

Weekly Internet Parsha Sheet Shabbos Tazria Metzora

Aveilus, Sefirah, and Hallel
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The Gemorah (Moed Koton 14B) understands from the pesukim in parshas Shmini that the kohein gadol does not observe aveilus over the death of a relative. (See Sefer Ginat Egoz, page 95). "The kohein gadol all year long is compared to everyone else on yom tov" - just as on yom tov no one observes aveilus, so too the kohein gadol does not observe aveilus all year long. Rav Soloveitchik explained>[1] this comparison as follows: the Gemorah (Chagiga 5B), based on a posuk in Divrei Hayomim, comments that in the presence of Hakadosh Boruch Hu there cannot be any sadness; simcha always follows when one is in the presence of Hashem. Just as on shalosh regalim we all have an obligation to be Oleh Regel, (i.e. visit the Beis Hamikdash and enter into the presence of Hashem), so too it is the role of the kohein gadol to be in the Beis Hamikdash all day long (Rambam Hilchos Klei Hamikdash 5,7) and supervise the offering of all of the korbonos[2]. Because the kohein gadol and everyone else on shalosh regalim are obligated to be lifnei Hashem, this engenders a mitzvas simcha, which in turn is a contradiction to observance of aveilus.

The Talmud (Yevamos 62b) tells us that many thousands of students of Rabbi Akiva died during the period of sefirah, and in the days of the Gaonim the minhag developed to observe aveilus over the great loss in Torah caused by the death of so many Torah scholars. The Zohar, however, considers sefirah to be a Biblical period of mourning unrelated to the death of these Torah scholars, and explains that it is because of this Biblical element of aveilus that we don't recite Hallel sholeim on she'vei shel Pesach in commemoration of the neis of kriyas Yam Suf, even though we do recite Hallel sholeim to commemorate other miracles (e.g. the miracles of Chanukah). Based on this Zohar, Sefardic mekubalim introduced the minhag, followed by many chassidim today, to delay beginning the counting of sefirah on the second night of Pesach until after the completion of the seder so that the recitation of Hallel sholeim at the seder comes before we start counting sefirah. The Hallel which will be recited on the morning of the second day of Pesach after Shacharis, however, is not connected to any neis but is rather an expression of our simchas Yom Tov.[3] As such, the Sefardic mekubalim were not concerned with this recitation of Hallel sholeim during sefirah. It is not proper, however, to recite Hallel sholeim in connection with a neis during sefirah.

When an individual is tamei the halacha sometimes requires him/her to wait seven clean days before going to the mikva to become purified. When the entire Jewish nation was spiritually impure after living amongst the Egyptians for so many years, it was necessary for us to have seven clean weeks. Our counting of the Omer today is also for the purpose of purifying ourselves, as we mention in the prayer we recite after the sefirah. One who is tamei is precluded from entering the Beis Hamikdash and therefore, by definition, is in a mild state of mourning. Simcha follows when one is in the presence of Hashem, and aveilus comes when one is unable to enter into His presence.

The establishment of Medinat Yisroel took place in the middle of the sefirah. HaGaon Rabbi Meshulem Roth wrote a Teshuva encouraging the reciting of Hallel sholeim on Yom Ha'atzmaut in commemoration of the yeshua and the nissim. Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neriah, in a letter to Rabbi Roth[4], raised an objection to this recitation based on the aforementioned Zohar and minhag which dictates that Hallel sholeim should not be recited during the sefirah period even for the great neis of Kriyas Yam Suf.

[1]See Ish HaHalach pages 210-211; Nefesh HaRav page 314

[2]See Nefesh HaRav page 306

[3]See Sha'ar haKollel chapter 49 section 2

[4]See Rabbi Neriah's sefer, Znif Melucha

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In My Opinion :: Rabbi Berel Wein *The Ambivalent Count*

We are currently in the season of the counting of the days of the Omer that will lead us to the grand holiday of Shavuot. In the tradition of rabbinic commentary regarding this process of counting the days between Pesach and Shavuot, the emphasis has always been on the countdown towards Shavuot – towards the revelation at Sinai and the granting of the Torah to Israel.

Tradition forced us to count towards something, towards a goal and an achievement. Yet in reality the count of the days of the Omer is not only a counting of time towards something – it is also a counting of days away from something. The count reflects the departure, both in memory and in actual time from the great and miraculous events of the Exodus from Egypt.

The great moments that Israel experienced at Yam Suf, of faith and trust in God and in His servant Moshe, faded away in time elapsed and in new experiences and challenges as the Jews entered the desert of Sinai. The farther away in distance and especially in time that Israel traveled, from the miracles of their release from bondage, the more they rebelled and grumbled against the Divine and Moshe.

Time passing dulls memory and weakens recall. The past is buried in the rush to anticipate the future and all of its blessings. That is the nature of humans - to count forward and rarely to look back. The counting of the Omer is fixed firmly in our minds as the anticipation of Shavuot and not as the memorial to Pesach.

We are witness to this phenomenon in many areas of our daily life. I was riding in a taxi recently and the taxi driver – a friendly and voluble soul – was relating that he lives on a certain street here in Jerusalem. The street is named for one of the members of the pre-State of Israel Jewish underground who was hanged by the British before they were driven out of the country. The taxi driver complained that most of the children who live on that street have no concept as to what, who and why the name of their street has an historical and emotional significance.

They are not taught of the struggles to establish a Jewish state in the Land of Israel – merely a few decades ago. Neither at school or at home are the events and lessons of the past recounted and emphasized. Only the current situation and the potential brighter future occupy attention and discussion.

Thus, within a few short years the sacrifices, beliefs and even the facts of the immediate past are forgotten and neglected. We count forward towards the next Yom Haatzmaut but the original events that led to the first Yom Haatzmaut are only dim memories of the fading generation. The count of time is always inexorably forward and therefore it must inevitably erase the past and its story and events. Counting time passing is always a double-edged sword – anticipating the future while dimming the memory of the past.

In order to counteract this human tendency, the Lord, so to speak, in beginning the words of the revelation at Sinai introduces Himself as "I am the Lord your God Who took you forth from the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage." That was intended as a wake-up call, a jog to our collective memory.

The Lord reminds us that as we counted forward to the great day of the granting of the Torah to Israel, we were also obligated to count backwards, again so to speak, to refresh ourselves with the miraculous events of our past - of the Exodus from Egypt and the deliverance of the Jewish people at the waters of Yam Suf.

The Torah emphasizes again and again the remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt. It appears in the Kiddush of Shabat and the holidays. It is associated with every event and commandment in the Torah and in Jewish

life. It is ordained as being a constant and daily memorial as to our existence and purpose in life.

As time passes and we look towards our great future, the Torah reminds us that the wondrous events that accompany our ultimate, complete redemption are to be of the nature that they were at the time of the Exodus of Egypt. As we count forward, we are also to count back and bring to life our past so that we can safely guarantee the success of our future. This is an important facet of counting of the Omer.

Shabat shalom

Weekly Parsha :: Rabbi Berel Wein
Tazria-Metzora

We, in our current milieu and society, find it difficult to intimately relate to the facts, descriptions and rituals outlined for us in the subject matter of the parshiyot of this week. The laws and rituals of negaaim are addressed to those of past generations that were on a far different spiritual level than ours. Even the Talmud Bavli did not assign any specific volumes in its vast compendium of Torah to explain and elucidate the sections of Mishnah that do deal with these issues.

We are left with the necessity to study and attempt to understand the written word, and to receive merit for so doing even though the issues involved have no particular practical impact on our daily lives and behavior.

The rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud associated the plague of tzoraas with the speaking of slander and with evil speech generally, though we do not really know the nature of tzoraas itself. It certainly was not leprosy in our current medical understanding of that disease. So this week's parshiyot remain obscure and mysterious to us in the extreme. However this does not mean that we are to ignore or downplay their appearance in the Torah.

The Torah does not contain extraneous or unimportant material. The word of God is not to be trifled with and all of the great rabbinic Torah commentators throughout the ages have grappled with deriving meaning and moral lessons from the words of these Torah parshiyot.

Part of the ritual of purification of the metzora was his isolation and quarantine - as he was sent out of the camp of Israel completely. The Netziv - Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin - in his classic commentary to Torah, associates the metzora with the Torah scholar who is found morally wanting in his behavior, speech and attitudes towards fellow human beings.

He implies that only where holiness exists - through the study and knowledge of Torah - can the physical symptoms of impurity and spiritual degradation be felt. The Torah scholar is therefore guilty of desecrating God's name by his untoward behavior and speech and thus his punishment is measure for measure - he himself is to be excluded from the camp of Israel.

The "ordinary" Jew, so to speak, does not feel the symptoms of tzoraas for he is not as exposed to the great holiness of Torah as is the eminent Torah scholar. The implicit warning here is the danger that faces a Torah scholar who does not rise to the level of truly moral behavior. I imagine that we can all be comforted somewhat in the fact that the plague of tzoraas is not quite relevant to us currently, as we are far removed from spiritual greatness and the levels of Torah scholarship achieved by our forebearers.

However, even we ordinary Jews are bidden not to fall into the trap of desecrating God's name by our speech patterns and behavior. And that is probably the most cogent and important lesson that we can derive from the parshiyot that we will read this week.

Shabat shalom

Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Tazria - Metzora
For the week ending 13 April 2013 / 2 Iyyar 5773
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Insights

Two Signs

"And on the eighth day, the flesh of the foreskin shall be circumcised."(12:3)

The greatness of Shabbat can be seen from the fact that a boy is not given brit mila until he is eight days old, until he has experienced Shabbat. In other words, the reason that brit mila is performed on the eighth day after birth is so that he can experience Shabbat before the mila. Only by passing through the holiness of Shabbat can he reach a level where he becomes fit to enter into the holiness of the Jewish People through brit mila.

More Than Skin Deep

"And on the eighth day, the flesh of the foreskin shall be circumcised."(12:3)

The custom at a brit is to say to the parents "Just as he has been brought into the Covenant (brit), so should he be brought to Torah, marriage and good deeds." Just as he has been brought into the brit, which is now an inseparable part of him, thus also should all the other mitzvot of the Torah form an inseparable part of him.

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Peninim on the Torah by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum
Parshas Tazria-Metzora

Parshas Tazria

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

Interestingly, the opening lines of Parshas Tazria relate to the Bris Milah that is to take place on a boy's eighth day of life. This is juxtaposed upon the previous parsha, Shemini, which concludes with the words, "to distinguish between the contaminated and the pure." The exhortation makes it incumbent upon us to learn how to distinguish between things that appear to be similar, such as between purity and the contamination. Horav Yehonasan Eibeshutz, zl, explains that specifically the mitzvah of Milah distinguishes between tamei, ritually impure, and tahar, ritually pure, and between the members of the gentile nations and the people of Klal Yisrael. As much as some of our assimilated coreligionists may attempt to emulate the nations of the world, a powerful distinction remains between us and them. Prominent among these differences is the mitzvah of Milah, which physically distinguishes us in appearance, as well as establishes our spiritual distinction. Thus, the Torah under

scores the notion that our havdalah, separation, is the result of mitzvas Milah.

The Imrei Binyamin employs this idea to explain why at a Bris Milah we declare, K'sheim she'nichnas l'Bris kein yika'neis l'Torah, u'lechupah u'l'maasim tovim, "Just as he has been entered into the covenant (of Milah), so may he enter into (the study of) Torah, to chupah, marriage, and to (the performance of) good deeds." Specifically in this setting - and not at any other event celebrating a mitzvah - we make this public declaration. It is only through the performance of this mitzvah that one enters into Bris Olam, the eternal covenant, a bond that transcends time and place. No other mitzvah assures that the individual will fulfill the mitzvah throughout his entire life. Milah leaves an indelible mark on one's body - a mark that he takes with him to the grave. No other mitzvah guarantees this level of commitment, this inexorable bond.

Regrettably, we find individuals who, in later life for whatever reason, have rejected their original life of observance. They have turned their backs on the tradition in which they had been raised, the tradition for which their forebears had sacrificed their very lives. When it comes to the mitzvah of Milah, they are unable to turn back. It is the one mitzvah that once it has been performed - is here to stay for the duration of one's life. Thus, we pray that, as this mitzvah will endure forever, so, too, should the infant's commitment to Torah study, marriage and the performance of good deeds be his hallmark for life - never to be separated from them.

The Chasam Sofer focuses on the words yimol b'sar orlaso, "The flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." In Sefer Shemos, the Torah addresses

the requirement that everyone was circumcised prior to partaking of the Korban Pesach: "Every slave of a man, who was bought for money, you shall circumcise him; then he may eat of it" (Shemos 12:44). Likewise, the convert must be circumcised. "No uncircumcised male shall eat it" (Ibid. 12:48). The words b'sar orlaso, "the flesh of his foreskin," are not mentioned. Only with regard to the Jewish male does the Torah empathize that the flesh of his foreskin is to be circumcised. Why?

The Chasam Sofer derives from here that a Jew is only an aral basar, physically uncircumcised. An improvement must be made only in his physical essence. Spiritually, he is circumcised. A non-Jew, however, remains an aral lev, his heart uncircumcised. It is not merely the skin that must be "repaired"; his heart also continues to remain closed. Once he converts, he removes the innate impediments within him that preclude his ability to commit. Consequently, his acceptance into the congregation of Yisrael accompanies his lasting commitment.

A Jew is never isolated from Hashem. This inseparable bond has endured the test of time, and transcended the vicissitudes and travail to which we have been subjected throughout our tumultuous history. The Kaliver Rebbe, Shlita, writes that we must do everything within our power to bring Jews back to Hashem - to faith and Torah. This is the only guarantee of our continued existence. A moment's thought that we arouse within a Jew who has gone amiss of Torah observance can often, in due time, alter the course of all future generations. An acculturated Jew, who had been attending a class of mine for two years without exhibiting any semblance of change, recently did something that renewed my confidence in never giving up on anyone. He entered the room, reached into his coat for his white yarmulke and kissed it before putting it on! By this simple act of tendering a kiss to the yarmulke, he demonstrated a sense of reverence for kedushah, holiness. The Kaliver Rebbe relates an incident which took place following the war. Arriving in Sweden straight from Bergen Belsen, the group of Jewish survivors, which included the Rebbe, was relegated to remain in a quarantine camp until it was safe to determine whether they had any contagious diseases. One night, the survivors noticed a group of Jewish women walking, in search of lost relatives. These women were at the mercy of the Swedish government, which treated them humanely, but placed them in jeopardy by "introducing" them to the local gentiles. Having lost everything, and seeking some form of economic and emotional stability, these women were on the verge of consenting to intermarriage.

The Rebbe appealed to their good consciences not to turn their backs on their faith. He was unsuccessful in moving them. Finally, the Rebbe cried out to them, "My dear sisters! Please remember this one thing: Prior to entering the fire which would consume their bodies, your parents' last wish was that their surviving children resist temptation and not sell themselves to the devil for any benefit in the world." As he uttered these words, the women burst into tears. A few days elapsed, and the women traveled to the capital city to apply for visas to Eretz Yisrael.

As mentioned earlier, the mitzvah of Bris Milah is interwoven into the basic fiber of Judaism. It is our badge of honor, our symbol of commitment, regardless of the challenges and obstacles which we must overcome. During the Holocaust, individuals risked their lives to see to it that every Jewish child received a Bris. The Piaseczner Rebbe, zl, was the last Chassidische Rebbe in Warsaw who still functioned as a Rebbe. At constant risk to his life, he held a public tisch, festive Shabbos gathering around the tisch, table. (This was, and continues to be, a setting for chassidic Jews to gather with their Rebbe to hear Torah thoughts, receive guidance and inspiration, and sing together, rejoicing in religious camaraderie.) Around the tisch, he taught Torah and prepared everyone to give up his life for the sanctification of Hashem's Name. He spared no effort to maintain the women's mikveh, and often risked his life to circumcise every Jewish male child.

In the winter of 1943, the Piaseczner performed a Bris on a baby that was already several months old. Everyone who participated in that clandestine minyan of men was placing himself in extreme danger, since, by this time, they had to worry equally about the Ghetto regime as they did about the Nazi guards. Any Jew who was caught on the street was likely to be shot

and killed on the spot. No questions were asked, for no answers were acceptable. The child's mother, however, stood there sobbing uncontrollably. She could no longer continue seeing her son go uncircumcised. Originally, she had been too frightened to circumcise him, thinking she might leave him with a gentile family for the duration of the war. Now she understood that all she wanted was to keep the mitzvah and at least see her son circumcised and entered into the covenant - whatever the cost.

Streams of tears flowed from the eyes of all those assembled at the Bris. Their hearts were filled with pain and anguish. Prominently missing was the child's father, who had been taken away to a torture camp near Lublin. Now that his wife worried daily about her husband's fate, she no longer wanted to accept the responsibility of permitting her son to go one more day in his uncircumcised state. With her heart-rending sobs piercing the air, she poured out her plea to the Almighty, "Let my husband live. Wherever he is, allow the merit of this Bris to intercede on his behalf, that he be saved from death."

As those assembled heard the mother's bitter sobs, their own tears began to flow with greater urgency. When Rav Zushia Friedman started up a niggun, lively chassidic tune, however, they all joined in - one great song of Kiddush Hashem. Their bitter, somber mood was almost instantly transformed from mourning to joy. The death that reigned in the streets, the pall that hung over all of their lives, had no power to prevent these dedicated Jews from joyfully celebrating their Jewishness.

Upon the completion of the days of her purity for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring a sheep within its first year for an Elevation-offering, and a young dove or a turtledove for a Sin-offering. (12:6)

Upon completing her period of purification, the yoledes, woman who gave birth, brings two korbanos, offerings, because she seeks atonement for two types of sin. The Korban Olah, Elevation-offering, atones for any resentful thoughts she may have had against her husband or Hashem during the painful moments of childbirth. The Sin-offering atones for the possibility that, in her dire pain, she might have sworn never to have physical relations with her husband. The requisite of two atonements for one activity is rare. The following anecdote reinforces this idea, lending us insight into the character of one of this past century's most inspiring gedolim, Torah giants.

Fundraising is an art - and a difficult one - to master. I am not sure if anyone really enjoys it, regardless of the degree of his success. One is often subject to some form of demeaning behavior on the part of the would be benefactor. There are, of course, those unique individuals who actually enjoy giving tzedakah, charity. They are truly blessed, and so is the fundraiser who has the good fortune of soliciting them for funds. Horav Meir Shapiro, zl, was a master in so many areas. A prolific talmid chacham, Torah scholar, a brilliant speaker, and intellectual, he was the founder of not only the Daf Yomi, but also the great Yeshivah of Lublin. Unlike any other yeshivah, it catered to the best of the best, providing its students with excellent physical amenities, such as a beautiful bais ha'medrash, dormitory and real food. All of this cost money, which kept its Rosh Yeshivah quite busy, traveling the world to raise money for his beloved yeshivah.

The story goes that, on one of his trips, Rav Meir had occasion to visit a city in Eastern Europe, which was home to a very wealthy Jewish industrialist. There was one problem: This man wrote the book on tightfistedness. He lived well, but he refused to share his wealth with anyone. The Lubliner Rav visited him. The man not only refused to give him anything, he even kept him waiting before he would see him. This was tremendous zilzul b'kavod ha'rav, humiliation of the honor becoming such a distinguished Torah personage.

Rav Meir refused to ignore the man's snub. He said, "I am not a yoledes; I did not recently give birth that I require two kaparos." He turned his face to the door and was about to leave, when the man who he was soliciting blocked his exit. "You may not leave until you explain to me the meaning of your statement," the man said.

Rav Meir replied, "My intentions were simple. There are times when I visit a wealthy man and, while I do not receive my desired sum or sometimes anything at all, at least I am treated royally and given the respect that a man of my position demands. When this occurs, I say 'A kaparah, the money! The money is an atonement.' At least I received a little honor. I was not mistreated. In other instances, I meet a philanthropist who gives me a nice check, but does not assuage my ego. I then say 'A kaparah the kavod. At least I received a nice check.'

"In your case, however, I was mistreated, allowed to cool my heels for one hour in the hall, and - to add insult to injury - I received no check for all my troubles. That is why I declared that I was no yolede, because only a woman who recently gave birth brings two kaparos."

When the man heard this explanation, he realized that he was speaking to no ordinary person. He immediately wrote out a nice check to Chachmei Lublin, and he continued to do so every year for quite some time.

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

The metzora is called this because the name is an acronym for motzi ra, (he) brings forth evil (speech). In the Talmud Arachin 16b, Chazal explain why the metzora is the only one of the tameiim, individuals who are subject to ritual contamination, who is isolated from the community. He was the cause of divisiveness between man and his fellowman; thus, he should also be separated from the society which he slandered. This presents a question. The first person to speak lashon hora, slanderous speech, was Chavah, who repeated the serpent's critique of the Almighty. Exploiting a ploy favored by the usurpers of Torah to rationalize their errant behavior, the serpent said that G-d did not prohibit the Eitz Hadaas, Tree of Knowledge, out of any concern for their lives, but out of concern that, if they ate from the tree, their wisdom would expand and they would become omniscient like Him. The last thing Hashem wants is for us to become independent of Him. This ludicrous statement has

been repeated by those who are alienated from the Torah way of life. After all, the Torah's laws as conveyed by the rabbis who interpret them, are motivated by a selfish desire to centralize and solidify their power base. Chavah repeated this foolishness, which makes her a slanderer. If so, why was she not struck with tzaraas?

Horav David Chanania Pinto, Shlita, begins by explaining the metzora's punishment. In the Talmud Nedarim 64b, Chazal state that four individuals are classified halachically as being similar to a corpse: one who is poverty stricken, a metzora, a blind person, and one who has no children. Clearly, this statement requires an explanation, which is not the focus of this paper. The metzora's inclusion in this group is questionable. He really lacks nothing. Why is he considered like a dead person? He has it all. Seclusion is not the end of the world - or is it?

Rav Pinto explains that the metzora has received what we might term as a "Divine snub." Hashem says to him, "Separate yourself from everyone. I also want nothing to do with you. Whatever you possess is of no value to Me. You are a persona non grata. This teaches us that one who is nechshav k'meis, considered like a dead person, has nothing of value. Anyone who speaks lashon hora becomes distanced from Hashem. One really cannot get much worse than that.

The Midrash teaches us that, while the Jewish people in Egypt had descended to the forty-ninth level of spiritual impurity, they still maintained one z'chus, merit, for being redeemed from Egypt: They had made a pact among themselves to maintain achdus, harmony, among one another. We now understand why Hashem did not want to visit tzaraas upon Chavah. As the only female in the world, to separate her from the only other human being would have created a rift in the world. If shalom, peace, did not reign in the world, Hashem would be "compelled" to distance Himself from it. Thus, Hashem diminished her punishment from tzaraas, to niddah, menstruant, which also mandates a separation between herself and her husband - but one with which people can live, since it is only for a set period of time and not as reclusive.

This, adds Rav Pinto, is the reason for the juxtaposition of tzaraas upon ishah ki sazeria, childbirth, and the ensuing period of ritual impurity. As explained, the reason there is a tumah of niddah is that tzaraas would have been an encroachment that would undermine the future of the world. Thus, the Torah places these two tumos, forms of contamination, side by side, so that the woman will have a formidable reminder of the severity of lashon hora.

Parshas Metzora

This shall be the law of the metzora. (14:2)

Tzaraas, spiritual leprosy, is not visited upon a person in a vacuum. There is a profound reason that this Heavenly punishment just happens to show up one day on a person's body, clothing, or home. In fact, there are a number of reasons, which all have one common thread coursing between them: interpersonal relationships. The metzora is a motzi ra, brings forth slander, evil speech, arrogance - all these and much more - in their various forms. Everyone has excuses to justify their slanderous talk, whether they feel they are only telling the truth, protecting the public, calling it the way they see it. They cloak their conceit in a veil of righteousness, as they attempt to get away with their character assassination.

After all is said and done, however, we all do it, and often it is actually true! So, what is to motivate a person to keep his mouth shut? I recently came across the Leket Amarim from the tzaddik Horav Yaakov Meir Shechter, Shlita. This small sefer is a veritable treasure house of practical insight and inspiration. In one of his maamarim, Rav Yaakov Meir distinguishes between two terms that are often used in tandem, when they are actually opposite in nature: Hischazkus, to strengthen, embolden oneself; Hisorerus, to arouse, inspire oneself. When we analyze the definitions of these terms, we note that they actually work in opposition to one another.

Hisorerus, arousal, inspiration, is the force which makes demands on a person, which calls on him to present an accounting of his actions. Hisorerus tells a person like it is: "You are doing poorly! You have made many egregious mistakes; you must get your act together." Hisorerus admonishes the person to return to Hashem. If the individual possesses a brain, he will respond to his call of inspiration.

Hischazkus emboldens and encourages the individual not to give up hope. True, he "messed up," but all is not lost. We still have hope. One can always repent and once again be embraced by Hashem. These appear to be two distinct approaches in one's relationship with Hashem.

Rav Yaakov Meir explains that these approaches actually complement one another. Indeed, the greatest form of hisorerus is Hischazkus. It would be a mistake to suggest that hischazkus belittles that which is wrong or covers up sin. Absolutely not! Hischazkus reveals the sin and uncovers the errors that we all seek to hide. Embedded deep within every individual there is a burning desire to be close to his Divine Source, the Almighty. The yetzer hora, evil-inclination, inevitably worms its way in and convinces us that it is too late. We have sinned too much. Give up hope of ever returning to Hashem. Therefore, you might as well continue with your "good time." The resulting depression and hopelessness are the clinchers, such that one is left out in the cold. With time, he becomes increasingly estranged and more and more distant. The worst aspect of this estrangement is that he believes that there is no turning back!

When one hears words of Hischazkus, however, and he listens intently to their message, he realizes that there is always hope. This arouses him to do teshuvah, repentance, inspiring him to return to Hashem. The good is hidden within, beneath layers of evil. It is waiting for that special moment when it will be discovered and revealed. Rav Yaakov Meir supports this idea with the words of Chazal in Meseches Bava Metzia 85. The Talmud relates how Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi was able to return Rabbi Yosi ben Rabbi Elazar, grandson of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who had strayed from the path of observance. Asmechi, He gave him semichah, ordained him. He announced from now on "Yosi" should be referred to as Rabbi Yosi. His goal was simple: By calling him Rabbi, he would strengthen and encourage him that it was not over. He could return and be accepted. It

worked, because concealed beneath layers of evil and neglect were the middos, character traits, of a truly refined person, an individual that was righteous. This process revealed the inherent good that existed within Rabbi Yosi.

People are surprising. A fellow, who for years had presented himself as evil, suddenly acts atypically and demonstrates a covert sense of righteousness to which we had been clueless, and, under different circumstances, would never have believed. The Chafetz Chaim related the following story: The government in one of the Eastern European cities issued a decree demanding that every home in the city sport a large cross on the front door to their home. The punishment for ignoring this decree was death. There was no room for negotiation. One either had the cross, or he died. It was that simple.

Obviously, the city's Jewish citizens had a problem acquiescing to this decree. What could they do? Their lives hung in the balance. One particular Jew in the community, a pharmacist by profession, was an apostate. He had years earlier reneged his affiliation with Judaism and had continued living in the community as a gentile. In recent years, no one had seen him manifest any affinity toward the religion of his parents. It was, thus, shocking to hear that, of all people, this renegade Jew refused to have a cross on his door. "I am a Jew and Jews do not have crosses," he said. His response shocked everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike. Indeed, his gentile maid begged him to hang a cross on his door. He ignored her plea and waited patiently for the police to come and arrest him. Come what may be - he was prepared for the worst. His fears were sadly realized, as he was mekadash Shem Shomayim, publicly sanctified Hashem's Name. From where did he derive the fortitude to make this move?

His entire adult life was spent running from Judaism, eschewing religious observance, and, now, in a moment of lucidity he transformed himself into a kadosh, holy person! How did it happen?

We all have it within us. Some have concealed it better, while others are fortunate to have the good near the "top." One should never give up hope. Just keep on "digging." The good will eventually materialize.

And for the person being purified there shall be taken two live, clean birds, cedar wood, crimson thread and hyssop. (14:4)

The erstwhile sinner must purge himself of the character flaw that led to his sinful behavior. One who slanders, who speaks ill of others, thinks that he is better, smarter, stronger, etc. than they are, can blame his haughtiness. Arrogance breeds contempt for those whom one considers to be beneath him. Thus, the metzora's process of purification, which entails repentance to atone for his misdeeds, must address the moral turpitude which brought him here in the first place. The cedar tree, which grows tall above other forms of vegetation, symbolizes haughtiness. The crimson thread is prepared with a dye from a pigment extracted from a lowly creature. The hyssop is a lowly bush. These two symbolize the opposite of arrogance: humility - a character trait that the metzora must now acquire.

We find these three articles also used in connection with the Parah Adumah, Red Heifer. They are thrown into the pyre of the burning cow. There is a distinction, however, between the two processes in the manner in which these symbolic ingredients are recorded in the Torah. Concerning the purification of the metzora, the Torah first lists cedar wood, followed by crimson thread and hyssop. In listing the ingredients to be thrown into the burning cow, the Torah lists cedar wood first, followed by the hyssop, with the crimson wool last. Why the change? Also, concerning the metzora, why does the Torah not list the ingredients according to the sequence of their height, with the hyssop preceding the crimson thread? The bush may be low, but it does grow a few inches off the ground. The worm, snail, or whatever creature supplies the red dye crawls along the ground. Sequentially, it should be last.

Horav Chaim Kanievsky, Shlita, resolves this anomaly with a principle quoted from the Rambam Hilchos Deios 2:2. In order to succeed in correcting a middah raah, deficient/faulty character trait, one must go to the opposite extreme and then work his way back to the center. Likewise, the metzora has fallen prey to the sins associated with haughtiness. He has

arrogated himself above others, much like the tall and imposing cedar tree. He must now revert to the extreme antithesis and lower himself to the stature of the worm. Then, he can slowly return to center court and be like the hyssop. In the case of the Parah Adumah, however, the Torah lists the ingredients sequentially, according to their height and significance.

Va'ani Tefillah

Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad.

Hear O' Yisrael Hashem is Our G-d. Hashem is One.

The quintessential seminal verse of Judaism is: Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad. The actual verse is the last four words. Shema Yisrael is a declaration, an announcement which affirms our faith in Hashem and proclaims His Unity. Emunah, faith in Hashem, is a personal thing. It is an emotion connected to the heart. Why is it necessary to call out to Yisrael to listen? One should simply express his personal emunah with Ani Maamin, "I believe that Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One."

Horav Leib Chasman, zl, explains that a Jew's obligation extends far beyond his personal faith. It is a Jew's responsibility to "sing Hashem's praises" to all Jews. He must strive to let it be known to all of his brothers and sisters that Hashem is Our G-d. Shema Yisrael! I want all of you to hear! Judaism does not belong to one individual or one group. It belongs to all of us; thus, it is our collective responsibility to see to it that the clarion call of Shema Yisrael reaches everywhere and penetrates everyone's heart.

The Mashgiach emphasizes this idea further by admonishing those who, upon establishing organizations and institutions for the purpose of disseminating Torah and for the spiritual betterment of Klal Yisrael, refuse to include anyone who either does not exactly conform to his myopic perception of Torah and mitzvos or does not fit into his selective clique. In such instances, it is not about Torah, but rather, it is about them. These organizations and establishments are nothing more than the products of overactive egos. Shema Yisrael teaches us to be inclusive - not restrictive.

Sponsored in loving memory of Beate Frank a"h Baila bas Eliezer a"h

By her husband, Walter Frank, and her children and grandchildren, Birdie and Lenny Frank and Family

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Rabbi Weinreb's Parsha Column, Tazria-Metzora

Sponsored in memory of Nathan and Louise Schwartz a"h

"Going At It Alone"

"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 tzora'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.

I read an article some years ago in *The American Scholar* (Spring 2010) 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.

**Orthodox Union / www.ou.org
Britain's Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks**

Holiness and Childbirth

The sidrot of Tazria and Metsorah contain laws which are among the most difficult to understand. They are about conditions of "impurity" arising from the fact that we are physical beings, embodied souls, and hence exposed to (in Hamlet's words) "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." Though we have immortal longings, mortality is the condition of human existence, as it is of all embodied life. As Rambam explains (*Guide for the Perplexed*, III: 12)

We have already shown that, in accordance with the divine wisdom, genesis can only take place through destruction, and without the destruction of the individual members of the species, the species themselves would not exist permanently . . . He who thinks that he can have flesh and bones without being subject to any external influence, or any of the accidents of matter, unconsciously wishes to reconcile two opposites, namely, to be at the same time subject and not subject to change.

Throughout history there have been two distinct and opposing ways of relating to this fact: hedonism (living for physical pleasure) and asceticism (relinquishing physical pleasure). The former worships the physical while denying the spiritual, the latter enthrones the spiritual at the cost of the physical.

The Jewish way has always been different: to sanctify the physical – eating, drinking, sex and rest – making the life of the body a vehicle for the divine presence. The reason is simple. We believe with perfect faith that the G-d of redemption is also the G-d of creation. The physical world we inhabit is the one G-d made and pronounced "very good." To be a hedonist is to deny G-d. To be an ascetic is to deny the goodness of G-d's world. To be a Jew is to celebrate both creation and Creator. That is the principle that explains many otherwise incomprehensible features of Jewish life.

The laws with which the sedra begins are striking examples of this:

When a woman conceives and gives birth to a boy, she shall be *teme'ah* for seven days, just as she is during the time of separation when she has her period . . . Then, for thirty-three additional days she shall have a waiting period during which her blood is ritually clean. Until this purification period is complete, she shall not touch anything holy and shall not enter the sanctuary.

If she gives birth to a girl, she shall have for two weeks the same *teme'ah* status as during her menstrual period. Then, for sixty-six days after that, she shall have a waiting period during which her blood is ritually clean.

She then brings a burnt-offering and a sin-offering, after which she is restored to "ritual purity." What is the meaning of these laws? Why does childbirth render the mother *teme'ah* (usually translated as "ritually impure", better understood as "a condition which impedes or exempts from a direct encounter with holiness")? And why is the period after giving birth to a girl twice that for a boy? There is a temptation to see these laws as inherently beyond the reach of human understanding. Several rabbinic statements seem to say just this. In fact, it is not so, as Maimonides explains at length in the *Guide*. To be sure, we can never know – specifically with respect to laws that have to do with *kedushah* (holiness) and *teharah* (purity) – whether our understanding is correct. But we are not thereby forced to abandon our search for understanding, even though any explanation will be at best speculative and tentative.

The first principle essential to understanding the laws of ritual purity and impurity is that G-d is life. Judaism is a profound rejection of cults, ancient and modern, that glorify death. The great pyramids of Egypt were grandiose tombs. Arthur Koestler noted that without death "the cathedrals collapse, the pyramids vanish into the sand, the great organs become silent." The English metaphysical poets turned to it constantly as a theme. As T. S. Eliot wrote:

Webster was much possessed by death
And saw the skull beneath the skin . . .
Donne, I suppose, was such another . . .
He knew the anguish of the marrow
The ague of the skeleton . . .

Freud coined the word *thanatos* to describe the death-directed character of human life.

Judaism is a protest against death-centred cultures. "It is not the dead who praise the Lord, nor those who go down into silence" (Psalm 114) "What profit is there in my death, if I go down into the pit? Can the dust acknowledge You? Can it proclaim your truth?" (Psalm 30). As we open a sefer Torah we say: "All of you who hold fast to the Lord your G-d are alive today" (Deut 4:4). The Torah is a tree of life. G-d is the G-d of life. As Moses put it in two memorable words: "Choose life" (Deut. 30: 19).

It follows that *kedushah* (holiness) – a point in time or space where we stand in the unmediated presence of G-d – involves a supreme consciousness of life. That is why the paradigm case of *tumah* is contact with a corpse. Other cases of *tumah* include diseases or bodily emissions that remind us of our mortality. G-d's domain is life. Therefore it may not be associated in any way with intimations of death. This is how Judah Halevi explains the purity laws in his work *The Kuzari*:

A dead body represents the highest degree of loss of life, and a leprous limb is as if it were dead. It is the same with the loss of seed, because it had been endowed with living power, capable of engendering a human being. Its loss therefore forms a contrast to the living and breathing. (Kuzari, II: 60)

The laws of purity apply exclusively to Israel, argues Halevi, precisely because Judaism is the supreme religion of life, and its adherents are therefore hyper-sensitive to even the most subtle distinctions between life and death.

A second principle, equally striking, is the acute sensitivity Judaism shows to the birth of a child. Nothing is more "natural" than procreation. Every living thing engages in it. Sociobiologists go so far as to argue that a human being is a gene's way of creating another gene. By contrast, the Torah goes to great lengths to describe how many of the heroines of the Bible – among them Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah and the Shunamite woman – were infertile and had children only through a miracle.

Clearly the Torah intends a message here, and it is unmistakable. To be a Jew is to know that survival is not a matter of biology alone. What other cultures may take as natural is for us a miracle. Every Jewish child is a gift of G-d. No faith has taken children more seriously or devoted more of its efforts to raising the next generation. Childbirth is wondrous. To be a parent is the closest any of us come to G-d himself. That, incidentally, is why women are closer to G-d than men, because they, unlike men, know what it is to bring new life out of themselves, as G-d brings life out of himself. The idea is beautifully captured in the verse in which, leaving Eden, Adam turns to his wife and calls her Chavah "for she is the mother of all life."

We can now speculate about the laws relating to childbirth. When a mother gives birth, not only does she undergo great risk (until recently, childbirth was a life-threatening danger to mother and baby alike). She is also separated from what until now had been part of her own body (a foetus, said the rabbis, "is like a limb of the mother") and which has now become an independent person. If that is so in the case of a boy, it is doubly so in the case of a girl – who, with G-d's help, will not merely live but may herself in later years become a source of new life. At one level, therefore, the laws signal the detachment of life from life.

At another level, they surely suggest something more profound. There is a halakhic principle: "One who is engaged in a mitzvah is exempt from other mitzvot." It is as if G-d were saying to the mother: for forty days in the case of a boy, and doubly so in the case of a girl (the mother-daughter bond is ontologically stronger than that between mother and son), I exempt you from coming before Me in the place of holiness because you are fully engaged in one of the holiest acts of all, nurturing and caring for your child. Unlike others you do not need to visit the Temple to be attached to life in all its sacred splendour. You are experiencing it yourself, directly and with every fibre of your being. Days, weeks, from now you will come and give thanks before Me (together with offerings for having come through a moment of danger). But for now, look upon your child with wonder. For you have been given a glimpse of the great secret, otherwise known only to G-d. Childbirth exempts the new mother from attendance at the Temple because her bedside replicates the experience of the Temple. She now knows what it is for love to beget life and in the midst of mortality to be touched by an intimation of immortality.

To read more writings and teachings from the Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, please visit www.chief Rabbi.org.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Tazria-Metzorah

A Blind Kohen Can't Rule On Negaim Even Though A Kohen Shoteh Can

The majority of this week's parsha deals with the laws of Tzoraas (commonly translated as leprosy, which in truth it is not). In several places, the Talmud says that Tzoraas comes as a punishment for a variety of sins. The most commonly quoted exposition is that Tzoraas comes as a result of lashon hara [gossip/slander]. Chazal utilize a linguistic exegesis of the

word Metzorah [leper] to teach this idea. They indicate that Metzorah is a contraction of the words motzi rah [he spews forth evil].

The Torah teaches: "If a person will have on the skin of his flesh a se'is or a sapachas, or a baheres, and it will become a Tzoraas affliction on the skin of his flesh; HE SHALL BE BROUGHT TO AARON THE KOHEN, OR TO ONE OF HIS SONS THE KOHANIM. [Vayikra 13:2]. Rashi states: "It is a decree of Scripture that there is neither impurity of affliction of Tzoraas nor their purification except by word of a Kohen." In other words, even if the Kohen is not an expert in these laws, and even if he does not know what he is talking about (the laws of Tzoraas are indeed complicated and complex), if the Kohen is told by a scholar what to say and he parrots the words of the Talmid Chochom, the blemish is pronounced tahor [pure] or tamei [impure] based on the proclamation of the Kohen, not on the proclamation of the Talmid Chochom who is not a Kohen.

The Rambam elaborates on this principle in Hilchos Tumas Tzoraas Chapter 9 Halacha 2: "Even though anyone is fit to inspect blemishes, purity and impurity (tumah and tahara) depends on the Kohen. How so? A Kohen who does not know what to look for has a scholar inspect (the blemish) and has the scholar instruct him 'Say it is impure' and the Kohen says 'impure'; or the scholar instructs 'Say it is pure' and the Kohen says 'pure'; or the scholar instructs 'Put him in a suspended state for another week' and the Kohen puts him in a state of suspension (masgeero) as it is written 'based on their mouths shall be every fight and every blemish' [Devarim 21:5]. And even if the Kohen is a minor (katan) or an imbecile (shoteh), the scholar instructs him and he decides whether the person is definitely impure, pure, or suspended further..."

Based on this Rambam, the Minchas Chinuch speculates whether or not the proclamation (based on direction of a scholar) of a blind Kohen regarding a nega would be effective. The Minchas Chinuch discusses the possibility. However, it is implicit in the Meiri and also from Rashi and Tosfos in Sanhedrin 34 as well, that a blind Kohen CANNOT rule on the status of Tzoraas, even if so directed by a Talmid Chochom. This is learned out from the expression [Vayikra 13:12] "I'chol mar'eh einei haKohen" (wherever the eyes of the Kohen can see). Rashi on this pasuk quotes the Toras Kohanim, Negaim, perek 4:4: "To the exclusion of a Kohen whose power of vision is impaired." Under normal circumstances, it would be obvious to us that a blind Kohen cannot rule on such matters of visual determination. However, in light of the earlier cited Rambam that even a minor or mentally deficient Kohen can rule based on the guidance of a scholar, the exclusion of a blind Kohen is somewhat of a novelty.

What in fact is the difference between a katan and shoteh on the one hand and a blind Kohen (sumah) on the other? Why must the Kohen see the blemish with his own eyes? I saw an interesting answer to this question from the Tolner Rebbe. In the Talmud [Sanhedrin 104b], Rava asks in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Why does the letter "Peh" precede the letter "Ayin" in the third and fifth chapters of Eichah (in which the pasukim are otherwise arranged in perfect alphabetical sequence)? Rava answers that this sequence commemorates the Spies who spoke with their mouths (Peh) that which they did not see with their eyes (Ayin). In other words, they spoke subjectively without basis in what they had actually witnessed.

This teaching is an insight into Lashon Harah in general. Many times, Lashon Harah is a crime of saying something that one has not seen. Typically, with this kind of gossip, a person sees something and then jumps to a conclusion and speaks, not about what he has seen but what he surmises based on what he has seen. Lashon Harah is a crime of letting one's mouth (Peh) jump ahead of what his eye (Ayin) has seen.

Halevai, we should be able to eliminate all of our gossip. But if we at least accepted upon ourselves to cut back on speaking those things which we have never seen, that would be great progress in our efforts towards Shmiras haLashon [Guarding one's tongue]. Homiletically, the Tolner Rebbe uses this idea to explain why a Kohen Shoteh can rule on the status of Negaim, but a blind Kohen cannot. We want to send a message that "You have to see it!" If you do not see it, you cannot say "tameh". A Kohen Shoteh does not have much intelligence, but at least he saw it. That gives him the license to talk about it. A blind Kohen, who does not see the

Negah (like most people who speak lashon harah without having seen what they are speaking about), has no license to speak.

Transcribed by David Twersky Seattle, WA; Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman, Baltimore, MD
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Tazria-Metzora: A Society Without Gossip

By Shmuel Rabinowitz

April 11, 2013 Thursday 1 Iyyar 5773 16:36 IST

A person's healthy spirit influences and benefits his body, while a person in a depressed emotional state has poorer chances of recovery.

The leprosy disease which appears in our parasha may slightly mislead the reader.

Many of the biblical scholars who looked at this parasha from the perspective of the world of terminology in which they lived understood that the Torah is proposing a way of dealing with a contagious disease (such as Hansen's disease) by isolating the afflicted and making sure he is not near other people so they do not catch his illness.

However, preeminent commentators concluded from perusing the Jewish laws pertaining to leprosy that this interpretation is not possible. Without getting into their evidence, we will note that Halacha states that a man who was discovered to have leprosy during the mass pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the Jewish holidays had his quarantine postponed until after the holidays, despite the fact that in those days many people crowding into Jerusalem could have caught the illness. Another Halacha, which limits the laws of leprosy to Jews only, versus a person who is not part of the Jewish nation and is not sent to isolation even if he shows signs of leprosy, shows that we must not be discussing a contagious disease as we know it.

What, therefore, is this biblical leprosy, and what is the meaning behind the manner of dealing with it that the Torah proposes – by isolating the leper for a week or two? Currently, there is much research being done on the interplay between the soul of a person and his body. For example, the use of medical clowns has been more and more common lately in the process of recovery from serious illnesses.

This is because a person's healthy spirit influences and benefits his body, while a person in a depressed emotional state has poorer chances of recovery.

Biblical leprosy refers to an extreme case of a person lacking in interpersonal relationships, which causes the appearance of the skin disease and the special way of dealing with it.

The disease of leprosy, the Torah teaches us, appears in direct connection with the sin of lashon hara. As opposed to what many think, slander is not necessarily a false rumor spread about a specific person. Even if a true and founded rumor is included in the slander, it is forbidden to be said if it is not for a beneficial purpose.

So the question here is: Why? If a person indeed behaved inappropriately, why not say so? Since it is the truth! A wellknown story is brought in the Talmud of a man who came before one of the great sages, Hillel, with an odd request: "I am interested in joining the Jewish nation and converting.

But I will do so on condition that you, Hillel, teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one leg." No less! Hillel did not respond that this was impossible since Torah was a wide subject requiring many years of study. He agreed to the condition and told him a short statement that epitomizes the moral approach of the Torah, "That which you hate – do not do to your friend." This is the central principle of the Torah as defined by Hillel.

Based on this basic statement, we can understand the reason why it is forbidden to say lashon hara even when the story is true. Every person has occasions when he behaves in a way which does not fit with the moral principles he believes in. Sometimes one fails in telling the truth, another fails in another sin, and there could be someone who behaves inappropriately to his family. And here, everyone should stop and think: Would I want people to know about my behavior? Would I want it to

become public knowledge that I occasionally fail? Obviously, the answer would be no.

And is it appropriate for me to do to another what I am so not interested in having done to me?! A proper society is one in which people are not busy judging each other, but are looking into themselves in an attempt to improve their own morals.

Dealing in gossip is cheap. It destroys the person when he is busy with the sins of others instead of with attempts to fix himself. Society then loses the reliability and solidarity so necessary for the creation of a good society in which it is pleasant to live.

The biblical leper is a person whose main occupation is judging others and speaking of their drawbacks. Such a person whose soul is so damaged causes his body to break out in the "leprosy" that comes as a result of the interplay between body and soul. This disease appears as a result of his internal illness and is evidence of the moral and spiritual corruption of a man who has nothing in his life other than dealing in gossip and slander, and therefore his body gets sick.

The Torah deals with it exactly on this plane – isolation.

The man who has leprosy appear on his body is sent to isolation of a week or two. During this time, when he misses the human society to which he is accustomed, he has the opportunity to look at the spiritual needs of a man in a proper society. During these days, he will learn how a man feels when society has turned its back on him and he is socially isolated as a result of stories of slander publicized about him.

After this short isolation, the leper returns to society full of moral insights, and will join the effort to build a proper and healthy society in which gossip is not accepted as a legitimate phenomenon, and every person in society is busy in improving his own moral state and not in snooping through the sins of his friends.

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Silence can Resonate More than Speech

Rabbi Dr. Eliyahu Safran

.israelnationalnews Iyar 1, 5773, 11/04/13 11:09

We speak, therefore we exist.

When a newly elected member of Parliament approached the esteemed British Prime Minister Disraeli for advice, Disraeli was only too happy to share some profound wisdom and insight. "For the first six months," Disraeli counseled, "you should only listen and not become involved in debate."

The man was perplexed. "But my colleagues will wonder why I do not speak!" the man sputtered in protest. Disraeli considered the man for only a moment more before responding, "better they should wonder why you do not, than why you do."

How true were Disraeli's words! How often our silence resonates more profoundly than our words! In music, it is the balance of notes and rests which create the melody. A song of unrelenting notes is often little more than noise. So too, a man of only words and not silences is little more than empty wind.

Yet, if all we are is rests and silences, we are without substance. For, while it is true that all creatures communicate, it is our ability to speak which distinguishes us and raises us above all other forms of creation. Without speech, only the most basic needs can be communicated. With speech, we can create and glory in art, in poetry, in worship and prayer. Speech is that which epitomizes the Divine gift inherent in each of us.

"... And He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life..."

The Targum translates, l'ruach memamela, "to a communicative, speaking being." That is, our ability to communicate through speech best characterizes the living soul within us. Our bodies, as Yishayahu the prophet exclaimed, are mere physical entities. "All flesh is grass...The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our G-d shall stand

forever." We, like grass, wither. But our words, the power of our speech stand forever.

Speech is power. And with power comes danger. It should come as no surprise then that of all possible human transgressions, the one punishable with tz'aras is the sin of lashon ha'rah – evil speech.

Resh Lakish does not mince words. Referring to the law of metzora he says, "This shall be the law of he who spreads evil talk" (mozi shem ra) One who is guilty of lashon ha'ra forfeits the mantle of spirituality from his being. What is he left with? Just his afflicted and "diseased" physical existence.

A medical doctor can treat leprosy, but only a kohen brings to bear gifts that can realign and rebalance the physical and spiritual aspects of man. The Mishna in Negaim teaches that the ultimate cure for the metzora comes about through the verbal pronouncement of tahor uttered by the kohen. Just as the spiritual imbalance was the result of evil talk, its cure can only be realized through the "pure" talk. As the prophet Malachi declared, "For the kohen's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek Torah at his mouth."

The cure required for the evil talker brings back into alignment the physical and spiritual natures of man. The Torah demands that the leper offer "two living clean birds" for his purification to repent for his idle chatter, "for birds continually chatter and chirp." He must bring cedar wood because the cedar is symbolic of haughtiness and pride, both manifest in his idle and meaningless talk. He must immerse himself in running water. As the Sefer HaChinuch elaborates, "The immersion in water symbolizes that the unclean person is recreated at that moment, just as the world consisted wholly of water at creation, before man came into the world. The renewal effected on his body will prompt him to a reappraisal of his own conduct."

To use the gift of speech for evil is a terrible transgression. To use it for good is a great blessing. Our noblest expression of spirituality is found in our daily need to pray. To pray wholly is to transcend the physical self; to climb above the work of our hands and to surpass the product of our minds. Prayer is "an act of self purification, quarantine for the soul. It gives us the opportunity to be honest, to say what we believe, and to stand for what we say."

"The acceptance of the spirit is prayer."

Our prayer is made possible by our ability to speak. Yet, even in prayer, the blessing and danger of speech is evident. As we enter into prayer, we cry to G-d, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise."

We are raised by our prayer. Made more whole. And yet, even after we have uttered our prayer we must guard against the possibility that our words were false, self-serving, and insincere. And so we conclude every prayer with a simple request, "Guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile."

Would that those words were forever in our hearts and at our lips!

If they cannot be, better that we choose silence. For our silence will serve our better angels more than any words we might speak.

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Rav Kook List

Rav Kook on the Torah Portion

Metzora: The Power of Speech

Only in Israel

What is the root cause for the disease of tzara'at as described in the Torah? The Midrash explains that this skin disease is a punishment for gossip and slander. A person suffering from tzara'at is called a metzora because he is "motzee shem ra" - he spreads derogatory reports (Vayikra Rabbah 16:1.

See Rambam, Hilchot Tzara'at 16:15, that one fulfills the mitzvah "Be careful regarding tzara'at" (Deut. 24:8-9) by avoiding gossip).

Given that tzara'at is brought about by slander, one would expect that all peoples would be afflicted, since even non-Jews are culpable for personal damages. Yet, Maimonides wrote that tzara'at is not a natural phenomenon, but a unique sign found only among the people of Israel. Why should only the Jewish people suffer from this ailment?

Divine Speech

There are two types of speech. There is everyday speech, based on and limited to that which occurs in the physical universe. And there is a higher form of speech, a holy speech that God bestowed upon Israel. This elevated speech does not originate from the physical world. On the contrary, the world originates from it. This is the speech through which God created the world. "Through the word of God, the heavens were made; and through the breath of His mouth, all of their hosts" (Ps. 33:6).

God granted us the power of His speech, the speech that preceded the world, when He gave us the Torah, the blueprint of creation. 'He looked in the Torah and created the universe' (Zohar Terumah 161b). The transmission of Divine speech to the Jewish people is alluded to in the verse: "I put my speech in your mouth... to plant the heavens and lay the foundations of the earth" (Isaiah 51:16).

Redemption of Speech

The Kabbalists explained that the Hebrew name for Passover, Pesach, is a combination of the words peh sach - "the mouth speaks." The redemption from Egypt, which paved the way for the Torah's revelation at Sinai, also redeemed the faculty of speech. For this reason, Passover is commemorated with a mitzvah of speech, the mitzvah to retell the story of the Exodus. And we find that Moses, aware of this aspect of the redemption from Egypt, tried to disqualify himself by protesting, "I am not a man of speech" (Ex. 4:10).

In an essay entitled "The Redemption of Speech," Rav Kook wrote:

"Sometimes we can sense the connection between our speech and the universe. This is the initial step to redeem speech from its exile."

"As the soul is elevated, we become acutely aware of the tremendous power that lies in our faculty of speech. We recognize clearly the tremendous significance of each utterance; the value of our prayers and blessings, the value of our Torah study and of all of our discourse. We learn to perceive the overall impact of speech. We sense the change and great stirring of the world that comes about through speech." (Orot HaKodesh vol. III, p. 285)

Two Mouths

The most striking expression of the difference between these two levels of speech is the remarkable statement of Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai:

"Had I been present at Mount Sinai, I would have requested that God create us with two mouths: one mouth to speak in words of Torah, and one mouth for all of our worldly needs." (Jerusalem Talmud, Berachot 1:2)

We may lack a mouth dedicated exclusively to Torah and prayer, but we can still deepen our awareness of the extraordinary nature of holy speech. At the start of the morning prayers, we recite a wonderful formula as we prepare our kavanah (mental state): "I hereby ready my mouth to thank and praise my Creator." With this short declaration, we ready ourselves to employ our mouth for a totally different form of speech. We prepare ourselves to employ the sublime speech that is rooted in the source of Divine wisdom. Since this discourse comes from the elevated speech which was used to create the universe, our prayers have the ability to influence the world and change its course (Olat Re'iyah vol. I, p. 192).

With this appreciation for the power of holy speech, we may understand why tzara'at only afflicts the Jewish people. Our faculty of elevated speech, based on the Divine speech which transcends the universe, can influence the world for good and for bad. When we misuse this great power, we damage the world and are held responsible. The affliction of tzara'at, and

the process of purifying oneself from it, comes to repair this wrong. The verbal communication of other nations, however, comes from the realm of the physical universe. Since it lacks the power of elevated speech, they are not punished for its misuse.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Mo'adei HaRe'iyah, pp. 295-296.)
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Weekly Halacha by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Ha-mapil

Question: How strict need one be about talking, eating or drinking after reciting the berachah of Ha-mapil prior to retiring for the night?

Discussion: L'chatchilah, Ha-mapil is recited 1 right before falling asleep. Indeed, according to one opinion, one may recite Ha-mapil only in the last few moments before falling asleep, when his eyelids are fluttering and he can barely remain awake.² Although we do not rule in accordance with this view,³ we still attempt to recite Ha-mapil at the last possible moment before getting into bed or before falling asleep.⁴ Accordingly, one is encouraged to prepare himself for sleep in such a way as to eliminate any interruptions between Ha-mapil and falling asleep.

But this cannot always be arranged: Some people toss and turn for a while before finally falling asleep; others can only fall asleep after reading or learning for a while in bed; some parents know that no sooner than they have recited Ha-mapil, a child will require attention. Should these people omit Ha-mapil from their nightly Kerias Shema al ha-mitah?

Some poskim suggest that they should. They explain that Ha-mapil is similar to she'hakol or borei peri ha-eitz, which must be recited right before drinking or eating with no interruption allowed. One who recites a she'hakol or borei peri ha-eitz and does not immediately eat or drink has recited a berachah levatalah. In our case, too, one who interrupts between Ha-mapil and falling asleep is reciting a berachah levatalah.⁵ It follows, therefore, that one who knows or suspects that he will have difficulty in falling asleep should omit Ha-mapil.⁶

The vast majority of poskim, however, disagree.⁷ Ha-mapil, they explain, is not a berachah for an individual's personal sleep; rather, it is a general blessing of praise to Hashem for giving His creations the opportunity to refresh and rejuvenate themselves through sleep and rest. It is a berachah similar to Elokai neshamah and the other morning birchos ha-shachar, which are general berachos of praise to Hashem. Accordingly, while Ha-mapil is recited near the time when one is ready to retire for the night, there is no concern of berachah levatalah if sleep did not immediately follow the recitation of the berachah. Even l'chatchilah, therefore, one could recite Ha-mapil although he is well aware that he will be forced to make an interruption after reciting the berachah.

What is the practical halachah? In deference to the minority opinion, l'chatchilah one should plan that no interruption will take place after reciting Ha-mapil. All eating, drinking, talking or any other activity should take place prior to reciting the blessing.⁸ But when this is difficult to do, or b'diavad if one recited Ha-mapil and now needs to eat, drink, answer an important telephone call or do any other necessary activity, he may do so and he need not be concerned about reciting a berachah levatalah.

Similarly, if after reciting Ha-mapil one realized that he forgot to daven Ma'ariv (or repeat the evening Kerias Shema at the proper time), recite a berachah acharonah, count Sefiras ha-omer, or recite Kiddush levanah (on the last possible night), he must recite whatever tefillah or berachah he missed and he need not be concerned that he already recited Ha-mapil.

Based on the above, the poskim infer the following: One who needs to use the bathroom after Ha-mapil recites Asher yatzar; if he sees lightning or hears thunder, the appropriate berachos are recited; if, for some reason, one needs to recite Ha-mapil in a location other than his

sleeping quarters, it is permitted to do so, as we are not concerned about the laws of shinui makom (change of location) in regards to Ha-mapil.⁹

It follows, therefore, that there is no excuse to skip Ha-mapil before retiring for the night. Omitting Ha-mapil because one fears being interrupted between making the berachah and falling asleep is not justified.¹⁰

Question: Under what circumstance would Ha-mapil not be recited?

Discussion: Ha-mapil would not be recited under the following circumstances:

* When taking a nighttime catnap.¹¹

* When sleeping during the day.¹²

* When going to sleep before tzeis ha-kochavim, even if one is planning to sleep all night.¹³

* When going to sleep in the early morning, if one will not fall asleep until after alos ha-shachar.¹⁴

* According to some Kabbalistic sources, one should omit Ha-mapil if he goes to sleep past chatzos. In addition, Ha-mapil is not recited on Friday nights, during the nights of Sefiras ha-omer and during Aseres yemi teshuvah. Other Kabbalistic sources dispute these omissions and require that Ha-mapil be recited at all times.¹⁵

1 The poskim are in agreement that men and women are equally obligated to recite Ha-mapil (Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 239:16) and that it has become universally accepted for both men and women to do so (Aruch ha-Shulchan 239:6; Halichos Shelomo 1:13, Devar Halachah 22).

2 Mishnah Berurah 239:3, quoting Seder ha-Yom.

3 Mishnah Berurah 239:3, quoting Knesses ha-Gedolah and other poskim.

4 While it is permitted to recite Ha-mapil and Kerias Shema al ha-mitah either standing, sitting or lying in bed, it is recommended that Kerias Shema be said standing or sitting, and Ha-mapil be recited once one is lying in bed and ready to fall asleep; see Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 71:4; Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 239:10; Aruch ha-Shulchan 239:6.

5 Mishnah Berurah 239:4 and Beur Halachah, s.v. samuch, seems to endorse this view.

6 See Ben Ish Chai, Pekudei 12 and Teshuvos v'Hanhagos 2:131.

7 See Beur Halachah 239:1, s.v. samuch, quoting Eliyahu Rabba and Chayei Adam; Aruch ha-Shulchan 239:6; and many poskim quoted in Tzitz Eliezer 7:27-3 and Yechaveh Da'as 4:21.

8 In addition, Rama 239:1 writes that no eating, drinking or talking should take place after Kerias Shema al ha-mitah, even before reciting Ha-mapil.

9 Halichos Shelomo 1:13-15; Tzitz Eliezer 7:27-3. Similarly, one may respond to a parent's question after reciting Ha-mapil; Mora Horim v'Kibudam, quoting Harav B.Z. Abba Shaul.

10 Even an onen (the term given to a mourner during the period of time between the death of a close relative and his burial), who is exempt from all prayers and blessings, is obligated to recite Kerias Shema al ha-mitah and Ha-mapil; Minchas Shelomo 1:91-25.

11 Teshuvos Keren l'David, O.C. 60.

12 Mishnah Berurah 239:8.

13 B'tzeil ha-Chochmah 5:166.

14 See Beur Halachah 239:1, s.v. samuch.

15 See Sha'arei Teshuvah 239:1, Kaf ha-Chayim 239:8 and Yechaveh Da'as 4:21.

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The Basics of Birchas Hagomeil By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Among the many topics covered in this week's reading are the mitzvos of the woman who just gave birth. This provides an opportunity to discuss:

Question #1: An offering or a blessing?

“The Torah describes bringing a korban todah as a thanksgiving offering. How does that relate to the brocha of birchas hagomeil? Did someone recite birchas hagomeil while offering the korban?”

Question #2: Blessing at home?

“May I recite birchas hagomeil if I will not be able to get to shul for kri’as haTorah?”

Question #3: Exactly ten?

“Our minyan has exactly ten people today. May someone recite birchas hagomeil?”

Answer:

There are two mitzvos related to thanking Hashem for deliverance from perilous circumstances. In Parshas Tzav, the Torah describes an offering brought in the Mishkan, or the Beis Hamikdash, called the korban todah.

There is also a brocha, called birchas hagomeil, which is recited when someone has been saved from a dangerous situation. The Rosh (Brachos 9:3) and the Tur (Orach Chayim 219) explain that this brocha was instituted as a replacement for the korban todah that we can no longer bring, since, unfortunately, our Beis Hamikdash lies in ruin. Thus, understanding the circumstances and the laws of the korban todah and of birchas hagomeil is really one combined topic. This article will discuss some of the basic laws of birchas hagomeil.

Tehillim on Salvation

The Gemara derives many of the laws of birchas hagomeil from a chapter of Tehillim, Psalm 107. There, Dovid Hamelech describes four different types of treacherous predicaments in which a person would pray to Hashem for salvation. Several times, the Psalm repeats the following passage, Vayitzaku el Hashem batzar lahem, mimetzukoseihem yatzileim, “when they were in distress, they cried out to Hashem asking Him to deliver them from their straits.” Hashem hears the supplicants' prayers and redeems them from calamity, whereupon they recognize Hashem's role and sing shira to acknowledge Hashem's deliverance. The passage reflecting this thanks, Yodu lashem chasdo venifle'osav livnei adam, “they acknowledge thanks to Hashem for His kindness and His wondrous deeds for mankind,” is recited four times in the Psalm, each time expressing the emotions of someone desiring to tell others of his appreciation. The four types of salvation mentioned in the verse are for: someone who successfully traversed a wilderness, a captive who was freed, a person who recovered from illness, and a seafarer who returned safely to land.

Based on this chapter of Tehillim, the Gemara declares, arba'ah tzerichim lehodos: yordei hayam, holchei midbaros, umi shehayah choleh venisra'pe, umi shehayah chavush beveis ha'asurim veyatza, “four people are required to recite birchas hagomeil: those who traveled by sea, those who journeyed through the desert, someone who was ill and recovered and someone who was captured and gained release” (Brachos 54b). (Several commentators provide reasons why the Gemara lists the four in a different order than does the verse, a topic that we will forgo for now.) The Tur (Orach Chayim 219) mentions an interesting method for remembering the four cases, based on words from our daily shmoneh esrei prayer: vechol hachayim yoducha selah, explaining that the word chayim has four letters, ches, yud, yud and mem, which allude to chavush, yissurim, yam and midbar, meaning captive, the sufferings of illness, sea, and desert: the four types of travail mentioned by the verse and the Gemara. (It is curiously noteworthy that when the Aruch Hashulchan [219:5] quotes this, he has the ches represent “choli,” illness [rather than chavush, captive], which means that he would explain the yud of yissurim to mean the sufferings of captivity.)

Not all troubles are created equal!

Rav Hai Gaon notes that these four calamities fall under two categories: two of them, traveling by sea and through the desert, are situations to which a person voluntarily subjected himself, whereas the other two, illness and being held captive, are involuntary (quoted by Shu't Chasam Sofer, Orach Chayim #51). Thus, we see that one bensch gomeil after

surviving any of these types of dangers, regardless of their having been within his control or not.

Some commentaries note that the Rambam cites the Gemara passage, arba'ah tzerichim lehodos, “four people are required to thank Hashem,” only in the context of birchas hagomeil and not regarding the laws of korban todah. This implies that, in his opinion, korban todah is always a voluntary offering, notwithstanding the fact that Chazal required those who were saved to recite birchas hagomeil (Sefer Hamafteiach). However, both Rashi and the Rashbam, in their respective commentaries to Vayikra 7:12, explain that the “four people” are all required to bring a korban todah upon being saved. As I noted above, the Rosh states that since, unfortunately, we cannot offer a korban todah, birchas hagomeil was substituted.

Thus we can answer the first question asked above:

“The Torah describes bringing a korban todah as a thanksgiving offering. How does that relate to the brocha of birchas hagomeil? Did someone recite birchas hagomeil while offering the korban?”

At the time of the beis hamikdash, birchas hagomeil had not yet been invented. We look much forward to its rebuilding so that we can again offer the korbanos and thereby become closer to Hashem this way. (However, note that the Chasam Sofer shares another possible way which disagrees with this interpretation of the Rosh and the Tur.)

A Minyan

When the Gemara (Brachos 54b) teaches the laws of birchas hagomeil, it records two interesting details: (1) that birchas hagomeil should be recited in the presence of a minyan and (2) that it should be recited in the presence of two talmidei chachamim.

No Minyan

Is a minyan essential for birchas hagomeil, as it is for some other brachos, such as sheva brachos? If someone cannot arrange a minyan for birchas hagomeil must he forgo the brocha?

The Tur contends that the attendance of a minyan and two talmidei chachamim is not a requirement to recite birchas hagomeil, but only the preferred way. In other words, someone who cannot easily assemble a minyan or talmidei chachamim may, nevertheless, recite birchas hagomeil. The Beis Yosef disagrees regarding the requirement of a minyan, feeling that one should not recite birchas hagomeil without a minyan present. However, he rules that if someone errantly recited birchas hagomeil without a minyan, he should not recite it again, but should try to find a minyan and recite the text of the brocha while omitting Hashem's Name, to avoid reciting a brocha levatalah, a blessing in vain (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 219:3). The Mishnah Berurah follows an approach closer to that of the Tur, ruling that if one will be unable to assemble a minyan, he may recite birchas hagomeil without one. However, someone in a place where there is no minyan should wait up to thirty days to see if he will have the chance to bensch gomeil in the presence of a minyan. If thirty days pass without the opportunity, he should recite the birchas hagomeil without a minyan and not wait any longer.

When do we recite Birchas hagomeil?

The prevalent custom is to recite birchas hagomeil during or after kri'as haTorah (Hagahos Maimaniyos 10:6). The Orchos Chayim understands that this custom is based on convenience, because kri'as haTorah also requires a minyan (quoted by Beis Yosef, Orach Chayim 219). The Chasam Sofer presents an alternative reason for reciting birchas hagomeil during or after kri'as haTorah. He cites sources that explain that kri'as haTorah serves as a substitute for offering korbanos, and therefore reciting birchas hagomeil at the time of kri'as hatorah is a better substitute for the korban todah that we unfortunately cannot offer (Shu't Chasam Sofer, Orach Chayim #51). He concludes nevertheless that, under special circumstances, one may recite birchas hagomeil without kri'as hatorah, which answers the question asked above: “May I recite birchas hagomeil if I will not be able to get to shul for kri'as haTorah?” The answer is that,

when there is no option of hearing kri'as hatorah, one may recite birchas hagomeil without it.

Do we Count the Talmidei Chachamim?

I quoted above the Gemara that states that one should recite birchas hagomeil in the presence of a minyan and two talmidei chachamim. The Gemara discusses whether this means that birchas hagomeil should be recited in the presence of a minyan plus two talmidei chachamim, a minimum of twelve people, or whether one should recite birchas hagomeil in the presence of ten people which should include two talmidei chachamim. The Rambam (Hilchos Brachos 10:8) and the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 219:3) rule that the minyan includes the talmidei chachamim, whereas the Pri Megadim rules that the requirement is a minyan plus the talmidei chachamim. Notwithstanding the Pri Megadim's objections, the Biur Halacha concludes that one does need more than a minyan including the talmidei chachamim.

No Talmid Chacham to be found

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 219:3) then adds that someone located in a place where it is uncommon to find talmidei chachamim may recite birchas hagomeil in the presence of a minyan, even without any talmidei chachamim present.

Ten or ten plus one?

There is a dispute among the authorities whether the individual reciting the brocha is counted as part of the minyan or if we require a minyan aside

from him (Raanach, quoted by Rabbi Akiva Eiger to 219:3). Most authorities rule that we can count the person reciting the brocha as one of the minyan (Mishnah Berurah 219:6). Shaar Hatziyun rallies proof to this conclusion, since it says that one should recite the brocha during kri'as haTorah, and no one says that one can do this only when there is an eleventh person attending the kri'as haTorah.

Thus, we can answer the last question that was asked above:

"Our minyan has exactly ten people today. May someone recite birchas hagomeil?"

The answer is that he may.

Conclusion

Rav Hirsch (Commentary to Tehillim 100:1) notes that the root of the word for thanks is the same as that for viduy, confession and admitting wrongdoing. All kinds of salvation should elicit in us deep feelings of gratitude for what Hashem has done for us in the past and does in the present. This is why it can be both an acknowledgement of guilt and thanks.

We often cry out to Hashem in crisis, sigh in relief when the crisis passes, but fail to thank adequately for the salvation. Our thanks to Hashem should match the intensity of our pleas. Birchas hagomeil gives us a concrete brocha to say to awaken our thanks for deliverance. And even in our daily lives, when, hopefully we do not encounter dangers that meet the criteria of saying birchas hagomeil, we should still fill our hearts with thanks, focus these thoughts during our recital of mizmor lesodah, az yashir, modim or at some other appropriate point in our prayers.

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