

Tazria-Metzora 5781: The Roots of Sins of Speech

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The Torah does not frequently speak of skin diseases, as it is not a scientific manual. Therefore, the malady of *tzara'at* begs the question of its relevance to the Torah, and furthermore, why it is subject to the laws of impurity and purity, *tumah* and *taharah*. It must be that it is a matter of spiritual importance; our tradition interprets it as a punishment for *lashon hara*.

However, it does not suffice to talk about *lashon hara* in broad strokes, as the Torah identifies different subtypes of *tzara'at*: אוֹ בַהֲרַת, אוֹ סַפַּחַת, אוֹ שֵׁאֵת (Vayikra 13:2; these terms are not easily translatable). It is too trite to conclude that speaking about others is wrong, as malicious speech manifests in different ways. What is the significance of the subtypes of *tzara'at* and how can we more deeply understand the most disturbing of speech?

S'eit, *sapachat*, and *baheret* correspond with Babylonia, Persia, and Greece, respectively, according to the *midrash* (Vayikra Rabbah 15:9). Why are we comparing skin diseases in the Torah to empires that were not yet in the picture at this time? The *midrash* takes to hint in these particular words that relate to these typological societies.

שֵׁאֵת, זוֹ בַבֶּל, עַל שׁוֹם (ישעיה יד): וְנִשְׂאֵת הַמֶּשֶׁל הַזֶּה עַל מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל, וְאָמַרְתָּ: אֵיךְ שָׁבַת נֹגֵשׁ שְׁבַתָּה מִדֶּהְבָּה...
 סַפַּחַת, זוֹ מִדֵּי, שֶׁהָעֵמִידָה הַמֶּן הַרְשַׁע שֶׁשָּׁף כְּנָחָשׁ, עַל שׁוֹם (בראשית ג): עַל גַּחוֹנֵךְ תֵּלֵךְ.
 בַּהֲרַת, זוֹ יוֹן, שֶׁהִיָּתָה מִבְּהַרְתָּ בְּגִזְרוֹתֶיהָ עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמַרְתָּ לָהֶן: כָּתְבוּ עַל קֶרֶן הַשּׁוֹר שְׂאִין לָכֶם חֶלֶק בְּאֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.
Se'et [a rising] is Babylonia, as it is written, "You will recite this parable about the King of Babylonia, and you will say: How has the oppressor come to an end, the arrogance has been ended...."
Sapachat [a scab] is [the kingdom of the] Medes, which raised Haman the wicked, who crawled like a snake, as it is written, "On your belly you shall go."
Baheret [a bright spot] is Greece, which made herself conspicuous in its decrees against the Jewish people and told them "Write on the horn of an ox that you have no share in the God of Israel."

As Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt"l explains (see *Darosh Darash Yosef*, p. 227-235), these three ailments really have to do with particular sins that come up in the context of these empires. *S'eit* corresponds with the sin of גְּאוּה, arrogance; *sapachat* corresponds with sycophancy; and *baheret* refers to superficiality. Building on Rav Soloveitchik's model, I would argue that there is an important message to glean from this *midrash* about speech itself and its accompanying sins. Furthermore, these three sins are not unrelated. And they are very relevant to modern society.

How does *s'eit* relate to arrogance? The *midrash* quotes a verse in Isaiah that has the same root as *s'eit* (“*v'nasata*”), and that root itself means to raise up. Arrogance is the improper elevating of oneself. The verse further describes the end of arrogance, *madheiva*, that is to emanate from Babylonia. Arrogance relates to Babylonia because the king Nebuchadnezzar sets up a golden statue of himself, in front of which he orders all to prostrate. Here, the arrogance displayed does not relate to speech per se. However, much of the *lashon hara* spoken comes from a place of arrogance. We are נשא , elevated, above other people when we speak *lashon hara*. Many Shabbos tables, or *l'havdil*, Whatsapp groups and office lounge areas consist of speech that essentially wishes to assert why “I” am better than someone else. Perhaps that person has more than me and I think I deserve what they have; perhaps it makes me feel better to know that I am not them. Rav Shimon Schwab comments, in relation to the bracha of *kibbutz galuyot*, that redemption is not just a process of physical gathering but spiritual gathering. Exile means factions that cannot get along. This proclivity for factions can sometimes come from a place of arrogance, that *my* form of Judaism is superior. That is one kind of arrogance. A particularly worrying form of arrogant speech being put forth is to be found on the internet. Here the issue is not just “gossip,” but it is the popularity of snark on Facebook comments, “slam dunk” put downs on Twitter, and Cable News/Podcast hosts who belittle others. All of this comes from a sense of arrogance, that I can patronize towards others because “I” am “clearly” more intelligent and have the monopoly on true opinions. I do not need to nor care to listen to other opinions because mine are perfect because they are my opinions. This is the arrogance that fuels speech that only lands in נשא as a malady. Indeed, this sort of discourse is a real malady and brings out *middot* that are in contradiction with our values.

Sapachat consists of a different kind of improper speech that emanates from sycophancy - insincere and excessive flattery. Is cozying up to someone and being a little nice truly a sin? In *Orchot Tzadikim* (Sha'ar Ha-Chanifah), we learn that a particularly despicable form of flattery is when someone speaks sweetly to another person in order to gain favor and eventually manipulate that person into doing their will. It is an attempt to gain trust in order to bring the other person down a bad path. According to the *midrash*, Haman was a master at this type of flattery. He embodies the ills of *sapachat* (ספחה) because he is *shaf* (ףש) and *nepach* (נפחה) like a snake, which cleaves to the floor and attacks from there. He lowers himself not out of humility but in order to make his deception inconspicuous. Doing so allows him to stealthily carry out terrible schemes. He is like the snake who slyly deceives Chava to carry out his own agenda, thus the allusion to the verse in Bereishit to the original snake. Even after Haman is exposed, Rav Soloveitchik points out, he tries to act in the same manner towards Esther. He is

spineless, but lowers himself to petty flattery in order to make improper gains. It is particularly noteworthy in this context that Bernie Madoff passed away this week. While I do not encourage the celebration of death, Madoff's name will forever be tarnished. His own son once noted that flattery was part of his way of alluring people. One explanation for the rise of his scheme suggests that he pretended to be exclusive about his agreement to invest for others, thus manipulating people to trust him. Madoff's speech is some of the worst deserving in *sapachat*. Yet, here we learn a lesson that our advances in life must be honest. While this has likely always been part of the fabric of society, today we certainly live in a world in which money and perceived status are keys to power, and a God-fearing Jew must not be a flatterer at the expense of integrity. We must not let another Madoff rise in our community who does not hold this value. Moreover, We should be appropriately wary of the possibility that an individual desiring to rise to power should be sincere and not debasing themselves to servile flattery to manipulate others. Our community has important interests for which we must advocate, but simultaneously we should not fall for leaders who will flatter us only to ignore our interests once they no longer gain from them.

Finally, Rav Soloveitchik says that *baheret* relates to superficiality because of the instructions to write on the horn of an ox. What is the significance of writing on the horn, and how does this relate to superficiality? The Mishnah in Bikkurim says that when bringing first fruits to the Beit Ha-Mikdash, oxen were adorned with gold and a garland of olives on the horns. The horn of the ox represents pomp and circumstance, it demonstrates the preference for aesthetics. Rav Soloveitchik suggests that when the Greeks wanted us to write on the horn that "you have no share in the God of Israel," it was not a desire to entirely destroy Jews and Judaism but just to limit it to externalities and superficiality. No meaningful religious or theological content. Form is more important than content. This remains a big challenge for Judaism today. Of course presentation matters to some degree - we have the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, that a mitzvah should be done in an aesthetically pleasing way where possible; we even built a Mishkan using very fine and expensive materials. But if all we are thinking about is the branding and marketing without deep reflection on values, we have missed something. If we talk about recipes and cuisine quality of Shabbos and yuntif food without dedicating it to the mitzvah of oneg Shabbos and simchat Yom Tov, we are missing the bigger picture. If returning to shul focuses on the number of people and minutes in shul without considering the meaningfulness of the *tefillah*, we are missing the bigger picture. Moreover, we can be prone to discussing important issues in superficial ways. Politics can be reduced to partisan slogans and soundbites. While some causes have significant moral stakes, many issues in both American and Israeli politics are complex and must balance significant values that cannot be broken down into good versus evil or

identity politics. We should endeavor to learn from opposite sides of various issues, even some of the most challenging, to enrich our wisdom. When we find it necessary to discuss religious differences between us and others, it should be focused on the content of character and sincerity in observing Torah, while focusing less on differences in dress and affiliations that miss the complexity of experience.

We observed this week the sixth *yahrzeit* of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein *zt"l*. Rav Aharon embodied the opposite of the maladies we described. With all of his genius and righteousness, he displayed no arrogance. If he felt he needed to express differences between himself and other communities or rabbis, it was only done in a manner to reach the truth. He discussed issues openly but did not resort to *ad hominem* attacks; he was further able to see his own community's shortcomings. When a rebbe of mine was about to embark on a trip to recruit students to Yeshivat Har Etzion, Rav Aharon's one instruction was to not disparage another yeshiva. Likewise, Rav Aharon conducted himself with integrity. He was surely kind to others and would praise others' accomplishments, but he did not debase himself to flatter others for his own gain. When a donor proposed a writing contest for the yeshiva and then asked that his own relative be given a prize regardless of the quality of the essay, Rav Aharon refused, at the expense of losing his donor. He would speak out on important issues and held to his values, even if it meant he could not please everyone. Finally, Rav Aharon was the antithesis of superficiality. A student was once at his home for a Purim *seudah*, and in an inebriated state, the student went over to Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein and said "your husband drives me crazy! It's always on the one hand, on the other hand, I just want a clear answer!" But this was indicative of Rav Aharon's appreciation for complexity. He once reflected that in his four years at Harvard, he learned that life is complex and people are complex. Another rebbe of mine shared that one summer, Rav Aharon spoke for a very long time on Friday night in yeshiva during davening; when my rebbe arrived home, his wife asked "what did Rav Lichtenstein speak about?" And he replied "he said Moshe was a good person." How did it take so long to explain that Moshe was a good person? Because even then, one cannot fully appreciate the depth of Moshe in superficial statements. Even if it would be more popular to "wow" others with a ten minute charismatic speech, Rav Aharon could not resort to such a tactic. The substance was far more important than the style of presentation.

This Shabbat, our task is to be mindful and reflective of our speech, and while so much of our speech is instinctive and rooted in habit, we should strive to ensure that our speech incorporates humility, demonstrates integrity and sincerity, and illustrates our celebration of the complexity of life.