

**In My Opinion Boredom
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog**

One of the effects of being cooped up in one's home for weeks on end, which is the situation for many if not most of us over the past month, is the fact that sooner or later it becomes very boring. Boring is a curse for rabbis, teachers, lecturers, and unfortunately for students as well. There is no comment more devastating to someone who has made a presentation, to say to that person, "I was bored listening."

There is a limit to how many classes one can view online, and because of that limitation, eventually boredom sets in. And when it does, the rabbis describe that being bored or unoccupied leads one to a feeling of desolation and depression. That is something that one must guard against at almost all costs, because there is nothing more depressing than being depressed.

Boredom also jogs our memory. When we are bored, our mind never turns itself off. Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, in his famous introduction to his work on Jewish ethics, begins by saying that the imagination and mind of a person never closes. It is always streaming. And since we are bored, our mind is not occupied with new things, it is preoccupied with old things. In boredom we remember things that we long ago thought we had forgotten or had sublimated. We also remember pleasant incidents in our life, but unfortunately, we are also reminded of incidents in times that were less than pleasant. All of this naturally affects our mood and how we view things.

One of the actions to counter boredom while I am here in the United States, is the time that I set aside to speak to my grandchildren, and great-grandchildren at length. In fact, at greater length than I have ever spoken to them before, about my life, my experiences, and my ideas. I speak to them about our family roots, where we come from, who we come from, and the details that I never had an opportunity to share with them. Since the magic of Zoom and other internet wonders are now commonplace, I have been able to do this four times already and will probably do it a few more times before they open up Israel and I can return home again.

I find it fascinating, because I have been able, through these Zoom sessions, to communicate a sense of the past, to the children, of the future. I hear in their comments, the wonder and amazement that always accompanies recollections of a world that they never knew. There is a longing they have for understanding who they are and gives them direction as to where they are going. It is a refreshing situation, that one is able somehow to record the stories of one's lifetime, to restore the memory in such a way that it can be meaningful not just to the person who is remembering, but to those who hear those remembrances as well. This has relieved a great deal of boredom, at least for me, because by nature I am a storyteller, and I can think of no more fascinating story than the incidents and occurrences that happen during one's lifetime.

The other antidote to boredom is reading. However, my eyesight does not really allow me to do so for any length of time, so my daughter has been kind enough to read for me at 15 to 20-minute intervals, a very fascinating book that I find the most informative and really instructive. The main idea is to keep the mind active. Don't let it run by itself. When it does, which is a symptom of boredom, then many things will be remembered that really are of no benefit and need not be brought to our attention once more.

But, in order to control our minds, to be able to counteract boredom, we must focus on what we want to remember, what we want to achieve, and how we want to tell our story.

So, this is the recommendation that I have, to recall all the positive incidents and accomplishments in our lives, that each one of us has. And that the relief from boredom that this will bring will be a great blessing to all concerned.

So, until we can face each other personally, I hope that this article of mine is not found to be too boring, and that you will accept it and the gracious spirit that is being sent to you.

Shabbat shalom.
Berel Wein

**Weekly Parsha Tazria-Metzorah
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog**

This week's Torah portion deals with a mysterious, enigmatic, and unknown physical disease. Somehow this disease brings uncleanness and defilement to the human body and is manifested in blotches of color which appear on the skin of the person. It can also affect inanimate objects such as bricks and wood in the house and the fabric of clothing and textiles. All of this is mysterious, and we have no rational way to explain this nor do we understand its cause.

We see in our current situation with the coronavirus that there are things in the world that are not seen by us and not understood, but that can have a great effect upon our health, our wellbeing and even upon our lives. We also see that the Torah prescribed a type of quarantine when this disease struck. This was to prevent the sick person from communicating the disease to others. He had to announce the fact that he was afflicted and had to go into a sort of self-isolation until it passed. This is all too familiar to us today because we see it in front of our very own eyes.

Nevertheless, the Torah is not speaking about the coronavirus, but the message is clear. Again, there are things in the world that we do not see, that we cannot forecast, and that we do not understand. But these things have a strong influence upon our lives and upon society. The defilement, which physically is undetectable, nevertheless is present, is active and can be very injurious.

The Torah prescribed a process of purification for this situation which also, on the surface, is not very rational, but since the disease is not rational, so the cure for it may very well also be in the realm of something that we do not understand nor appreciate.

There were many ideas advanced as to the cause of this disease that the Torah describes. The most accepted idea is that it was caused by slanderous speech. We find that this disease affected kings, noblemen, scholars, and in the books of the prophets, it describes many great people who were afflicted. It was a non-discriminatory type of sickness, and again, we are witness to the fact that there are such viruses, so to speak, in the world that attack the great, the weak, the small and the strong, all at the same time.

Whatever the cause was, this specific affliction apparently no longer exists amongst us. But the Torah, which is eternal, continues to teach us about it, and we find an entire section in the Mishna which deals with it and details the Jewish law which applies to such situations. This affliction may have morphed into different types of diseases, it may be that one particular cure is no longer applicable, but it certainly represents the fact that there must be a cure and that there must be a cause, and that these things do not happen randomly. We should not think that these afflictions descend upon us per chance without having some sort of cause.

Because of this, I am certain that after our current scourge passes, God willing in the very near future, we will be able to take a harder look at ourselves and our society, at our speech, our behavior and at our attitudes, one with another. If we do so and improve, then perhaps we will have discovered something about the disease itself and the cure that helped us escape with our lives.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

**Words That Heal (Tazria-Metzora 5780)
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

At the risk of disclosing a spoiler, I would like to begin this week's Covenant & Conversation by discussing the 2019 film A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood. Tom Hanks plays the beloved American children's television producer/presenter Mister Rogers, a legendary figure to

several generations of young Americans, famous for his musical invitation, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

What makes the film unusual is that it is an unabashed celebration of the power of human goodness to heal broken hearts. Today such straightforward moral messages tend to be confined to children’s films (some of them, as it happens, works of genius). Such is the power and subtlety of the film, however, that one is not tempted to dismiss it as simplistic or naïve.

The plot is based on a true story. A magazine had decided to run a series of short profiles around the theme of heroes. It assigned one of its most gifted journalists to write the vignette about Fred Rogers. The journalist was, however, a troubled soul. He had a badly broken relationship with his father. The two had physically fought at his sister’s wedding. The father sought reconciliation, but the journalist refused even to see him.

The jagged edges of his character showed in his journalism. Everything he wrote had a critical undercurrent as if he relished destroying the images of the people he had come to portray. Given his reputation, he wondered why the children’s television star had agreed to be interviewed by him. Had Rogers not read any of his writings? Did he not know the obvious risk that the profile would be negative, perhaps devastatingly so? It turned out that not only had Rogers read every article of his that he could get hold of; he was also the only figure who had agreed to be interviewed by him. All the other “heroes” had turned him down.

The journalist goes to meet Rogers, first sitting through the production of an episode of his show, complete with puppets, toy trains and a miniature townscape. It is a moment ripe for big-city cynicism. Yet Rogers, when they meet and talk, defies any conventional stereotype. He turns the questions away from himself and toward the journalist. Almost immediately sensing the core of unhappiness within him, he then turns every negative question into a positive affirmation, and exudes the calmness and quiet, the listening silence, that allows and encourages the journalist to talk about himself.

It is a remarkable experience to watch as Hanks’ gentleness, immovable even under pressure, slowly allows the journalist – who had, after all, merely come to write a 400 word profile – to acknowledge his own failings vis-à-vis his father and to give him the emotional strength to forgive him and be reconciled to him in the limited time before he died. Here is a fragment of their conversation that will give you a feel for the tone of the relationship:

Journalist: You love people like me.

Fred Rogers: What are people like you? I’ve never met anyone like you in my entire life.

Journalist: Broken people.

Fred Rogers: I don’t think you are broken. I know you are a man of conviction. A person who knows the difference between what is wrong and what is right. Try to remember that your relationship with your father also helped to shape those parts. He helped you become what you are.

Note how in a few brief sentences, Rogers helps reframe the journalist’s self-image, as well as his relationship with his father. The very argumentativeness that led him to fight with his father was something he owed to his father. The film reflects the true story of when the real Fred Rogers met the journalist Tom Junod. Junod, like his character ‘Lloyd Vogel’ in the film, came to mock but stayed to be inspired. He said about the experience, “What is grace? I’m not certain; all I know is that my heart felt like a spike, and then, in that room, it opened and felt like an umbrella.” The film is, as one reviewer put it, “a perfectly pitched and played ode to goodness.”[1]

The point of this long introduction is that the film is a rare and compelling illustration of the power of speech to heal or harm. This, according to the Sages, is what Tazria and Metzora are about. Tsara’at, the skin condition whose diagnosis and purification form the heart of the parshiyot, was a punishment for lashon hara, evil speech, and the word metzora, for one suffering from the condition, was, they said, an abridgment of the phrase motzi shem ra, one who speaks slander. The key proof-text they brought was the case of Miriam who spoke badly

about Moses, and was struck with tsara’at as a result (Num. 12). Moses alludes to this incident many years later, urging the Israelites to take it to heart: “Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam along the way after you came out of Egypt” (Deut. 24:9).

Judaism is, I have argued, a religion of words and silences, speaking and listening, communicating and attending. God created the universe by words – “And He said ... and there was” – and we create the social universe by words, by the promises with which we bind ourselves to meet our obligations to others. God’s revelation at Sinai was of words – “You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a Voice” (Deut. 4:12). Every other ancient religion had its monuments of brick and stone; Jews, exiled, had only words, the Torah they carried with them wherever they went. The supreme mitzvah in Judaism is Shema Yisrael, “Listen, Israel.” For God is invisible and we make no icons. We can’t see God; we can’t smell God; we can’t touch God; we can’t taste God. All we can do is listen in the hope of hearing God. In Judaism, listening is high religious art.

Or it should be. What Tom Hanks shows us in his portrayal of Fred Rogers is a man who is capable of attending to other people, listening to them, talking gently to them in a way that is powerfully affirming without for a moment being bland or assuming that all is well with the world or with them. The reason this is both interesting and important is that it is hard to know how to listen to God if we do not know how to listen to other people. And how can we expect God to listen to us if we are incapable of listening to others?

This entire issue of speech and its impact on people has become massively amplified by the spread of smartphones and social media and their impact, especially on young people and on the entire tone of the public conversation. Online abuse is the plague of our age. It has happened because of the ease and impersonality of communication. It gives rise to what has been called the disinhibition effect: people feel freer to be cruel and crude than they would be in a face-to-face situation. When you are in the physical presence of someone, it is hard to forget that the other is a living, breathing human being just as you are, with feelings like yours and vulnerabilities like yours. But when you are not, all the poison within you can leak out, with sometimes devastating effects. The number of teenage suicides and attempted suicides has doubled in the past ten years, and most attribute the rise to effects of social media. Rarely have the laws of lashon hara been more timely or necessary.

A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood offers a fascinating commentary on an ancient debate in Judaism, one discussed by Maimonides in the sixth of his Eight Chapters, as to which is greater, the chassid, the saint, the person who is naturally good, or ha-moshel be-nafsho, one who is not naturally saintly at all but who practices self-restraint and suppresses the negative elements in their character. It is precisely this question, whose answer is not obvious, that gives the film its edge.

The Rabbis said some severe things about lashon hara. It is worse than the three cardinal sins – idolatry, adultery, and bloodshed – combined. It kills three people: the one who speaks it, the one of whom it is spoken, and the one who receives it.[2]. Joseph received the hatred of his brothers because he spoke negatively about some of them. The generation that left Egypt was denied the chance of entering the land because they spoke badly about it. One who speaks it is said to be like an atheist.[3]

I believe we need the laws of lashon hara now more than almost ever before. Social media is awash with hate. The language of politics has become ad hominem and vile. We seem to have forgotten the messages that Tazria and Metzora teach: that evil speech is a plague. It destroys relationships, rides roughshod over people’s feelings, debases the public square, turns politics into a jousting match between competing egos and defiles all that is sacred about our common life. It need not be like this.

A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood shows how good speech can heal where evil speech harms.

Shabbat Shalom

Shabbat Shalom: Shemini (Leviticus 9:1-11:47)

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “Speak to the children of Israel saying, when a woman conceives (tazria) and gives birth to a male ... on the eighth day the child’s foreskin shall be circumcised.” (Leviticus 12:2-3)

The Hebrew word “halacha” is the term used for Jewish law which is the constitution and bedrock of our nation; indeed, we became a nation at Sinai when we accepted the Divine covenantal laws of ritual, ethics and morality which are to educate and shape us into a “special treasure... a kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6).

The verb of the root “hleh” means “walk”; progressing from one place to another, and not remaining static or stuck in one place, as in the biblical verses: “Walk before Me [hit’halech] and become whole-hearted” (Genesis 17: 1) and “You shall walk [ve’halachta] in [God’s] pathways” (Deuteronomy 5: 33).

This is important since scientific discoveries and social norms are constantly evolving, and it is incumbent upon scholars to consider these changing realities when determining halachic norms, such as establishing time of death (no longer considered the cessation of the respiratory function, but rather now considered brain-stem death), which would allow for heart transplants.

For this reason, the Oral Law was never supposed to have been written down – for fear that it become ossified.

It was only because our lost sovereignty (70 CE), pursuant exile and almost incessant persecution might have caused us to forget our sacred traditions that the Sages reluctantly agreed to commit the Oral Law to writing in the form of the Talmud, declaring, “It is time to do for the Lord, they must nullify the Torah law” not to record the Oral Law (Tmura 14b).

However, thanks to responsa literature, where sages respond to questions of Jewish law from Jews in every country in the globe, halacha has kept “in sync” with new conditions and new realities.

I would like to bring to your attention a ground-breaking responsum published by the great Talmudic luminary Rav Moshe Feinstein in 1961, regarding the verse which opens our Torah portion. Reactionary forces opposed his ideas, burnt his books and harassed his household, but he refused to recant.

The Hebrew word tazria in the above quote literally means “inseminated,” zera being the Hebrew word for seed or sperm. The rabbi was asked whether a woman who had been artificially inseminated, after 10 years of a childless marriage because of her husband’s infertility, could still maintain sexual relations with her husband. In other words: did the “new invention” of artificial insemination by a man who is not her husband constitute an act of adultery, which would make the woman forbidden to her husband?

Rav Moshe responded forthrightly and unequivocally: “It is clear that in the absence of an act of sexual intimacy, a woman cannot be forbidden to her husband or considered to be an unfaithful wife ...similarly, the child is kosher, because mamzerut (bastardy) can only occur by means of an act of sexual intimacy between a married woman and a man not her husband, not by means of sperm artificially inseminated.” The sage added how important it is for us to understand the deep existential need a woman has for a child and how our “holy matriarchs” all yearned to bear children “and all women in the world are like them in this respect.” If the mother does not know the identity of the sperm donor, it would not prevent the later marriage of the child (lest he/she marry a sibling), since we go in accordance with the majority of people, who would not be siblings to this child (Igrot Moshe, Even HaEzer, siman 10).

This responsum opened the door for many single women who refuse to be promiscuous, or to take a marriage partner solely for the sake of having a child with him, but who desperately wish to have a child of their own and continue the Jewish narrative into the next generation. Especially given the obiter dictum Rav Moshe included, in which he explained the importance of having a child especially to a woman and specifically states that he would have allowed the woman to be artificially inseminated ab initio (l’hat’hila — since the woman asked her question after she had already been inseminated), this responsum has mitigated to a great extent the problem of female infertility. If a given

woman does not have a properly functional ovum, her husband’s sperm can artificially inseminate a healthy ovum, which can be implanted within the birth mother who will then carry the fetus until delivery; and if a woman is able to have her ovum fertilized by her husband’s sperm but is unable to carry the fetus in her womb, a surrogate can carry the fetus until delivery.

The question is to be asked: Who then is the true mother, the one who provides the fertilized ovum or the one who carries the fetus to its actual birth? Depending on the response, we will know whether or not we must convert the baby if the true mother was not Jewish.

Rav Shlomo Goren, a former chief rabbi of Israel (and previously the IDF chief chaplain), provides the answer from our parsha’s introductory text: “When a woman is ‘inseminated (tazria) and gives birth...” The word “tazria” seems at first to be superfluous. Rav Goren explains that it took 4,000 years for us to understand that this word is informing us that the true biological mother is the one whose ovum was “inseminated.”

Shabbat Shalom!

The Visit to Merhavaya

Rav Kook Torah

“You speak of desecration of Torah and mitzvot?” Abraham Isaac Lipkovitz exploded. “Rabbis are firefighters! Go put out the fires! What are you doing sitting around here?”

A group of rabbis, including Rav Kook, had gathered in Lipkovitz’s home in Rehovot to discuss the state of religious life in the Land of Israel. They were particularly disturbed by blatant violations of the Sabbath in the new settlements.

But Lipkovitz, who worked in construction and agriculture, was a doer. He had little patience for the rabbis’ endless discussions. He cited the example of the prophet Samuel, who would travel around the country to fortify religious observance.

“You rabbis are sitting here, while over there - there are fires burning! Every day, the fires destroy more and more. And you are responsible! You are at fault!” Lipkovitz took a breath. “You need to go to all these places and demand that the Sabbath be observed.”

For several years, Rav Kook had toyed with the idea of a rabbinical tour of the northern communities. Perhaps it was Lipkovitz’s outburst that spurred the rabbi to put his plan into action.

In mid-November of 1913, a small delegation of rabbis, led by Rav Kook, set out to visit the new communities of the Galilee and the north. The rabbinical tour was meant to strengthen ties with the isolated moshavot and bolster religious observance. Rav Kook delineated the tour’s objectives in his introduction to Eileh Massei, a pamphlet which documented the rabbis’ month-long tour:

“We are called upon to assist as best we can, “to come to God’s aid for the heroes” (Judges 5:23) - to visit the moshavot, to raise their spirits, to inject the dew of holy life into the bones of the settlements... [We must] elevate the life of faithful Judaism, and publicly announce the call for harmony and unity between the Old Yishuv [the established religious communities in the cities] and the New Yishuv [the new Zionist settlements].”

The journey enabled the rabbis to meet the pioneers of the First and Second Aliyah, and learn of the difficulties of life on the moshavot first-hand. In fact, meeting and interacting with Rav Kook, the elderly Rabbi Yosef Chaim Zonnenfeld of Jerusalem, and the other rabbis in the delegation had a powerful impact on many of the pioneers. In many cases it succeeded in awakening a desire for greater observance of the Sabbath and kashruth. Practical arrangements for separating agricultural tithes were instituted, and other religious matters were worked out.

But the most crucial issue - the lack of traditional Jewish education for the children - could not be properly addressed during such a short visit.

The Wagon of Jewish Laborers

The cooperative settlement Merhavaya had been established two years earlier, in 1911. It was the first Jewish settlement in the desolate Jezreel valley, near Afula. Members of HaShomer, an early Jewish defense organization, protected the settlement from attacks by Bedouin and neighboring Arabs.

Gershon Gafner, a prominent member of the cooperative, recorded his memories of the rabbis' visit in his memoir, *My Path to Merhavaya*: We were informed of the arrival date for the visit of Rabbis Kook and Zonnenfeld, of blessed memory, and Rabbi Yadler. In honor of these esteemed guests, we hired a "diligence" (a French stagecoach) from Nazareth to bring them from the Afula station to Merhavaya. The visit, however, was postponed repeatedly. Since it was expensive to retain the diligence coach, we had to return this elegant and modern (for those days) form of transportation.

One day we were surprised to receive an urgent message from Afula. The rabbis had arrived and were waiting for us at the station! We were to come at once and bring them to Merhavaya.

Lacking a better option, we quickly "renovated" one of the carts which we used to transport manure. We cleaned it up, "upholstered" it with straw and sacks, and made our way to Afula. In this fashion, we brought our honored guests to Merhavaya....

We expressed our regret that we did not have the opportunity on such short notice - from when we learned of their arrival - to prepare a more suitable form of transportation for them. In response to this apology, Rav Kook delivered an impassioned speech. His fiery address lasted nearly an hour.

Rav Kook expressed his great joy that, for the first time in his life, he was privileged to travel in a wagon of Jewish laborers in the Land of the Patriarchs. His speech probed the depths of Jewish history. He praised the importance of working the land and recalled the sacred history of the Jezreel valley, which we pioneers were the first to redeem after centuries of desolation. With tremendous excitement, he noted that our fathers' fathers had lived in this place, creating Jewish life with dedication and self-sacrifice. And now, he noted, the descendants of those ancient Hebrews have arisen and continued their Jewish tradition.

He concluded his words with a heartfelt blessing that we should merit to see, with our own eyes, the entire Land of Israel redeemed and flourishing through the labor of the children of the Eternal Nation.

Rav Kook's words made a deep impression on us. We felt, with great admiration, that he was truly worthy of the crown of Torah that he wore. The rabbinical delegation stayed with us several days. During one of the nights, the rabbis were witness to an attack on Merhavaya. We explained to them that the Arabs primarily chose to attack us on Friday nights [on the assumption that few or no Jewish guards would be on duty]. Therefore we are forced to go out on the Sabbath to protect our property and our lives. We asked the rabbis to provide a clear answer if we are acting properly according to Jewish law.

Rav Kook responded calmly and with full understanding of the situation. If, he explained, we are certain that it is a life-threatening situation, then it is our obligation to defend the place, even if this will lead to violation of the Sabbath laws. This is in accordance with the well-known Halakhic principle, "Danger to human life overrides the laws of the Sabbath."

Rabbi Zonnenfeld, Rabbi Yadler, and the other rabbis, however, did not express an opinion one way or the other.

After his visit to Merhavaya, Rav Kook closely followed after the development of the settlement. And the people of Merhavaya - most of whom were far removed from traditional Judaism - felt a profound admiration for him. They saw in Rav Kook a Torah scholar blessed with a sensitive soul, as well as a broad and humane outlook.

Reasons For Our Minhagim

The Double Entry

8636. It is customary to build a courtyard (or foyer area) in front of the shul entrance so that one first passes the courtyard (or foyer) and then enters the sanctuary. 8637.

A) This is based on a verse in Mishlei (8:34), the idea of which is expressed in Yersuhalmi Berachos (5:1) "One should always enter the shul through two doors". Hence the custom that one enters the sanctuary through two doors (i.e. doorways).

B) This double entry parallels the Beis Hamikdash where one entered the outer hall before entering the sanctuary.

Mishna Berurah 90:21, Magen Avraham 90:35, Bach 90, Mes Middos 4:7, Otzar Taamei Haminhagim

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Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parsha Insights

Far Away - Tazria

"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, this 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. Therefore, the Torah specifically says not that the Kohen shall declare him pure, but rather that "the affliction is pure." But he, on the other hand, is as far from purity as is possible.

Based on the *Ha'amek Davar* and Rabbi S. R. Hirsch

Boomerang - Metzora

"And he shall be brought to the Kohen." (14:3)

When a person speaks lashon hara, it indicates that he has no concept of the power of speech. He considers words to be insignificant in comparison to actions. As the nursery rhyme says, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me."

Nothing could be further from the truth. When a person speaks evil, he awakes a prosecutor in Heaven, not only against the target of his speech, but also against himself. An angel stands by the side of each of us recording our every word. In order to teach those who speak slander the power of just one word, the Torah instructs that the offender be brought to the Kohen. But, even as he is on his way to the Kohen, his body covered with tzara'at for all to see, and until the Kohen actually pronounces the word "Impure!" he is still considered totally pure. Similarly, once he is impure, he cannot return to his former status of purity, even though his disease has healed completely, until the Kohen pronounces him to be spiritually pure once more. From this, the speaker of lashon hara is taught to reflect on the power of each and every word. For, with one word he can be made an outcast, and with one word he can be redeemed.

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Rabbi Mordechai Willig

Response to COVID-19

I

The Torah describes the process of purification from tzara'as, in which the Kohen must take birds, cedar wood, red wool (shni tola'as) and hyssop (aizov) (Vayikra 14:4). Rashi interprets (as translated by Artscroll), "Since afflictions come about because of malicious talk (lashon hara) which is an act of verbal twittering, birds that twitter and chirp constantly were required for purification. Because afflictions come as a result of haughtiness, what is the cure for his affliction? He should lower himself from his arrogance like a worm (tola'as), and like hyssop (an herb which does not grow tall)."

When tzara'as is diagnosed, the Kohen quarantines that person to one house (Rashi ibid 13:4); while he is impure, he must stay in isolation (badad). Rashi explains, "since he caused a parting (a dispute) by speaking lashon hara, he, too, shall be set apart."

"This is the law of the metzora on the day of his purification" (ibid 14:2). The Medrash Raba (ibid 16:2) explains the etymology of metzora

as coming from motzi shem ra, slandering someone falsely. While lashon hara is forbidden even if it is true, slander is much worse (Chofetz Chaim 1:1).

The Gemara (Shabbos 33a-b) teaches that askara, the most difficult death (Berachos 8a), is a punishment for lashon hara. The Gemara's source for this assertion is, "The mouth of the liars will be stopped, yisacheir", literally choked, which connotes askara (as Rashi explains, a disease that chokes). This punishment is limited to liars, i.e. motzi shem ra (Maharsha).

II

All of Rabbi Akiva's students died because they did not honor one another. They all died a difficult death - askara - between Pesach and Shavuot (Yeivos 62b). The Maharal explains that honoring a friend is the essence of life, and leads to longevity (Megila 27b). It is literally the way of life (Brachos 28b), indicating that these students who died did not properly honor their friends.

Askara begins in the mouth and ends in the throat, the source of speech which defines human life. "Man became a living soul" (Bereishis 2:7) is rendered by Onkelos as, "a speaking soul." Askara is so called because the throat, the source of speech and life, is choked (niskar).

III

The Rambam (Hilchos Ta'anuyos 1:1-3) writes:

it is a Torah commandment to cry out to Hashem when a crisis besets the community...such as a plague (dever)...this is the path of teshuva, for when a crisis comes and they cry out to Hashem, all will know that because of their misdeeds they were punished. This prayer will cause the crisis to be removed from them. But if they will not cry out, but instead say, this is a natural occurrence which happened by chance, this is a path of cruelty which causes them to cling to their misdeeds and can add to even greater troubles. This is what the Torah states, "If you will not heed Me and will be indifferent, I will be indifferent to you, with a vengeance" (Vayikra 26:27,28). That is, when I bring a crisis upon you so that you repent, if you say it happened by chance, I will respond with vengeance to your indifference.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis which affects all of mankind. The Rambam enjoins us to view it as a wake-up call to heartfelt tefila and teshuva. Nearly a century ago, the Chofetz Chaim warned that a natural disaster in the Far East was Hashem's call to Am Yisrael to repent. "I have destroyed nations...I thought that you would fear Me, that you would learn a lesson" (Tzefania 3:6,7). If the lesson is not learned, Am Yisrael itself will suffer (Letters of the Chofetz Chaim, no. 30).

The present crisis, which originated in the Far East, has taken many lives. We all live in fear, isolation and apart, many in quarantine. Many victims are torn from their families as they enter hospitals, dying alone, mostly because of the inability to breathe. While we are unable to identify a particular misdeed for which we should repent, it behooves us all, at all times, to avoid lashon hara and motzi shem ra associated with askara. This is especially timely in the week of Parshas Tazria-Metzora, when verbal (and other forms of gossip and) twittering is named as the primary cause of tzara'as, and during Sefira when Rabbi Akiva's students died of askara because of interpersonal failings.

IV

Aharon HaKohen offered the ketores (incense) to atone for the people. He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped (Bamidbar 17:12,13). As such, it is recommended to recite Pitem Haketores daily, even for those who usually say it only on Shabbos after Mussaf (Pele Yoetz, Dever).

But what caused the plague in the first place? It was caused by the paradigmatic dispute which was not for the sake of Heaven (Avos 5:20), that of Korach and his entire company. This began as a family feud (Rashi, Bamidbar 16:1) over leadership, and fueled by rabble-rousers it ensnared multitudes, including great God fearing men (Ha'amek Davar). More important than reciting Pitem Haketores is eliminating disputes, both in families and within and between communities. These two responses - stopping lashon hara and seeking peace - are indeed the answers to the question we all ask at times of rampant death: "Who is the person who desires life and who loves days of seeing good?"

(Tehilim 34:14,15)As in the case of Korach, disputes often result from hubris, as does tzara'as. To be purified from tzara'as, and to end a plague, one must lower himself from his arrogance, as Rashi teaches.

The COVID-19 crisis has not only led to difficult deaths and widespread illness. It has also crippled all of mankind, totally upending our way of life and our plans for the future. All of the amazing progress in medicine and technology is not a match for this microscopic coronavirus.

The obvious lesson is that Hashem, not mankind, controls the world. This should suffice to eliminate hubris from everyone. By lowering ourselves and by ceasing lashon hara and machlokes we can do our share to end this horrific plague. By heeding Hashem's call, as the Rambam and Chafetz Chaim warn, with heartfelt tefila and teshuva, may we soon be taken by Hashem, as in Nissan long ago, from sadness to happiness, from mourning to celebration, and from heavy darkness to great light.

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Parshat Tazria-Metzora: Going At It Alone Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

"No man is an island." "It takes a village."

These are just some of the clichés that are used to convey the importance of social groups, of the realization that people cannot "go at it alone".

But just as it is vital that each of us learns that we are ultimately limited in what we can accomplish by ourselves, it is equally vital that we learn of the benefits of occasional solitude and of the need to sometimes just be alone.

In this week's double Torah portion, Tazria-Metzora, we read at length and in great detail about an individual who is afflicted by a condition known as tzara'at, often translated as leprosy. It is a condition which is characterized by specific discolorations of the skin and which is understood by our sages to be the consequence of immoral behavior, particularly malicious gossip.

The Torah prescribes that such an individual rend his clothes and let his hair grow. He is considered ritually unclean, and "... he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside that camp." (Leviticus 13:46)

Opinions vary as to why he must be removed from society. Some say simply that he is quarantined because his condition is contagious. Others insist that since his misdeeds caused harm to others, he must be punished by living apart from others.

I prefer, however, the view that believes that a period of solitude is imposed upon this individual to afford him an opportunity to think, to reconsider his actions, and to resolve to live a new moral life style. He is afforded the social isolation necessary for thoroughgoing introspection, a chance to think for himself.

There is a lesson here about the benefits of solitude that is of renewed relevance in our day and age.

The most recent edition of The American Scholar (Spring 2010) carries an essay by William Deresiewicz which he delivered to the plebe class at the United States Military Academy at West Point in October of last year. The essay is entitled "Solitude and Leadership."

Mr. Deresiewicz eloquently conveys the message to these future military leaders that leadership demands a mindset which can only come about with frequent and sustained periods of solitude.

He emphasizes the importance of thinking and writes, "Thinking means concentrating on one thing long enough to develop an idea about it."

He further emphasizes the importance of concentrating, and writes that it means "gathering yourself together into a single point rather than letting yourself be dispersed everywhere into a cloud of electronic and social input."

Ralph Waldo Emerson made Mr. Deresiewicz's point long ago when he said, "He who should inspire and lead his race must be defended from traveling with the souls of other men, from living, breathing, reading, and writing in the daily, time-worn yoke of their opinions."

These opinions of a famous 19th century essayist and one of his contemporary counterparts stress and amplify a message implicit in this

week's Torah portion. The message is that time by oneself, reflecting and engaging in serious introspection, is an essential component of self improvement and a prerequisite not only for membership in society, but for leadership of society.

Jewish sources go much further than Emerson and Deresiewicz. The latter restrict their insightful comments to the importance of solitude in everyday, mundane affairs. Our tradition goes beyond that and teaches that solitude is necessary for spiritual growth and for religious leadership.

The sages of the Talmud insist upon the necessity of cheshbon hanefesh self-reckoning. The Jewish ethical treatises of medieval times recommend that one regularly withdraw from society to engage in such self reckoning. Chassidim, and most particularly the followers of Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, daily engage in periods of hitbodedut, solitary contemplation.

The secular writers quoted above are helpful in that they make it clear that solitude need not entail mystical practices or spiritual techniques. Rather, solitude provides an opportunity for thinking on one's own and for concentrating deeply without the undue influences of one's social surround.

I personally am convinced that occasional solitude would be a healthy antidote to the blind conformity which is imposed upon all of us by our contemporary world.

Once again, the Torah, in the midst of a passage which seems most out of tune with modernity, gives us a lesson essential for coping with modernity.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah: Tazria Metzora

Where in the Torah do you find an example of purposeful isolation? It is in Parshat Tazria which appears alongside Parshat Metzora this Shabbat.

The Torah presents us with the laws of the Metzora – a 'leper', someone who is guilty of slandering others. Chazal explain that the term 'metzora' is derived from the words 'Motzei Sheim Ra'. 'He has created a bad name for others'. So what is the punishment for the Metzora? The Torah tells us "badad yesheiv michutz lamachane" – "He must dwell alone, his place of habitation will be outside the camp".

Rashi brings the gemara in Mesechet Arachit Daf 16B. There Chazal tell us that the Metzora has been guilty of causing husbands to separate from wives and people to separate from their friends therefore he now should be separated from society. This is one of the outstanding examples of corrective punishment in the Torah. The hope is that as a result of tasting isolation himself, the Metzora, at the end of his period of being impure, will re-emerge into society now to be a responsible person. It is clear that the Torah views isolation as being an unhealthy state of existence. That is why in Sefer Bereshit we are told "Lo tov lehiyot adam levado" "it is not good for a person to be by themselves". And I wonder, is the English word 'bad' derived from the word 'badad' because it is not good to be alone?

During this period of the coronavirus, so many of us are isolated. And we're getting through this, knowing that it is for a good purpose: to look after our own health and the lives of those around us.

Unlike in biblical times, when isolation meant absolute isolation. Today, those who are isolated can and should be in touch with others. And it is a mitzvah to get in touch with those around you – particularly those living by themselves – on the phone, by email and through whichever way possible. Those of us able to get out of our homes, can stand outside the homes of others and speak to them through the window or be in touch, be connected. Because it is tough to be alone right now.

May Hashem bless us and all of our society that when we eventually emerge from isolation we will come back into a society which will be responsible, which will be happy and most importantly of all be healthy.

Shabbat Shalom

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Tazria-Metzora: Spiritual First Responders

Ben-Tzion Spitz

A man of courage is also full of faith. - Marcus Tullius Cicero

It's fascinating and even a little eerie, that the Torah, written more than 3,300 years ago, already prescribes ideas of quarantine, isolation, contagion and social distancing millennia before the modern world figured it out for itself.

This week's Torah reading of Tazria-Metzora deals with the spiritual-physical malady known as Tzaraat. It was an unusual skin condition that was the result of a spiritual-ethical failing, most commonly attributed to gossiping, but could also be caused by a host of other shortcomings. Tzaraat should not be confused with leprosy, an incorrect translation that is often used.

The Torah further details the treatment protocol of someone infected with Tzaraat. The afflicted person needed to be seen by a Kohen who would determine if it was indeed Tzaraat. If the Kohen confirmed that it was Tzaraat, the patient needed to leave their house, leave the entire encampment of Israel and remain in isolation until the Tzaraat was gone. The Meshech Chochma on Leviticus 13:2 delves deeper into the disease and specifically those tasked with intervention, the Kohens.

According to the Meshech Chochma, quoting Talmudic sources, Tzaraat was highly contagious. It may be that it was not necessarily from the physical transmission, but rather because the infected person suffered from a defect of the spirit, an ethical virus, that could easily be transmitted to someone with a weak spiritual immune system or other underlying spiritual maladies. That is one of the reasons the infected person would have to call out "impure, impure," so people would know to avoid him and practice social distancing from him.

Because of the danger of the disease, and its possibility to easily infect others, one group from within Israel, the Kohens, who had already been separated and sanctified from within the rest of the people of Israel, were tasked with treating Tzaraat. The Kohens were designated to be the first responders, the doctors, and nurses who would check, diagnose, treat and tend to these spiritually afflicted people, even though the job took them out of their normal working environment of the Tabernacle. The Meshech Chochma states that the special designation of the Kohens gave them unique protection against the corrosive danger of the spiritual virus at the heart of Tzaraat.

The Kohen's ancient role in Israel was to facilitate a Jew's connection with God in the Tabernacle and later on in the Temple in Jerusalem. They braved an encounter with the dangerous virus of Tzaraat out of faith. The Kohen's mission of being the spiritual physician of the people in turn provided him with protection against the spiritual virus.

May we all achieve and maintain spiritual and physical health and avoid viral infections of any sort.

Dedication - To the memory of the Holocaust survivors, including my grandparents, Jakob and Ita Spitz z"l.

Shabbat Shalom

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Tazria-Metzora 5780

What Benefit Is There to Quarantine?

The two parashot we read this Shabbat are Tazria and Metzora. They both deal with topics that do not have direct implications for our lives: laws of purity and impurity, with a significant section dedicated to laws pertaining to the "metzora", one suffering from a skin disease. According to what is written in these parashot, a person who suffers from various kinds of skin diseases must undergo a complicated process of purification which includes periods of quarantine of varying lengths of time. At the end of the process, he is supposed to bring a sacrifice to the Temple.

When we examine these Torah portions, we must start with a basic premise: These were not contagious illnesses, and the purification

process did not include any acts whatsoever that were hygienic or medical. There is an array of evidence of this, and the commentators dealt with this extensively. For our purposes, one piece of evidence will suffice: The Torah writes that a person whose skin disease has spread on his entire body and doesn't have any "clean" spots – is pure. If this were a contagious disease, this determination purifying the "sick" person in such a serious state would be completely illogical.

What is being discussed is, therefore, an "illness" of a spiritual nature, so the attitude about it stems from a certain outlook on the person, on society, and on the relationship between body and soul. We often deal with faulty spiritual-moral-social predicaments whose impairment is expressed not only in the social fabric or emotional state of the person, but also in his physical state. It sounds strange, but many different philosophers from different times were very preoccupied with the interaction between emotional and physical processes and tried to find an explanation for psychosomatic phenomena. This is a field that is still not completely understood by even the greatest of researchers, but the spiritual-moral attitude of the Torah regarding the "metzora" points to the fact that indeed, there can be spiritual-emotional issues expressed by physical ailments.

The sages of the midrash teach us the following:

Thus have our masters taught: The affliction comes [upon one] for eleven things: For idolatry, for desecration of the name [of God], for unchastity, for theft, for slander, for false witness, upon the judge who perverts justice, for swearing in vain, upon one who enters a domain which is not his, upon one who thinks false thoughts, and upon one who instigates quarrels among brothers. And some also say, "for the evil eye (i.e., for being miserly)."

(Midrash Tanchuma on Metzora, siman 4)

The process the "metzora" must undergo includes periods of quarantine. This quarantine can be interpreted as punishment or as a process of educational significance. What is our first thought when we think about quarantine? Nowadays, when all of humanity fears the coronavirus, many of us think about the meaning of the social quarantine that has been forced upon us. One thing is clear: Quarantine disconnects the individual from society.

This disconnection places us in a different existential state. Our usual and blessed state includes a social life. This is emotionally healthy. A person who lives alone for an extended period of time can go crazy; and even when we think of moral repair, we can't shut ourselves away. Morality takes on meaning only when a person comes in contact with others and creates relationships. Quarantine is, therefore, an unusual state of being. Sometimes we have to leave our normal state and experience life differently – alone.

A person who sins, especially sins between himself and others, must go into quarantine. Thus, he has the opportunity to separate himself from the peer pressure that stands in contrast with his own values, to relieve himself from the pressures that stem from seeking social status and respect. When a person is alone, he has the ability to be seriously introspective, to discover his hidden desires, his latent fears, and his unique strengths. This period of quarantine can be a spring board to a higher-quality life, a repaired life.

May we merit the fulfillment of the verse: "No harm will befall you, nor will a plague draw near to your tent" (Psalms 91), and may we return to good days while repairing our ways.

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

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Tazria-Metzora

פרשת תזריע - מצורע תשפ

בגדיו יהיו פרומים וראשו יהיה פרום

His clothes shall be rent, his head shall be wild. (13:45)

It is vital that people recognize that the *metzora*, spiritual leper, is impure, and, as a result, people will veer away from him. The *Sefer HaChinuch* explains the source/root of this *mitzvah*. (Not a reason, because reasons are not given for *mitzvos*. *Mitzvos* are mandated, and only Hashem knows the true reason.) The *metzora* should take his

distancing from his people as an example for his *neshamah*, soul. A person is distanced from all good as a result of his sin, in order that he be inspired to repent from his evil way. As a result of his slanderous speech he caused man to be separated from his wife, friend from friend. Therefore, he, too, must be separated. Let him feel the pain that he has caused others.

As a general principle, Hashem punishes (and rewards) *middah k'neged middah*, measure for measure. Every bad event that happens to man does not "just happen." It happens because, as a result of his sin, Hashem removes His guardianship from him until he receives the fitting punishment that is consistent with his sin. In other words, by our actions we are the direct cause of our punishment, which will be measure for measure. If we would only acknowledge and delve into what happens to us, we would likely deduce what it is that we have done to incur such punishment. This is where *middah k'neged middah* is quite helpful. Furthermore, when a person acts positively in a specific manner, he will be reimbursed by Hashem in a like manner. Thus, if one is in need of a *yeshuah*, salvation, the positive way he acts towards others will be viewed by Hashem as a catalyst for reward in the area commensurate with his positive actions. The following story is but one example of the immediate effect of *middah k'neged middah*. (While this is certainly not the first story of its nature, it is astonishing how the *middah k'neged middah* occurred almost immediately.)

Moshe was a wonderful boy who was otherwise perfectly healthy and well developed, both physically and emotionally. I say "otherwise" because, at a young age, Moshe suddenly began to stutter terribly. His parents visited doctors, therapists, psychologists – all to no avail. No one was able to relieve Moshe of his stuttering. Nothing worked until, one time, when Moshe's mother attended a wedding. During the meal, when she was sitting at a table with a group of women, one of the women, unprovoked and clearly unjustified, embarrassed her publicly. The entire table just sat shocked, waiting for a reaction. There was none. She just let it slide by as if nothing had occurred, totally ignoring the woman's vitriolic, baseless slander. The strength of character which Moshe's mother evinced was incredible. She must have wanted to dig a hole under her chair and slide down into it. She did not, acting as if nothing had been said.

A couple of hours later, Moshe's mother returned home to be met by her son, Moshe, who was preparing for bed. He asked her about the wedding, and she almost fainted. He did not stutter! He spoke clearly, enunciating every word properly – no gaps, no stuttering. She did not believe her own ears. The unbelievable transformation of her son's speech came immediately upon the heels of her restraining her response to the woman who had slandered her. She suffered in silence. Hashem rewarded her with sound – the beautiful sound of her son's voice.

We have no doubt that one who refrains from responding believes that Hashem has a reason for presenting this situation. The person who committed the slander is a vehicle of Hashem. A reactive response achieves nothing but a quick descent to that person's nadir. The person who slandered Moshe's mother clearly had a severe problem. Hashem used that person to send home a message, and, as a result, she became a better person. In such a situation, one should show that he believes in Hashem and that he acknowledges that He is testing his compliance to His message. Moshe's mother listened, and now she is able to listen to the unimpeded sound of her son's speech.

בדד ישב מחוץ למחנה מושבו

He shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (13:46)

Someone comes over and says, "Have you heard the latest about Moshe?" (Fictitious name) The perfect response, as noted by the *Baalei Mussar*, Ethicists, is: "Let me ask you a simple question. Did you make it your business to run the information (concerning Moshe) through your three sieves?" "What three sieves?" you ask. "Well, the first sieve is the one of *emes*, truth. Are you absolutely certain that what you are about to say is true?" At this point, the individual who was about

to share a nice bit of information hesitates and says, "I heard it from someone whom I know is 'probably' reliable."

"Fine; now let us focus on the second level. Is it *chiyuvi*, positive? If you are about to share with me something positive concerning Moshe, then, by all means, share! Of course, I want to hear positive takes about Moshe. Now, let me tell you what the third sieve is: importance/significance. Is it vital that you relate to me something concerning Moshe, something which you are not certain passes the veracity test? Now, you agree that what you are about to tell me might not be true, is probably not positive, and is not that crucial. Why would you say it? And why would I want to listen? Perhaps the best thing to do is forget about it and do not speak."

The commentators observe that the *metzora* is the only individual who is declared *tamei*, ritually contaminated, who is sent out of all three *machanos*, camps: first *Machane Shechinah*, holy camp; *Machane Leviah*, where the *Leviim* lived; and, last, *Machane Yisrael*, where the rest of the Jewish community made their home. *Badad yeishev*; alone he must live. No friends, no family, alone, until he personally feels the loneliness that he brought upon others.

There are three levels of *tumah*: *tumas meis*, defilement contracted by contact with a corpse; *tumas zav*, defilement as the result of bodily emission; and last, *tumas metzora*. The defilement of one who comes in contact with a corpse is *halachically* the most stringent, since it defiles others who come in contact with the one who is *tamei*. Because it is even more stringent than *tumas zav*, he is distanced from *machne Leviah*. On the other hand, the *metzora*, whose defilement is on the lowest level of the three, is removed from the entire community – all three camps!

The *metzora* has hope, if he remains silent. *Netzor leshoncha mei'ra*; "Guard your tongue from evil" (*Tehillim* 34:13). The *baal lashon hora* has hope. When he realizes and acknowledges the pain that he has caused, the destruction that he has wrought, when he feels the anxiety that he has caused others to feel in the pit of his stomach, he learns to correct the bad words with good words. We all thrive on praise and compliments. Sadly, some leaders find it very difficult to pay a compliment. It is almost as if, by offering praise, they feel that they are giving away a part of themselves. Recognizing the positive efforts of those around us (employees, friends, spouses, family) increases the self-esteem of the individuals whom we are praising and engenders greater productivity. It is a short-term need, which should be satisfied on an ongoing basis. Paying a compliment is transformative; it costs nothing (unless the benefactor has serious personal esteem issues) and is extremely effective and rewarding.

How does one compliment, offer praise, if he has not perceived anything to compliment? If a person is not doing his job well, should he be complimented? Should one prevaricate specifically to make someone feel positive about himself? *Hevei dan es kol ha'adam l'kaf z'chus*, "Judge every man favorably" (*Pirkei Avos*). This does not mean that we should gloss over negativity and bad behavior. It means that we should look for the positive – remaining cognizant of the negative. If we search and look at the positive, the negative will either not matter or will matter less. Indeed, the positive compliment that we offer might so transform the individual that he will not exhibit his negative side. Everyone has a positive side; some of us simply refuse to look for it or to take into consideration that one might have a reason for his negative side. It all depends on how we look at someone and the image of him we choose to paint. The following story is illuminating.

A benevolent king was loved and admired by his constituents. This was despite the king's grotesque physical appearance. He was plagued with three prominent physical impediments, which made him self-conscious. First and foremost, he was missing his left leg. He had been born without one leg and, throughout his life, he was handicapped. Second, his right shoulder and back were hunched. This was a deformity that not only troubled him emotionally, but it also caused him severe physical pain at times. Last, the king's right eye was closed. Due to some form of palsy, the muscle in the lid of his right eye could not open

and shut. Thus, if one were to see the king, these three deformities would be prominent.

The king decided that, like other monarchs, he wanted to have a large painting of himself hanging in the entrance foyer of his palace, so that his visitors would have an impressive image of their king to view with admiration and respect. Obviously, the artist who undertook this job would have to be very creative in order to gloss over the monarch's deformities. The ministers searched for the most talented artist in the land who was willing to undertake this project (not that he would have much of a choice). The artist came, made some notes and proceeded to paint his rendition of the king. A month later, the artist was ready to show his skill in capturing the king's image. He pulled off the cloth draping the painting, and there, for all to see, was a spitting image of the king – grotesque as ever. When the king saw the image of himself, he became furious. "How dare you paint such an ugly image of me?" the king roared. "But that is how his majesty looks. What did I do wrong?" the (foolish) artist replied. He was immediately sent to take up quarters in the king's dungeon. "Perhaps after some time in the dungeon, you will realize the pain that you caused me," the king railed.

The king still did not have a painting of himself. A second artist was commissioned. This one had already learned of the fate which his predecessor had suffered. He would not be so foolish. He presented the king with an image of himself that was absolutely stunning. It was also an outright lie. The king was presented as tall, erect, handsome, with a smile on his face, as both eyes stared out prominently. The king appeared to be a perfect specimen of humanity. The artist was proud of himself, until the king saw the image and screamed, "You are making fun of me! You know that I do not look like that! I will allow you to spend time in the dungeon mulling over your egregious audacity. I may not look as bad as the previous artist depicted me, but I certainly do not look like this. I am no fool!"

The king then instructed his ministers to find an artist who would do the job – right, or else, he, too, would be participating in an extended visit in the dungeon. They searched the kingdom for an artist, but not just any artist. They needed the services of an artist who was as astute as he was skilled. He had to devise a way to avoid the king's abnormal appearance, while preserving his true mien. They found an artist who was known to be clever, having navigated a number of previous presentations employing skill, guile and creativity in thorny situations. The artist met the king, saw the previous images that had been made of him, and realized that he had before him a formidable challenge -- until he thought of a brilliant idea. He spent a few weeks painting the image he felt would receive the king's approval. At last, the day arrived. The king, surrounded by all of his ministers, waited in the large hall of the palace to see what this artist had produced. The easel with the painting was covered with a large cloth, which was removed at the artist's command. When they saw the painting, everyone stood dumbfounded. It was beautiful, and brilliant. The artist captured everything positive about the king, yet did not call attention to any of his abnormalities. The image showed the king riding on a white steed, while pulling back on a bow and arrow. It was the right side of the king, thus alleviating the need to show that his left leg was missing. His right eye was closed, because he was aiming at the target, and his shoulder was hunched because he was pulling back on the bow! Needless to say, the king was satisfied beyond belief.

The lesson for us is simple. We all have failings. We can either focus on these failings or present them in a positive context and background. When one looks for the positive, he will find it. One who sees only the negative has a jaundiced perspective which distorts anything that presents itself in his line of vision.

Metzora

כי תבואו אל ארץ כנען ... ונתתי נגע צרעת בבית ארץ אחוזתכם

When you arrive in the land of Canaan... and I will place a tzaraas affliction upon a house in the land of your possession. (14:34)

A well-known *Rashi* teaches that the news concerning a plague of *tzaraas* appearing on one's house was to be taken with a grain of salt. While at first it seems tragic that one should suffer the loss of his home,

there was a rewarding caveat to the destruction of the house. When the *Canaanim* heard of the impending arrival of the Jews into the land which they had inhabited, they hid their treasures in the walls, so that the Jews would not benefit from them. Now that the house was destroyed, the concealed places revealed all of the hidden treasure. The obvious question is: Did Hashem not have another means for enriching the Jews? Why was the vehicle of *negaim*, plagues, chosen to be their medium of reward?

Horav Yechezkel Michel Epstein, zl, author of the *Aruch HaShulchan*, explains that this was by design. *David Hamelech* says (*Tehillim* 119:71,72), “It was good for me that I was humbled (*uneisi*) so that I might learn Your laws. I prefer the teaching You proclaimed (*Toras Picha*) to thousands of gold and silver pieces.” *Uneisi* is translated as humbled, but means the same as *ani*, poor man, so that when *Dovid Hamelech* is humbled/as a poor man, he is asserting that studying Torah is greater than owning thousands of silver and gold pieces. This makes sense if a wealthy man makes this declaration. He says all the money in the world does not come close to the satisfaction and eternal value of Torah study. David, the “poor man” cannot say this however – since he has never experienced wealth, having been humbled by poverty.

The *Aruch HaShulchan* explains that man can confront two diverse challenges: wealth; and poverty. Wealth is considered to be the more difficult challenge of the two, since wealth can lead a person to *kefirah*, apostasy, when he begins to believe that his material bounty is the result of *kochi v’otzem b’yadi*, “my power and the might of my hand.” Poverty is different, since it engenders depression, but, at the end of the day, wealth, which can catalyze *kefirah*, is a greater source of spiritual anxiety.

Chazal in *Pirkei Avos* (4:9) say, “Anyone who maintains the Torah amid (despite) poverty will ultimately maintain the Torah amid wealth.” Simply, this means that even if one is poor, he should be patient, because one day he will maintain the Torah amid wealth. We know this to be untrue, as many Torah scholars have lived in abject poverty all of their lives. The *Aruch HaShulchan* explains that *Chazal* are teaching us that one who succeeds in maintaining the Torah throughout the challenge of poverty, may be secure in the knowledge that he has the strength of character and commitment to Hashem that he can also overcome the challenge of maintaining the Torah amid wealth. It does not mean that he will become wealthy, only that wealth will not lead him away from Hashem. One who has failed the challenges brought on by poverty, however, will certainly not succeed in triumphing over the challenge of wealth.

This is the underlying meaning of the *pasuk*: “When you will come to the land of Canaan,” a nation of wealthy merchants, whose possessions are all destined to become yours, but who is to say/ensure that you are able to triumph over the challenges that are endemic to wealth? Therefore, “I will place a plague of *tzaraas* on the house.” When you see a quick end to your dreams and aspirations of material bounty, and you nonetheless withstand and overcome the challenge brought on by poverty and the humility it brings along, then you will be worthy of the wealth that will be discovered when you destroy your home. Now, after you have successfully navigated the test of poverty, you can go on to the test of wealth, with the knowledge that you are prepared to maintain the Torah and *mitzvos* amid wealth.

ובא אשר לו הבית... והבא אל הבית... יטמא

The one to whom the house belongs shall come... (14:35)

Anyone who comes into the house...shall be contaminated (14:46)

A house that has a *tzaraas* plague, appear on its structure is rendered *tamei*, ritually contaminated. This is a miraculous phenomenon which occurs only in *Eretz Yisrael*. If it does not disappear, the walls – and, at times, the entire structure – is demolished. Initially (*Ramban*), *tzaraas* on a house is Hashem’s subtle rebuke to its owner. Something is amiss in his behavior. The house is his first warning. Hashem first afflicts (he who is deserving) something outside of his body. If he does not listen to the message and positively alters his demeanor, the ailment will spread to his clothing, and, if after this occurs, he still refuses to

shape up, the affliction strikes his body. Furthermore, historically, *tzaraas* of the house was actually a blessing in disguise, since the heathens who inhabited *Eretz Yisrael* hid their treasures in the walls of their houses so that the conquering Jewish army would not discover them. When a person was compelled to demolish his home, his sorrow turned into joy when he found the treasures.

Things happen, or rather, they do not “just happen.” They happen for a reason and a purpose. It is our obligation to listen to our Heavenly messages. Hashem is reaching out to us out of Divine love, in the hope that we will hear His subtle messages and act upon them. Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in a vacuum. *Hashem Yisborach* speaks to us, but, if we are not listening, or worse, if we refuse to listen, to what avail are the messages? *Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita*, relates an incident which he saw recorded in the *Sedei Tzofim*, by *Horav Dovid Friedman, Shlita*. Apparently, a family in Manchester, England, renovated their guest house and rented it out to a young, recently-married, couple. Sadly, a few months into the rental, the couple experienced marital discord and divorced. A second couple moved in shortly thereafter. Shockingly, their marriage ended up in a manner similar to that of the first couple. When this tragic outcome happened to the third couple to rent the guest house, the owner acknowledged that there was a problem. He was, thus, relieved when the fourth couple to rent the house had to escape in the middle of the night when a fire broke out and destroyed a large portion of the house. It was crunch time. The messages were certainly real and becoming more compelling. They decided to remove the *mezuzos* and check to confirm their *kashrus*. How shocked they were to discover that, in the phrase, *Asher Anochi Metzavecha ha’yom al levavecha*, “Which I command You today on your hearts.” (*Krias Shema*), the *reish* (last letter of *asher*) was prominently missing; thus, *asher* read as *eish* – fire!

It now all made sense. Fire can be a reference to the all-consuming energy that destroys everything in its path, or to the fire of controversy that is equally devastating. Regarding the first three couples, the fire of controversy was sadly successful in destroying a marriage that was probably already on shaky ground. The fourth couple’s relationship with one another was unshakeable (as ideal marriages should be). Thus, it required the fire of energy to send home the message that the protection which is usually provided by the *mezuzah* had been incapacitated.

Va’ani Tefillah

ותחנה עינינו בשוכך לציון ברהמים – V’sechezenah eineinu b’shuvcha l’tzion b’rachamim. May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in compassion.

Is it important that we “see” Hashem’s return and the downfall of our enemies? The mere fact that it finally occurs should be sufficient. *Horav Yonasan Eibeshutz, zl*, explains that when a person is saved in the merit of others, not in his own merit, he does not deserve to “see” the downfall of his enemies/ of the enemies of G-d. Thus, Lot’s wife, who was spared only in Avraham Avinu’s merit, was unworthy of witnessing the destruction of Sodom. When she looked, she was punished. On the other hand, the Jews in Egypt, who believed in Hashem, were permitted to gaze upon the Egyptian’s demise.

We pray to Hashem that when the time finally arrives, we are worthy of redemption (in our own right), not only in the merit of our ancestors. Therefore, when we ask to personally witness the end of our exile and the destruction of our enemies, we are praying that we be worthy in our own right of this salvation. “Seeing” is an indication of believing in Hashem.

Sponsored in loving memory of **ע"ה Beate Frank כ"ל בת אלעזר ע"ה**

By her children and grandchildren, Birdie and Lenny Frank and Family Hebrew Academy of Cleveland, ©All rights reserved prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

To Dew or not to Dew

Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: To dew or not to dew

“Why does nusach Sfarid recite morid hatal during the summer davening and nusach Ashkenaz does not?”

Question #2: Sanctity of Eretz Yisroel?

"I know that many agricultural mitzvos, such as terumos, maasros and shemittah, apply only in Eretz Yisroel. But why does everyone in Eretz Yisroel recite morid hatal? What does the sanctity of Eretz Yisroel have to do with whether we recite morid hatal or not?"

Question #3: Where am I?

"In error, I recited vesein tal umatar during the davening on Chol Hamoed Pesach. Someone told me that I do not recite Shemoneh Esrei again, because I live in the United States. What difference does it make where I live?"

Background

This article will explore the background behind the variant customs regarding the recital of morid hatal. I note that during the time of the rishonim, there were various other nuscha'os, versions of the text, all now in disuse, including one text used during the winter months, "morid hagoshem" without the preceding words mashiv haruach, and another version, mashiv haruach umorid hageshem vehatal, adding a reference to dew during the winter months.

Mashiv haruach in the summer?

Furthermore, between Pesach and Sukkos there is another version, mashiv haruach umorid hatal, which, although included in tefillas tal that we recite in shul on the first day of Pesach, has for the most part fallen into disuse except for those who follow nusach hagra.

Introduction

At this point, let us begin with the basics. The second brocha of the Shemoneh Esrei is called "Gevuros," because it describes Hashem's greatness, and therefore begins with the words Atah Gibor, "You are great." Let us study the text of the brocha, which, upon even cursory examination, is replete with redundancy.

"You, Hashem, are powerful forever! You revive the dead; You are abundantly able to save." It is at this point that the words mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem, morid hatal, or their alternatives are added, depending on custom and time of year. We can ask, "Why, indeed, is mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem inserted at this point?"

The brocha then continues: "He provides the living with loving kindness. He revives the dead with great mercy. He supports those who are falling, heals the ill, releases the bound and fulfills His promise to those who sleep in the earth. Who is like You, the Master of might, and who is comparable to You, King Who brings death, restores life and brings the sprouting of salvation. You are faithful to revive the dead. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who brings the dead to life."

Four resurrections

The Ritva (Taanis 2a) notes that the brocha contains four references to techiyas hameisim, resurrection, which is seemingly highly redundant. They are:

1. "You, Hashem, are powerful forever! You revive the dead;"
2. "He revives the dead with great mercy."
3. "King Who brings death (and) restores life."
4. "You are faithful to revive the dead."

Four types of resurrection

The Ritva explains that there is no redundancy, because each of the four refers to a different type of resurrection.

(1) The first refers to rain that provides food for life. In the words of the Talmud Yerushalmi, "Just as techiyas hameisim brings life to the world, so rain brings life to the world." Now we understand why mashiv haruach is recited just at this point of the Shemoneh Esrei.

(2) The second is when Hashem brings people back from the brink of their demise, be it illness or other travail.

(3) The third is when the prophets, such as Eliyahu and Elisha, brought people back to life.

(4) The fourth is a reference to the ultimate techiyas hameisim.

Mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem

The Mishnah rules that between Sukkos and Pesach one should add mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem to the second brocha of Shemoneh Esrei. The Gemara states that one may recite mashiv haruach, which praises Hashem for providing wind, or morid hatal, which praises Hashem for providing dew, but that neither of these praises is required.

To quote the Gemara: "Concerning dew and winds, our Sages did not require reciting them, but if he wants to, he may" (Taanis 3a). The Gemara proceeds to ask why this is true, to which it answers that winds and dew never cease. Praising Hashem for their daily occurrence is similar to praying that the sun rise in the morning. Although it is absolutely essential for our existence, Chazal did not institute a special prayer for this. For this reason, in the time of the rishonim, several different customs developed. Some thanked Hashem for the wind all year round, whereas others never recited such a prayer at all, neither in summer nor in winter. There were those who thanked Hashem for providing dew all year round, and those who never did.

With time, one practice became accepted. When we thank Hashem for rain (which is required), we also thank him for wind. Notwithstanding the statement of the Gemara that it is not required to say mashiv haruach, the universal custom is to say it when we say morid hagoshem. This is because the wind that accompanies the rain helps keep the ground from becoming too wet (Mishnah Berurah 114:11).

At this point, we understand the basic brocha. We can also understand why Chazal instituted mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem in the winter months, particularly in Eretz Yisroel and Bavel, when it rains only at that time of year.

Forgot mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem

The Talmud Yerushalmi rules: "If it is the season when he should say mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem, and he said tal, he is not required to repeat the Shemoneh Esrei." Yet, the Yerushalmi quotes another source that if someone neglected to recite mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem or vesein tal umatar, he must repeat Shemoneh Esrei. The Yerushalmi answers that this latter source is discussing a case when someone said neither morid hatal nor morid hagoshem; in this instance, he must repeat Shemoneh Esrei. But if he mentioned tal, and not geshem, he does not repeat Shemoneh Esrei. This ruling is accepted.

Birkas Hashanim

As we know, Chazal also instituted reciting a request for rain, vesein tal umatar, in the ninth brocha of Shemoneh Esrei, birkas hashanim. The difference between mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem, "He who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall," and vesein tal umatar, "Grant dew and rain upon the face of the earth," is that the first is praise of Hashem and, therefore, it is inserted into the second brocha of our davening, both on weekdays and Shabbos, since the first three brochos of the Shemoneh Esrei are devoted to praise. The second is a prayer beseeching Hashem to provide rain, and as such is recited in birkas hashanim, the appropriate brocha of the weekday Shemoneh Esrei.

Missed them

Should one forget to recite either mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem or vesein tal umatar when required, one is obligated to repeat the Shemoneh Esrei. However, there is a halachic difference between the two that is already noted by the Tur. Should one recite morid hatal in the second brocha, praising Hashem for providing dew, rather than mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem, one is not required to repeat the Shemoneh Esrei. Nevertheless, when required to recite vesein tal umatar, someone who recited only vesein tal and omitted a request for rain is required to repeat the Shemoneh Esrei.

To dew or not to dew

At this point, we can answer the first of our opening questions: Why do some people recite morid hatal during the summer davening, and others do (or should I say "dew") not?

The answer is that, although one is never required to recite morid hatal, if he said it instead of saying mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem, he does not need to repeat the Shemoneh Esrei. Thus, there is an advantage to reciting it, because, should he recite it by mistake when he is required to say mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem, he does not need to repeat the Shemoneh Esrei. Similarly, someone who is uncertain whether to say mashiv haruach umorid hagoshem or not should recite morid hatal and they have fulfilled the requirement that Chazal created.

The minhag of nusach Sfar is to follow this approach, and that has also become the prevalent practice in Eretz Yisroel, even among those who

daven nusach Ashkenaz. But it has nothing to do with being in Eretz Yisroel.

Sanctity of Eretz Yisroel?

We can also now answer the second of our opening questions:

“I know that many agricultural mitzvos, such as terumos, maasros and shemittah, apply only in Eretz Yisroel. But why do they recite morid hatal there? What does the sanctity of Eretz Yisroel have to do with whether we recite morid hatal or not?”

The answer to this question is historical, and not halachic. The origin of the Ashkenazic community of Eretz Yisroel was from the students of the Baal Shem Tov, who were all Chassidim and davened nusach Sfarad, or from disciples of the Gra, who recited morid hatal in davening notwithstanding that they davened nusach Ashkenaz. Although there was a major influx of Ashkenazic Jews to Eretz Yisroel in the 1930's, after the Nazis took power in Germany, for the most part they accepted the nusach Ashkenaz that was then practiced in Eretz Yisroel. This included reciting morid hatal in shmoneh esrei, reciting Hallel in shul with a brocha the night of the Seder, duchening daily, the omission of the brocha Baruch Hashem le'olam in weeknight maariv and various similar practices.

Where am I?

At this point, we have enough of an introduction that we can begin to understand the background to the last of our opening questions: “In error, I recited vesein tal umatar during the davening on Chol Hamoad Pesach. Someone told me that I do not recite Shemoneh Esrei again, because I live in the United States. What difference does it make where I live?” First, let us examine the following story shared by the Gemara (Taanis 14b):

“The people of the city of Nineveh (in contemporary Iraq) sent the following shaylah to Rebbe: Our city requires rain even in the middle of the summer. Should we be treated like individuals and request rain in the brocha of Shema Koleinu, or like a community and recite ve'vesein tal umatar during the brocha of Boreich Aleinu? Rebbe responded that they are considered individuals, and should request rain during the brocha of Shema Koleinu.”

The Gemara subsequently demonstrates that the tanna Rabbi Yehudah disagreed with Rebbe, and contended that they should recite vesein tal umatar in the brocha of Boreich Aleinu.

This controversy recurred in the times of the early amora'im, approximately one hundred years later, when the disputants were Rav Nachman and Rav Sheishes. Rav Sheishes contended, as did Rebbe, that during the summer the Nineveh residents should recite vesein tal umatar in Shema Koleinu, whereas Rav Nachman ruled that they should recite it in Boreich Aleinu, following Rabbi Yehudah. The Gemara concludes that it should be recited in Shema Koleinu, and this is the conclusion of all halachic authorities.

Why not add?

Germane to understanding this passage of Gemara, a concern is raised by the rishonim. Halacha permits adding appropriate personal requests to the appropriate brocha of the Shemoneh Esrei. For example, one may include a prayer for the recovery of an individual during the brocha of Refa' einu, or request assistance for Torah study into the brocha of Chonein Hadaas. The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 8a) rules that someone who needs livelihood may add a personal supplication to the brocha of Boreich Aleinu. Therefore, the question rises: If one may add his personal request for parnasah, why could the people of Nineveh not add their own personal requests for rain during Boreich Aleinu?

The rishonim present two answers to this question:

1. Since rain in the summer months can be harmful in some places, one may not pray for rain in birkas hashanim when this prayer is detrimental to others. A request for livelihood is different, since granting a respectful livelihood is never harmful to someone else.
2. This is the version of the prayer that Chazal instituted for the winter months, and they established a different text for the summer months. Therefore, reciting vesein tal umatar in birkas hashanim during the summer conflicts with the text that Chazal established for this brocha, in Hebrew called the matbei'a she'tav'u chachamim. One is not permitted

to change the text of Chazal's established prayers, although one may add personal supplications to them.

The Rosh understands that Nineveh could not recite their own personal request for rain in Boreich Aleinu because a city cannot make its own policy regarding the text of a brocha, but an entire country, defined as a large area, may. For this reason, he ruled that in Spain or Germany, where they needed rain after Pesach, they could recite Vesein Matar in Boreich Aleinu whenever their country needs rain.

Although the opinion of the Rosh is not accepted, someone who erred and davened in a way that the Rosh considers correct, should not repeat the Shemoneh Esrei (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 117:2).

Conclusion

Man was created by Hashem as the only creation that has free choice. Therefore, our serving Hashem and our davening is unique in the entire spectrum of creation. The power of tefillah is very great. Through tefillah one can save lives, bring people closer to Hashem, and overturn harsh decrees. We have to believe in this power; one should not think, “Who am I to daven to Hashem?” Rather, we must continually absorb the concept that Hashem wants our tefillos and He listens to them!

Understanding how much concern Chazal placed in the seemingly minor aspects of davening should make us even more aware of the fact that davening builds our relationship with Hashem. As the Kuzari notes, every day should have three high points -- the three times that we daven. Certainly, one should do whatever one can to make sure to pay attention to the meaning of the words of one's tefillah. We should gain our strength and inspiration for the rest of the day from these three prayers. Let us hope that Hashem will accept our tefillos together with those of Klal Yisrael!

Gift of Life

Yonason Rosenblum | April 22, 2020

A lifesaving quest to harvest the plasma of Covid survivors

On April 1, Rabbi Leib Kelemen, a well-known author and rosh kollel in Jerusalem, sent out a podcast. Imagine, he told his listeners, a scene in which all the negative news coverage of chareidi Jews was suddenly replaced by images of chareidi Covid-19 survivors lining up in multitudes to give potentially life-saving convalescent blood plasma to those still battling the virus.

Little did he know that the wheels were already turning that would bring his vision to pass.

If I Find a Donor

The story, which has the makings of a Hollywood thriller and which is far from over, begins with apparent serendipity. On March 29, Covid-19 patient Rabbi Mordechai Swiatycki of Monsey was taken to Westchester Medical Center, where his medical condition declined rapidly and he was placed on a respirator. At one point, the German-born infectious disease specialist overseeing Rabbi Swiatycki's case, Dr. Bettina Knoll, began reviewing all the possible treatments with his son Abba. She mentioned a number of possible medications, but also said she wished that she could try using convalescent blood plasma drawn from those who had recovered from the virus. Unfortunately, she said, there were no donors.

Abba asked what would happen if he could find a donor. Even though Dr. Knoll did not initially receive a favorable response from her supervisors to his suggestion, the seed had been planted in Abba Swiatycki's mind.

On April 4, Abba contacted Rebbetzin Abby Fink of the Young Israel of New Rochelle, whose shul became the center of the first major outbreak of COVID-19 virus in New York State, when a shul member returned from a trip abroad and did not realize that he was infected. Rebbetzin Fink gave him the name of another man, Mordechai Serle of Flatbush, who had been searching for convalescent plasma for his hospitalized father-in-law. She informed Abba that Mordy Serle had found a donor. (Both Serle's father-in-law, Reb Dovid Shurin, and Abba Swiatycki's father recovered. The former never received the blood plasma that that a member of the New Rochelle community volunteered to give; the latter eventually received the convalescent plasma, but only after being removed from the ventilator.)

The two forty-ish executives — Serle a partner in a law firm and Swiatycki a senior officer in a real estate development company — hit it off, however, and they decided to pool their efforts to see whether they could bring the convalescent plasma to more people in desperate need.

They didn't have much medical background, but they possessed energy, creativity, a burning drive to get things done. Soon they would be commanding a national effort, to be named the Yitzchak Lebovitz Covid Plasma Initiative, to provide potentially lifesaving plasma to Covid patients.

A List of Names

By Motzai Shabbos, April 5, the two had created a website covidplasmasavealife.com to register potential donors of convalescent plasma — i.e., all those who tested positive for Covid-19 virus and have been symptom-free for at least 14 days.

The entry of the first names in their data bank came about in a particularly poignant fashion. The family of Reb Meir Greenberg of Monsey were searching for convalescent plasma and had sought donors through one of the popular Orthodox websites for their critically ill father. At 2:00 a.m. in the morning on April 6, Abba Swiatycki received a call from one of the daughters; she sent him the names of all the people who'd offered to donate plasma to her father. Only later did Abba learn that she'd called him only moments after her father's passing.

When Serle and Swiatycki first put up their website, the only hospital in the New York metropolitan area actively seeking convalescent plasma donors was Mt. Sinai in Manhattan. Playing a leading role in that campaign was a Monsey-based chassidische importer of shoes, Chaim Lebovits, who has developed a volunteer sideline guiding individual patients with medical problems requiring the highest level of medical expertise. In the course of his activities, Lebovits had developed a close relationship with Dr. Jeffrey Bander, a cardiologist at Mt. Sinai Hospital.

Both Swiatycki and Serle had already been in contact with Lebovits, in the course of their search for convalescent plasma for their loved ones. Now he became the guide for his slightly younger colleagues and connected them with crucial contacts around the country, chief among them Dr. Shmuel Shoham, a native Israeli, now at Johns Hopkins University Medical Center in Baltimore; and Dr. Michael Joyner of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

The Angel and the Sword

Those contacts became crucial when the Mayo Clinic was appointed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as the lead research institution for the FDA's Expanded Access Program (EAP). The Mayo Clinic had

already been joined in a voluntary association with over 50 other leading academic institutions, including Johns Hopkins, on research on convalescent plasma.

This is far from the first effort to harness plasma to fight infection. The technique was employed in the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic and again against the H1N1 flu in 2009–2010. Of most direct relevance to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was used to combat two previous coronaviruses: SARS in 2003 and MERS in 2012.

But the FDA's approval of Early Access Program for convalescent plasma, under the Mayo Clinic's auspices, had the potential to make the technique much more widespread and accessible. Until then hospitals could only gain permission to use convalescent plasma under a cumbersome procedure on a case-by-case basis, and usually only when the patient was critically ill. And past experience shows that it is more likely to be effective at an earlier stage of illness.

Under the EAP, any hospital that complies with the Mayo Clinic protocols and appoints a senior investigator to oversee the clinical trials is able to use transfusions of convalescent plasma. Nevertheless, in a video issued on April 2, Dr. Joyner predicted no more than a "trickle" of cases using the therapy in the week to come, and pointed out that the logistics involved are extremely complex.

Though Dr. Joyner did not specify the nature of those logistical complexities, they are threefold. The first is securing an adequate supply of donors. The second is finding enough machines to draw the blood plasma. Few hospitals have their own machines, and the 70-minute process of extracting the blood plasma and restoring the donor's blood, along with the preliminary intake makes for a two-hour process per extraction. Then there is the logistical nightmare of making sure that all the slots on the available machines are taken and do not go unused. Finally, hospitals must be convinced to join the EAP. Like most large bureaucracies, their natural tendency is to continue doing what they have been doing and to avoid rapid changes in procedures.

Dr. Joyner, early on, came to view the chareidi community as a major ally. Because the community was so hard hit by the COVID-19 virus, it constituted a huge reservoir of potential donors. In addition, he knew the community's ability to mobilize once it identifies a goal. As Chaim Lebovits likes to say of himself, "How did a chassid with large peyos get to the point where he can reach the top expert in any medical field within half an hour? It's because my entire education was in Yiddish, and my English is so weak. I never learned the words, 'I can't' or 'No.'"

On Erev Pesach, Chaim was having difficulty convincing a particular hospital to try convalescent plasma on one of his "clients." After consulting his rav, he arranged a conference call on Yom Tov with the head of the hospital and Dr. Joyner. On another occasion, Dr. Joyner called Lebovits on Erev Shabbos, and told him that he needed eleven donors in Brooklyn, Minnesota before the weekend. Reb Chaim, who wasn't previously aware of the existence of a Brooklyn in Minnesota, reached out to his connections in the Minneapolis suburb of St. Louis Park. An hour before Shabbos, eleven chassidim showed up at the blood center in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota.

After the successful conclusion of the Yom Tov phone call, Dr. Joyner told Reb Chaim, "I'm named after the archangel Michael, but I need a sword. You [i.e., your community] will be my sword."

Blood that Heals

Serle, Swiatycki, and Lebovits decided early on to follow a decentralized approach to compiling donor lists. In addition to their website, separate individuals and organizations in Crown Heights, Williamsburg, Monsey, Kiryas Yoel, Lakewood, and northern New Jersey have run their own donor campaigns. Already on April 1, Agudath Israel of America sent out a donor registration request to its membership.

Within two weeks, approximately 5,000 recovered coronavirus victims have signed up, out of an estimated potential donor pool of around 40,000. Each donor provides enough plasma at one session to benefit three patients (though where the patient does not respond to the first transfusion — perhaps because it is low in the necessary antibodies — a second unit is often given). Each donor can provide plasma every seven days.

The existing donors are already sufficient to cover every current slot for donations. The response of the chareidi community must further be put into the context of parallel efforts to enlist secular donors. This week, the ad hoc save-a-life campaign has secured 120 slots at two Delaware blood centers. Prior to Shabbos, the two sites had only two donors lined up. Similarly, a Pennsylvania blood center that services twenty-nine hospitals, with which negotiations have commenced, has only nine units of convalescent plasma on hand, representing at the most three donors.

The next bottleneck to be tackled was the shortage of machines capable of extracting the vital blood plasma containing antibodies to COVID-19. Maimonides Medical Center in Boro Park is one of the few hospitals close to a Jewish population center with the machine necessary to extract blood plasma. But, at present, it has only one such machine, and generally services no more than five donors daily.

Monsey businessman Leizer Sheiner and his Williamsburg counterpart Leizer Kestenbaum — both clients of Mordechai Serle — have been working closely with Maimonides to increase its collection and storage capacity by purchasing more tubing and collection bags, and hopefully, in the not-too-distant future, a second machine to extract convalescent plasma.

The big breakthrough, however, came when the group succeeded in bringing New York Blood Center (NYBC), one of the world's largest blood centers, with affiliates across the United States, into the convalescent plasma project. NYBC has the capacity to extract hundreds of units of blood plasma daily.

One of the keys to clinching the deal was Mordy Serle's undertaking to Dr. Beth Shaz, NYBC's Chief Medical and Scientific Officer, that his group would handle all the paperwork connected to new donors and assist with the scheduling of donors. That work was done by data analyst Adam Kahn and a team of volunteers headed by Pam Sher, and including Henya and Dovi Grossman, Aliza Rubinstein, and Nossan Swiatycki.

Get Them on Board

But no matter how many donors are available and how many plasma extraction machines are humming, there is no benefit unless hospitals are on board with trying the convalescent blood therapy. The trio of askanim took on that responsibility as well.

Mt. Sinai had long been running clinical trials and was eager to partner with the Mayo Clinic from the start. At the initiative of Chaskie Rosenberg of Boro Park Hatzolah, Serle, Lebovits, and Swiatycki spoke by phone with Dr. Patrick Borgen of Maimonides Medical Center, and the hospital moved with great alacrity to join the EAP within two hours. Westchester Medical Center (WMC), which had already some experience using the convalescent plasma with a few individual patients also joined quickly. Dr. Elliot (Ari) Levine, an Orthodox cardiologist at WMC, has since taken a lead in handling inventory and allocation issues between NYBC and the various participating hospitals.

Other hospitals needed a bit more of a push, or at least education in the contours of the Mayo Clinic trials. Memorial Sloan Kettering, for instance, was not aware that the trials were not limited to critically ill patients.

As with compiling the donor lists, the ad hoc group has employed a decentralized approach to enrolling hospitals in the EAP clinical trials. Liba Lederer and Yehudah Kasziner of the Lakewood Bikur Cholim, for instance, have been negotiating with hospitals in the Philadelphia and central New Jersey area, and other Orthodox groups are working with hospitals in northern New Jersey.

Still, just before Shabbos Chol HaMoed Pesach, Mordy Serle received a call from Dr. Shaz that she had 400 units of convalescent plasma in store and no takers. That Shabbos, Mrs. Serle delivered a baby girl at 11:30 a.m. Less than a quarter-hour after the birth, she told her husband that he had to do something about the missed opportunity represented by those 400 units, and while still in the delivery room, he began work on convening a conference call that afternoon.

When the conference call commenced, it included Dr. Joyner of the Mayo Clinic, Dr. Shoham of John Hopkins, Dr. Benjamin Chen and Dr. Jeffrey Bander of Mt. Sinai, representatives of ten New York metropolitan area hospitals — all of them serving significant Jewish populations — and most of the major Orthodox activists in the save-a-life group. All of the latter were acting under strict rabbinical guidance. The group heard a presentation by Dr. Chen and Dr. Bander on the extremely promising results from Mt. Sinai's clinical trials to date, which was crucial to convincing some of the hospitals to become more active in using convalescent plasma. Then Dr. Joyner and Dr. Shoham answered all questions about the operation of the EAP. The former was able to allay concerns about any dangers arising from the transfusion of the blood plasma.

"Get the Chassidim"

Just two weeks since the launch of their website, the working group has given a major boost to use of a highly promising therapy for COVID-19 patients, and one that also has the potential to be used as a prophylactic for health care workers, who are the most exposed to the virus. There is still room for substantial expansion of the use of convalescent plasma in the New York metropolitan area. The donor base is already there, as the save-a-life initiative proves.

And the success of the program has created its own momentum, as more organizations seek to join in. The American Red Cross and Vitalent, a non-profit blood center, have announced that they are making available additional machines for the extraction of blood plasma. Meanwhile, the FDA has approved an antibody level test for recovered coronavirus victims, and the Mayo Clinic has committed to producing 1,000 tests a day, with the capacity to increase that to 20,000 if necessary. (These tests are crucial, as at present it is estimated that about five percent of plasma donors do not have high enough levels of antibodies for their plasma to be therapeutic, but until now, there has been no test for antibody levels.)

Not only can the model be expanded, but it can be duplicated around the country, particularly in areas hard hit by the coronavirus to date. Agudath Israel of America has already briefed all its regional directors on the program, and they are eager to work with hospitals in their areas. That has already happened with Sinai Hospital in Baltimore joining the Mayo Clinic protocol.

In addition, the group's efforts have already had an impact in Israel. Chaim Lebovits relates with relish the discussion in a conference call between himself and Dr. Joyner and Dr. Shoham and a senior Magen David Adom (MDA) official in Israel. The MDA official's main question concerned, "Where do you find the donors?" Dr. Shoham answered him in fluent Hebrew, "What's your problem? Do what we did! Get the chassidim. You have plenty of chassidim." The next day, the MDA official called back to say that they had successfully followed Dr. Shoham's advice.

Indeed, there have been multiple calls from communal leaders in Israel, where there are fewer regulatory barriers to trying the convalescent blood therapy, for chareidim who have recovered from the COVID-19 virus to donate blood plasma. The Badatz-Eidah Hachareidis issued a proclamation that it is the highest priority for coronavirus survivors to donate blood. Similarly, Rabbi Elimelech Firer, the founder of Ezra L'Marpeh and considered one of the world's greatest medical experts, appealed for donations of blood plasma and established a special hotline for those seeking to donate.

Public and Private

Not surprisingly, the story of a chareidi initiative at the forefront of research on what could become a game-changing therapy in battle against the coronavirus has attracted widespread media attention from outlets such as the Wall Street Journal, CNN, and Fox News.

But Mordechai Serle, Abba Swiatycki, and Chaim Lebovits — who, incidentally, have still not met one another in person — are focused not on media reviews but on saving more lives.

At all times, they have acted in accord with clear rabbinic guidelines, primarily from Rabbi Yisroel Reisman, a rosh yeshiva in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath and one of Flatbush's most prominent shul rabbanim. He, in turn, has been in ongoing consultation with Rav Reuven Feinstein, on the one hand, and with leading infectious disease specialists to assess the potential benefit from convalescent plasma, on the other.

During World War II, Rav Dessler proclaimed that when Jews are being slaughtered, there is no more private life. The trio of askanim can attest to the truth of his words. During one conference call, Reb Chaim Lebovits told his colleagues that he had to get off the phone for a quarter of an hour for the levayah of his brother.

And then, despite his personal mourning, he got back on the line.

As Easy as Drawing Blood?

As scientists are scrambling for vaccines, drugs, and other treatments against COVID-19, doctors have begun reexamining a century-old treatment for infections: infusion of blood plasma teeming with immune molecules, extracted from recovered donors.

Convalescent plasma therapy — which was used during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic and against other infections before modern cures came along — harnesses antibodies found in the blood of people who have recovered from an infection (hence the term convalescent therapy), to treat patients who are infected. In this therapy, blood is drawn from a person who has recovered from the disease and the serum is separated and screened for antibodies — proteins produced by the immune system when the body is attacked by a pathogen.

These antibodies continue to float in the recovered person's blood, primarily in the plasma — the clear, straw-colored liquid part of the blood — for months or even years.

The process for donating plasma is similar to donating blood. Plasma donors are hooked up to a small device that removes plasma while simultaneously returning red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets, and other blood components to the body with a saline solution to replace the withdrawn plasma. While regular blood donation takes less than half an hour, source plasma donation takes between one and three hours. But unlike regular blood donation in which donors have to wait for red blood cells to replenish between donations, which takes up to eight weeks, plasma can be donated in some cases as often as twice a week.

לע"נ

שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה