaching out to others with acts of lovingkindness. Whoever follows Aharon's lead will have his support. This is what it means to be of the *talmidim*, students, of Aharon *HaKohen*. Therefore, one who has reason to go to a *Kohen* – a student of Aharon – is as if he is

going to Aharon, because Aharon assists those who emulate his acts of lovingkindness.

נגע צרעת כי תהיה באדם

If a *tzaraas* affliction will be in a person. (13:9)

Tzaraas, spiritual leprosy, is visited upon a person who fails to curb his tongue. *Lashon hora*, slanderous speech, is the rubric under which sins of verbal expression fall. Veritably, it does not have to be verbal; it may be a non-verbal expression, such as a turn of the nose, a “hrrumph” negatively dispatched with enough venom behind it to destroy a person: all this falls under the *lashon hora* classification. We also recognize such a phenomenon as *lashon tov*, good, complimentary speech, words that soothe, embrace, empower, ennoble and show that someone respects and cares about you. Sadly, the negative trumps the positive in random interchange. It requires a greater degree of effort to think positively than to denigrate. Most who minimize the achievements of others, who disparage their characters, who seek avenues to vilify their goals and objectives, are people whose envy of others has compromised their cognitive abilities, leaving them with nothing but hostility and vindictiveness – all the products of self-loathing.

I would much rather write about something pleasant – a positive action performed sincerely – an action that saved the present and established the foundation for a wonderful, secure future. The following story related by Rabbi Henoch Teller is inspiring. It shows how a well-placed word at a critical moment elevated a person's self-worth and enabled him to continue his journey to live a Torah life.

It was *Erev Yom Kippur*, the busiest time of the year for *mikvah* goes. It is crowded all day, as Torah Jews from all walks of life and every religious persuasion immerse themselves in the water in preparation for the holiest day of the year. Understandably, most *mikvaos* are not built for the crowd that comes en masse on this special day. People make do with some of the inconveniences, hygienic and physical, which are the inevitable consequences of being at the *mikvah* on *Erev Yom Kippur*. No one seems to care, because it is *Erev Yom Kippur*. Included in the crowd was a young man who was “trying out” Yeshiva Ohr Sameach to see whether he was willing to adopt this lifestyle. He looked different, being that he was the only male in the room sporting a long ponytail. He felt self-conscious about his hair,

especially when he removed his rubber band that kept it all in place. There was, however, more.

People do not immerse themselves fully-clothed in a *mikvah*. Our young man had recently been a member of a cult that was into physical gratification of every sort. As such, he had various tattoos on his body declaring his affiliation with this cult. [This is often part of the baggage that a *baal teshuvah* brings to the fore. With love and sensitivity, it can be addressed and ameliorated.] When his tattoos were exposed, a hush pervaded the crowded *mikvah*. The people did not want to be rude. It is just that they were not accustomed to such an artistic display – especially on the human body, the repository of the Divine soul and the manifestation of the *Tzelem Elokim*, Divine Image. He had impressive artwork, the pride and joy of the finest Asian body artists. The silence continued, as the young man slowly made his way to the steps going down to the *mikvah*. To say that he felt self-conscious would be an understatement. He felt like going into the water and staying there, rather than face humiliation. Suddenly, an elderly Jew made his way to the steps and went over to the young man who was about to descend. The elderly man took hold of the shoulders of the young fellow and, with glistening eyes, said, “Look here, young fellow, I, too, have a tattoo.” He then pointed to the row of numbers that were tattooed on his arm, courtesy of the Nazi murderers: “Just in case I ever forget what those monsters did to me, I have the tattoo. You, too, have come a long way. You have something to remind you how far you have come.”

As soon as the elderly Jew said his piece, the sounds of lively conversation returned to the *mikvah*. The young man was now one of them – all because someone said a kind, thoughtful word to the “visitor” from a different culture who was returning “home” to where he belonged.

וטמא טמא יקרא ... בדד שב מחוץ למחנה משבו
**He is to call out: “Contaminated, contaminated” ...
He shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall be
outside the camp. (13:45,46)**

Shlomo Hamelech writes (*Sefer Mishlei* 18:21), *Maves v'chaim b'yad lashon*; “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” We can understand that slander defames a person; it can be viewed as character assassination, but murder? The victim that has been disgraced, slandered, is alive and well. Why is the act of speaking evil considered tantamount to murder? The *Baalei Mussar*, Ethicists, make a

powerful statement, one which we rarely think about. When one is slandered, when one is the subject of *lashon hora*, he is no longer viewed in the same manner – even if it is a blatant lie! Subconsciously, we look at that person differently – even when we know that what we have heard is not true. The old maxim, “They don’t say those things about me/you,” is very apropos. Thus, the person that he was yesterday, before he became a *lashon hora* victim, no longer exists. He is gone from the face of the earth. A new person who has the exact same features as he does has taken his place.

I remember many years ago attending a *simcha* out-of-town. At the table were guests from various cities and stripes of religious observance. Someone whom I did not know made a casual derogatory statement about someone else, whose acquaintance I had never made. Years passed, and I met the subject of the slander. I still did not know him, but I looked at him through a different lens. That is human nature. For all intents and purposes, the *baal lashon hora*, slanderer, had years earlier murdered that person. I was looking at the mirror image of that original person, but, in my mind, he was not the same. *Lashon hora* transforms the victim. No one will ever look at him in the same manner. That is a fact.

It is for this reason that the *middah k'neged middah*, measure for measure, punishment meted out to the slanderer is *badad yeisheiv*, “he shall dwell in isolation”; even other contaminated people may not be in his proximity. Also, he must call out to whomever walks by “*Tamei! Tamei!* I am contaminated! Stay away, You do not want to go near me.” He transformed his victim into another person, so his punishment is that he, too, should become another person, one with whom no one wants to be. One caveat exists, one difference between him and his victim. He can do *teshuvah*, repent, and revert to his former self. His victim is finished. No one will ever look at him in the same way. He will always have a pall hanging over him.

וראה הכהן אחרי הכבס את הנגע והנה לא הפך הנגע את עינו
**The Kohen shall look after the affliction has been
washed and behold! The affliction has not changed
its color. (13:55)**

The *Zohar Hakadosh* notes that the words *nega* and *oneg* are comprised of the same Hebrew letters, but in different sequence: *nun, gimmel, ayin* – *nega*; *ayin, nun, gimmel* – *oneg*. The difference between them is where the *ayin* is placed – at the

beginning of the word (as in *oneg*, pleasure) or the end of the word (*nega*, affliction). The *metzora* is to derive a powerful lesson therein. If he expiates his hurtful speech and changes his life, he transforms his present state of *nega* to *oneg*. As long as he is afflicted, however, it indicates that he has not yet repented.

Horav Leib Lopian, zl, expands on this idea. As mentioned, the difference between *oneg* and *nega* is the placement of the *ayin*. The *Rosh Hayeshivah* extrapolates this thought to one's approach to life and living. If, at an early age, one uses his eyes and heart to understand what Hashem asks of him and he conforms to it, he merits that his life will be one of *oneg*, pleasure. He knows where he is going; he is focused on what is appropriate; he lives life with Torah and *mitzvos* as his lodestar. If, however, he comes to his senses only during his twilight years, and then takes time (because, now, he has so much of it) to look back on his life, he sadly will see *nega*. While one can repent later in life and go forward with hope, it will not undo what has been done. The *nega* is present. Therefore, it is best that he place his life on the proper track, so that he will not only arrive safely at his "destination," but he will look back on his "trip" as being meaningful and pleasurable.

Horav Avraham Gurvitz, Shlita, quotes *Horav Eliezer Lopian, zl*, who cites the *Midrash Rabbah Shir HaShirim* 1:10, that Shlomo Hamelech wrote *Shir HaShirim* in his youth, *Sefer Mishlei* later on in life (but still young), and, *Sefer Koheles* in his old age. The *Rosh Yeshivah* (Toras Emes, London) explained that when one who comes to Torah i.e. studies, lives and is guided by it, at an early stage in his life, in his early youth, his life is one of *Shir HaShirim*, of song and joy. It is a life of purpose and meaning. One who arrives at the decision to live a Torah life later on, once he has reached young adulthood, when he has formed his habits and adopted a different lifestyle, his life is one of *Mishlei*, cognitive, common sensical realization that change is imperative. He is guided by the logic that he refused – or of which he was unaware during his youth. He certainly can change, but it will be a thoughtful process. The one who lives a life of physical privilege, squandering his time and prowess toward the base and ephemeral will be like *Koheles*, who understood that life as is, without direction and enduring meaning, is *hevel*, nothing, *haveil havalim*, futility of futilities. He must now make every attempt to salvage whatever he can of what is left of his life, before it is too late.

Life has purpose; otherwise, Hashem would not have created us. Hashem has assigned each of us a life mission to fulfill. One of the underpinnings of Jewish belief is that Hashem created this world with purpose. The cornerstone of Judaism is that each of us has a Divine mission to fulfill. It is that mission and its execution which give our life meaning and fulfillment. It is that sense of mission from which we derive our strength and resilience. It is what makes us go forward, to build and create – despite being plagued with tragedy and grief. Torah and *Chassidus* in America were built by *udim mutzolim mei'eish*, firebrands plucked from the fire, survivors of the European Holocaust, who did not defer to grief, but instead used it as the foundation for building the future for us. How sad it is when people wait/waste an entire life before they realize that their lives have purpose, that they have been charged with fulfilling a Divine mission.

Time is a Divine gift. How we use it defines who we are and how we view this gift. I saw an inspiring thought concerning the idiom, "killing time," which in my opinion, is tantamount to murder. Only, with murder a perpetrator and a victim are involved. The perpetrator is the victim when one kills time. The following poem/essay (cited by Rabbi Efreim Goldberg) is especially inspiring. The author chose to remain anonymous. Its message is like its author, faceless. This allows for each of us to attach our life and identity to its message.

"To realize the value of one year: Ask a student who failed his exam.

"To realize the value of one month: Ask a mother who has given birth to a premature baby.

"To realize the value of one week: Ask the editor of a weekly newspaper (or *Peninim*).

"To realize the value of one day: Ask a daily wage earner who has ten mouths to feed.

"To realize the value of one hour: Ask those who are waiting for a loved one in surgery.

"To realize the value of one minute: Ask the person who missed the train.

"To realize the value of one second: Ask the person who survived an accident.

"To realize the value of one millisecond: Ask the person who won a silver medal in the Olympics."

Every moment is precious. A moment wasted is irretrievable. We might make up what we wanted to accomplish, but the moment in time is lost forever.

Va'ani Tefillah

ד' אל באפך תוכיחני ואל בחמתך תיסרני – *Hashem, al b'apcha sochicheini v'al b'chamascha s'yasreini.*

Hashem, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chastise me in Your rage.

The *Malbim* distinguishes between *af*, anger, and *cheimah*, rage. While on the surface they each express anger, they reflect two varied forms of expression. *Cheimah* is internal. The individual harbors anger within himself. *Af* is external anger which is not concealed. It is possible to have *af* without *cheimah*, if the one who is expressing his anger bears no ill will against the subject of his expressed emotions. Within our hearts, however, we harbor no bad feelings. *Cheimah* without *af* occurs when the anger is kept festering within. For whatever reason, the individual who is angry does not express his feelings, either by choice or due to an external force that prevents him from doing so.

Radak writes that a duplication of the terms, i.e. *af*, *cheimah*, is in accordance with the idiom of the language. [Apparently, the use of synonyms is common fare.]

In memory of our beloved parents

Rabbi Dr. Avrohom Yitzchok Wolf, Rebbetzin Anna Moses

Sruly and Chaya Wolf and Family, Ari and Rivky Wolf and Family

Abba and Sarah Spero and Family, Pesach and Esther Ostroy and Family

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The Bracha on Blossoming Trees

Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: How Many?

“May I recite birkas ilanot when I see only one blossoming tree?”

Question #2: What Type?

“Must it be a fruit-bearing tree?”

Question #3: When?

“Must I recite this bracha in the month of Nissan? I live in Australia!”

Foreword:

Since Chodesh Nissan is arriving, we will discuss birkas ilanot, the special bracha that Chazal instituted to be recited when observing trees in bloom. As an introduction, I note the words of the Aruch Hashulchan about this bracha, “The observance of reciting this bracha is weak among the common people. Furthermore, the Bedek Habayis (notes that

Rav Yosef Karo, himself, added afterward to his Beis Yosef commentary) writes that the custom is not to recite this bracha. However, all talmidei chachamim and G-d-fearing people are meticulous about observing this bracha.”

Introduction:

The Gemara that provides the source of this bracha is extremely brief and in an unusual location. Whereas other similar brochos recited upon items that one sees are discussed in the last chapter of mesechta Brochos, birkas ilanot is discussed in the sixth chapter of Brochos, which is the source for the brochos recited before eating and drinking. In the midst of a discussion of the brochos on fragrances, the Gemara inserts the following passage:

Rav Yehudah said, “Someone who goes out during the days of Nissan and sees trees that are blooming, says ‘Blessed (is Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe) Who did not leave anything lacking in His universe, and He created good creations and good trees so that mankind can have pleasure from them’” (Brochos 43b).

As we will soon see, although the Gemara mentions only the first word of the bracha, Boruch, it means that we should recite a full bracha. The Gemara then resumes its discussion on fragrances, without any further mention of birkas ilanot.

The wording of the Tur and the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 226) is remarkably and unusually similar to that of the Gemara. To quote the Shulchan Aruch: “Someone who goes out during the days of Nissan and sees trees that are blossoming, recites, ‘Blessed is Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who did not leave anything lacking in His universe, and He created good creations and good trees so that mankind can have pleasure from them.’ This bracha is recited only once each year, and if he waited until after the fruits are grown, he should no longer recite it.” (See also Mishnah Berurah 225:12.) The wording of the bracha as quoted in Shulchan Aruch is Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha’olam shelo chisar be’olamo kelum, uvara bo beriyos tovos ve’ilanot tovos leihanot beham benei adam.

It is surprising that there is very little Mishnah Berurah on this halacha, and no Biur Halacha at all, but there is much discussion on this bracha in the writings of other halachic authorities, such as the Kaf Hachayim, who lived shortly after the Mishnah Berurah.

Required?

The wording of the Gemara implies that there is no requirement to look for a blooming tree – if you happen to notice one, you should recite a bracha. This sounds similar to the bracha we recite upon hearing thunder, seeing lightning or a rainbow, or seeing something very unusual. There is no requirement to look for them, but a bracha praising Hashem is recited when you see any of these natural phenomena. This is as opposed to the bracha on kiddush levanah, which is a requirement. Perhaps this explains why the common people were not so concerned about reciting birkas ilanot, as the Aruch Hashulchan reports.

However, notwithstanding this point, the sifrei kabbalah assume that this mitzvah is an obligation, or, at least, a very important bracha to recite. The fact that this bracha assumes a greater role in kabbalistic sources than in halachic sources may explain another phenomenon that I will discuss shortly.

Season or date?

Reading the Gemara carefully, we should ask several questions. For example, the words of the Gemara say that you should recite this bracha “in the days of Nissan.” If this means during the month of Nissan, then the Gemara should say “the month of Nissan,” not the “days of Nissan,” which implies that the season is important. On the other hand, if the season is the most important factor, then the Gemara should have said, “in the spring,” and not mentioned Nissan at all.

This question results in a dispute among halachic authorities. The Birkei Yosef writes that it is preferred to wait until Nissan to recite birkas ilanot. On the other hand, the Mishnah Berurah rules that the Gemara mentions Nissan only because it was written in a place where fruits usually began blossoming then, but that you should recite the bracha whenever you first see trees blossom in your climate and place. Thus, the Mishnah Berurah rules that you should recite it whenever you see the first blossoms, and the Aruch Hashulchan, who also lived in a cold climate, notes that, where he lived, the bracha was usually not recited until Iyar or even Sivan, when it finally became warm enough for fruit trees to blossom. The Kaf Hachayim quotes several sources who contend that this bracha should not be recited before Nissan. Specifically, he quotes authorities who rule that birkas ilanot should not be recited when seeing the blossoming of almonds, which bloom well before Nissan; the same is true of the loquat, called shesek in

Modern Hebrew, which also blossoms in the middle of the winter.

The conclusion of most authorities is that it is preferred to wait until Nissan in order to recite the bracha according to all opinions, but not required. Based on the conclusion of these authorities, we can answer one of our opening questions:

“Must I recite this bracha in the month of Nissan? I live in Australia!”

Australia, South Africa and most of South America are located in the southern hemisphere, where the month of Nissan is in the fall and Tishrei occurs in the spring. The answer to the question is that you can recite the bracha of birkas ilanot in whatever season fruits blossom, in your climate. If you live in a place where there are blossoming trees readily available in the month of Nissan, but some trees already blossom earlier, there are authorities who suggest waiting until Nissan to recite the bracha.

One or more?

The Gemara states that birkas ilanot is recited when a person sees “trees.” Does he recite this bracha if he sees only one blossoming tree?

The Birkei Yosef mentions that there must be at least two blossoming trees, and this is quoted subsequently by the Kaf Hachayim. However, I note that the Mishnah Berurah does not quote this halacha, although he had ready access to the Birkei Yosef and quotes him innumerable times in the context of many other laws.

Among those who require that there be at least two trees, the Kaf Hachayim mentions that there is no requirement that there be trees of more than one species.

Two date palms

While researching materials for this article, I found the following curious question, raised by Rav Yitzchok Zylberstein, son-in-law of Rav Elyashiv and a well-respected rav in Bnei Brak.

“Do you recite birkas ilanot if you see two date palms?”

What is the question? The Gemara (Pesachim 111a) rules, ha’oveir bein shenei dekalim damo berosh venischayov benefsho, “someone who walks between two palm trees, his blood is on his head and he is obligated for the damage that he will bring upon himself.” Rashi and the Rashbam there explain that the concern is because of ruach ra’ah.

A question regarding birkas ilanot is that since the wording of the bracha states “for mankind to benefit,”

perhaps it should not be recited over two palm trees, since this might be harmful for someone who walks between them. The case in question was when there is a path running between the two trees that individuals walk through. Rav Yitzchok Zylberstein suggests that, since the halacha is that you may recite this bracha when you see only one tree, and one palm is not dangerous, you may recite it. Then he asks that since the two trees together are dangerous, one of them should be removed, so that they not continue to present a hazard to people walking between them. Since we are not sure which tree will ultimately be removed, perhaps you cannot recite the bracha!

We should note that this question is probably theoretical. Dates do not usually blossom until late in the season, and, since are other fruit trees that blossom much earlier. Someone concerned about reciting the bracha would have recited it already -- unless he lives in an area where there are few other species of trees that blossom.

As many as possible?

Some authorities quote that, according to kabbalah, you should try to recite this bracha in a place where there are as many trees as possible. I have been told that even among those who do practice according to the kabbalah, most do not follow this approach. There are also opinions quoted that you should not recite this bracha while in the city, but should go outside the city (Kaf Hachayim quoting Rav Chayim Palagi). I personally do not know of anyone who observes the bracha this way. Again, Mishnah Berurah does not mention this.

Many Sefardim make it a lengthy procedure, including going as a group. They recite several chapters of Tehillim, then an extensive lesheim yichud, some other kabbalistic prayers, and a tefillah that our bracha should be valued as if we had all the deep kabbalistic ideas that are included in this bracha that Chazal implemented. They also recite the verses of Ve'yitein lecha and Vihi noam (recited on Motza'ei Shabbos), before making the birkas ilanot (Kaf Hachayim). After reciting birkas ilanot in a very loud voice, each person sets aside three coins for tzedakah. They then recite several more chapters of Tehillim, a tefillah that is taken from the middle of the musaf shemoneh esrei of Yom Tov, a tefillah that moshiach come, and the part of the Zohar that begins with the words Patach Eliyahu that many Sefardim recite daily before davening mincha. They conclude the procedure with the passage that begins with the words Rabbi

Chananya ben Akavyah omer, and then recite a kaddish derabbanan. This is the procedure that I saw followed in the Kaf Hachayim. In the Sefardic siddurim that I examined, I found similar procedures. All of this means that it is a far more elaborate procedure than that followed by Ashkenazim, who simply recite the bracha without any fanfare.

Edible fruits?

There is no mention in the Gemara that the bracha is recited only if the tree bears edible fruit. However, this halacha could perhaps be inferred from the wording of the bracha, since it implies that mankind receives some direct pleasure from this tree, which is the case when people will enjoy eating its fruit. The halachic conclusion of the late authorities is that it should be recited on a tree whose fruit is edible (Be'er Heiteiv, Mishnah Berurah, Kaf Hachayim).

How many species?

Do we recite this bracha for each species that we see blossoming, just as we recite a bracha for each species of new fruit we observe or eat in the course of the year, or is this bracha recited only once each year? The Mordechai, a rishon, implies that this bracha is recited only once each year, and when the Mishnah Berurah discusses this question, he reaches the same conclusion.

Missed first time?

If someone did not recite birkas ilanot the first time he saw a blossoming tree, can he still recite the bracha the next time he sees one? The halachic conclusion of the Mishnah Berurah is that he can still recite the bracha, even if the blossom has already developed into a fruit, as long as the fruit is not fully grown.

Shabbos or Yom Tov

The prevalent custom is not to recite this bracha on Shabbos or Yom Tov, although the Mishnah Berurah makes no mention of such a rule. The Kaf Hachayim does, prohibiting it because of a gezeirah that you might pull off leaves or flowers. He also mentions that there are kabbalistic reasons not to recite this bracha on Shabbos or Yom Tov.

Prohibited fruit

Can you recite this bracha on a tree planted (or transplanted) within the previous three years, whose fruit, when it grows, will be prohibited because of orlah? The Kaf Hachayim rules that you should not. The reason is, presumably, because the wording of the bracha is that these blossoms are for mankind to benefit from, and any benefit from the fruit of this particular tree is prohibited. Nevertheless, I note that

the Mishnah Berurah does not mention anything about this ruling.

Grafted trees

Can you recite birkas ilanos on a grafted tree? Several late authorities discuss whether you can recite this bracha for a tree that is grafted from different species, such that it would be forbidden for a Jew to graft these trees. (The fruit of this tree may be eaten, so this is a different question from the previous one, regarding a tree producing orlah fruits.)

There is a dispute among earlier acharonim regarding whether you can recite a shehecheyanu on a fruit from a tree that was grafted. Quoting the Halachos Ketanos (1:60) as his source, the Be'er Heiteiv (Orach Chayim 225:7) rules that you cannot recite shehecheyanu on a fruit from a grafted tree. However, the She'eilas Yaavetz (#63) disagrees and rules that you may. Among later authorities, several discuss how we rule between these authorities. Biur Halacha 225:3 s. v. Peri quotes both opinions, but implies, slightly, that the bracha can be recited. (See also Shu"t Igros Moshe, Orach Chayim 2:58.) Shu"t Minchas Yitzchak 3:25 concludes that it is better to find something else on which to recite the shehecheyanu.

Regarding birkas ilanos, I found one responsum among the late halachic authorities, which concluded that it is preferred not to recite the bracha on a tree grafted in a way that would violate halacha (Shu"t Minchas Yitzchak 3:25). This case is actually quite common, since most fruit trees today are grafted, and frequently from one species onto another. There is an article on this subject on RabbiKaganoff.com

From a passing vehicle

If you see the blossoming tree while you are in a passing vehicle, can you recite the bracha? Rav Yitzchok Zylberstein, whom we quoted above, discusses this question. He compares it to a Biur Halacha (218:1 s. v. Bimkom), which is based on the law regarding the bracha recited upon hearing thunder (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 227:3). The Biur Halacha concludes that you can recite the bracha on a place where a miracle occurred only as long as you see the place. Rav Zylberstein adds that the Shulchan

Aruch rules that you can recite the bracha for thunder, as long as it is within the period of time of toch kedei dibbur, enough time either to say shalom alecha rebbe, or shalom alecha rebbe umori (this is a dispute among halachic authorities), which is only a few seconds after you heard the thunder. The same halacha, concludes Rav Zylberstein, should be true regarding someone who sees the blossoming trees while traveling – if it is within a few seconds, he may still recite birkas ilanos, but if more time has elapsed since he saw the blossoms, he may not (Chashukei Chemed, Pesachim 111a).

Ripping up a tree

Rav Zylberstein has another teshuvah about the following question: An ailing father wants desperately to recite birkas ilanos, but cannot physically be taken outdoors to see a tree. Is it permitted to rip up a blossoming tree by its roots and bring it to the ill man, so that he may recite the bracha? Since this question is not about birkas ilanos, but about the issue of bal tashchis (destroying fruit trees), we will not discuss it in this article.

Conclusion

In a monumental essay, Rav Hirsch (Bereishis 8:21) explains that the expression rei'ach nicho'ach that we find in the context of korbanos, usually translated as “a pleasant fragrance,” should more accurately be rendered “an expression of compliance.” He demonstrates that the word nicho'ach means “giving satisfaction” and the concept of “rei'ach” is used, because fragrance implies receiving a very slight impression of something that is distant. Thus, when a korban is offered as a rei'ach nicho'ach, it means that it shows a small expression of our fulfilling Hashem's will.

Similarly, the concept of birkas ilanos is that we thank Hashem, not only for the essential things in life, but also for the extras – the things that we can live without, but that Hashem gave us as extra pleasures. Fruits are usually not essential for life, but make our sojourn through earth a bit more pleasurable. And for that also, we must be sure to thank Hashem.

לע"י

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה
אנא מלכה בת ישראל ע"ה