



# The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

## Metzora 5782

### The Varieties of Vulgarity

Rabbi Norman Lamm z"l (Originally given May 4, 1968)

**A**ccording to tradition, the terrible plague of tzaraat (usually mistranslated as leprosy) is occasioned by one of three sins. Amongst them is that of *gassut*, to which we shall devote this morning's talk.

*Gassut* means thickness, heaviness, and therefore a crudity or rudeness or obtuseness. In a word, *gassut* is vulgarity.

It does not require unusual wisdom or perceptiveness to observe that our society suffers from an over-abundance of vulgarity. We need but look about ourselves to notice the obvious lack of refinement and delicacy and sensitivity. Indeed, not only does *gassut* lead to *nega'im*, but today vulgarity itself is a veritable plague.

Modern life, for all its sophistication, tends towards vulgarity. Possibly it is a result of our liberal, democratic tradition. Any democratizing movement tends on the one hand to bring culture and the "finer things of life" to the masses of the people, but on the other hand also lowers standards and debases the coin of culture. This is true of language which becomes vulgarized, and of music and art which tend to deteriorate with the increase in mass education. Perhaps the preponderance of vulgarity is the result of instantaneous electronic communication, so that an eruption of vulgarity in any one part of the world, especially America, is immediately broadcast by satellite to all parts of the world which regard such conduct as the norm of behavior.

But certainly, vulgarity, as the very word indicates, tends towards commonness; it spreads like the plague. *Gassut* is itself a species of *nega'im*. It is not because a thing is common or popular that, by itself, makes it vulgar. We are not and should not be snobbish. But vulgarity, as an inadequate conception of the art of living, simply happens to characterize most people; for the art of living is one that

is not easy to master.

Let us be more analytic. We can, I believe, discern three varieties of *gassut* of vulgarity.

Lexicographers (see Kohut on the *Arukha*) tell us that the word *gass* usually appears in the conjunction with one of three words: *lev*, *ruah* and *daat*, that is, heart, spirit, and knowledge or mind. Using these three compound terms, we can identify three varieties of vulgarity.

- *Gassut ha-lev* is emotional impudence or grossness, or simply: arrogance.
- *Gassut ha-ruah* is the crudity of the spirit, or spiritual insensitivity.
- *Gassut ha-daat* is obtuseness of the mind, or the failure of intellectual discrimination.

The first of these is arrogance, *gassut ha-lev*, or emotional vulgarity. This species of vulgarity dulls a man's sense of humor and makes him lose all perspective about his place in the world. He cannot distinguish between self-worth and inflated bombast, whereby only he is important and no one else is. The man of *gassut ha-lev* - vulgarity is so confident of his own superiority that he considers himself part of the "in crowd," and will be seen with no one else; therefore God brings upon him the plague of tzaraat which requires that he be banished to *hutz le'mahaneh*, outside the camp. The man who wanted to be only "in" is now "out," literally an outcast... Indeed, God refuses to abide such a man in His own mahaneh, His very world, for the Lord says concerning such a man: *ein ani ve'hu yekholin la-dur ba-olam* (*Sotah* 5a), the world is too small for both of us; he and I cannot co-exist in one world. This makes sense. The arrogant man, the man of emotional vulgarity, suffers from a swollen ego, one which displaces not only fellow human beings from the scene of the world. His punishment therefore is a just retaliation: God pushes such

a man out of His world...

But the bluster of such vulgarity of heart, as we know today, usually is a cover for an inner void, an inner emptiness. The man who suffers from what appears to be an excess of superiority usually is painfully aware of his inferiority of which he is ashamed.

This, I believe, is at the bottom of the insight of the Talmud which tells us that a man of *gassut ha-lev*, or arrogance, *hashuv lifnei Hakadosh Barukh Hu ke'ilu avad avodah zara* (*Sotah* 4b), is considered by the Holy One as if he had worshiped an idol. This is the accepted reading in our text of the Talmud. But a variant, recorded by the disciple of Maimonides, R. Judah b. Judah Ibn Aknin in his *Sefer Hamusar*, says that such a person is considered by the Holy One *k'avodah zarah atzmah*—as if he himself were a veritable idol! An idol has all the appearances of life, but is really dead. The man of arrogance and bombast and vanity tries to impress you with his superiority, but such superiority is indeed non-existent. We recall what King David said about the idols: *einayim la-hem ve'lo yiru, aznayim lahem ve'lo yishmah'u*, they have eyes but they do not see, they have ears but they do not hear, they have noses but they do not smell. The man who suffers from the vulgarity of vanity has all the apparent appurtenances of personality, but none of the underlying reality. This kind of vulgarian appears sociable, when he is really gathering gossip with which he will be able to derogate his fellow man and enhance his own ego. He appears to be engaged in friendly conversation, but he is really prattling in a monologue, for he is concerned only with that which aggrandizes his own self. He appears to look at you and to listen to you, but: “they have eyes and see not, ears and hear not”-- his ego blinds him to anything save that which concerns his own welfare. He appears to be polite—but his “please” is nothing more than servile begging and his “thank you” is an insincere down payment on favors he is yet to request. The vain man is indeed vulgar.

The second variety of vulgarity is *gassut ha-ruah*, spiritual obtuseness or insensitivity. In a word, it is the failure to appreciate the relations of values, to understand that all values are limited in time and place, that at the right occasion they are completely qualified and proper, but that at the wrong time and place they are grotesque and absurd. Therefore, the man of spiritual vulgarity suffers from distortion of values.

Indeed, what inspired the theme of this sermon is a

particular species of spiritual vulgarity which reappears annually and never fails to irritate me with a special form of abhorrence. I refer to the advertisements which regularly appear in our press every year before Passover, advising us to hurry and make our reservations in the various resort hotels where, we are told, a Passover vacation can be combined with a marvelous night club; where a famous cantor will entertain us at the same time that great bands will give us fun; where double choirs and heated indoor swimming pools all go together. Often I pray that these tasteless and insipid advertisements would remove one line from their text: “Dietary laws observed”...

I admit that because of them I am embarrassed before Gentiles, I am embarrassed before the Almighty, I am embarrassed before my very self.

A higher form of spiritual vulgarity afflicts American Jews, especially Orthodox ones, who misconstrue the very nature of the synagogue, who believe that it is a mark of honor and distinction to act in the synagogue as one acts in his very home, for it indicates that we are “at home” in the precincts of the House of God. Thus, we violate every norm of conduct that the Halakhah demands of us in the synagogue, the standards of reverence for a holy place, *mora mikdash*, and we excuse our irreverence by “*heimishkeit*”—a fabrication and a distortion of the Halakhah and of all Judaism. It is a species of spiritual vulgarity to subvert the nature of the synagogue by being long on conversation and short on dress in it. Such empty prattle and constant chatter is a vulgarization of the spirit of holiness of a synagogue; and revealing too much of one’s self because of fashion, reveals as well as short-sightedness and a lack of spiritual and intellectual integrity which should impel us to leave such fashions outside the synagogue.

A still more subtle form of *gassut ha-ruah* is the whole American Jewish attitude to the synagogue. American Jews often consider the “temple” the center of all of Judaism. Now a synagogue certainly is important. But it is never by any means more important than Shabbat or kashruth or family purity or ethical relations, and especially not more than the study of Torah. In Jewish law the academy of study is of greater sanctity than the house of prayer. I have always maintained that religious Jews in Israel have much to learn from American Orthodoxy, for we have undergone certain kinds of experiences of modernity, and Israelis can very well benefit by the lessons we have derived from these

experiences. But in one sense we have much to learn from Israeli Jews. For in Israel, once a man is a truly committed religious Jew, he understands much better the value of the study of Torah than we do. In Israeli synagogues, for all their faults, you will find people attending lectures in Talmud and Torah with much greater regularity and greater numbers than you will in America.

(Another subtle form of spiritual vulgarity, of *gassut ha-ruah*, deserves our attention. This too deals with the exaggeration of values when they are out of place. There is a remarkable statement in the Talmud: *siman le'gassut ha-ruah aniyut* (Shab. 33a) -- poverty is a symptom of spiritual vulgarity. Did the Rabbis really mean to be so harsh on poor people? What they intended, I submit, is this: the poor man is afflicted not only by being economically deprived, and financially disadvantaged. An even greater tragedy derives from the psychological fact that inwardly he begins to attribute extravagant powers to money. If only I had money, he begins to believe, all my problems would be solved. Money becomes to him not something to attain in order to relieve certain of his difficulties, but it grows in his imagination into a veritable savior. This distortion of the value of money is a symptom of the disease of poverty, and it reveals itself in this spiritual vulgarity. The same is true not only for money but for social status or any other value.)

The third variety of vulgarity is the intellectual form, *gassut ha-daat*, the failure to discriminate between ideas, things, and people; the inability to comprehend conceptual subtleties.

As you know, on Saturday nights and on holiday nights, we add a paragraph in our Amidah prayer in which we speak of the separation or havdalah between the sacred and the profane, between week day and Sabbath or holiday. This particular passage is included in the fourth blessing, that in which we ask God for the gift of knowledge and intelligence. Why so? Because, the Talmud answers, *im ein daat havdalah minayin*– without knowledge, there can be no havdalah, no discrimination, no differentiation. The major function of intelligence is analytic: to distinguish between various ideas. The failure to make such distinctions is, therefore, a form of *gassut ha-daat*, a thickness of the mind, an obtuseness of intellect, or conceptual vulgarity.

The most distressing recent example of such *gassut ha-daat* comes to us from the exalted chambers of the

United Nations. I refer to the protests in the press in the UN against a recent parade by the State of Israel through old Jerusalem in celebration of Israel's 20th anniversary as a state.

Now, one may legitimately question if this is the best way for Israel to celebrate its Independence Day. I confess that I have serious doubts as to whether it is in the spirit of Jewish history and Israeli tradition to celebrate such a great event exclusively by a military parade and showing off tanks and jet airplanes. I suspect that there is more that can be done which conforms better to the spirit of Israel and World Jewry.

Moreover, objective editorialists have a right to criticize Israel on the grounds that such a parade may have jeopardized the peace, although I totally disagree and feel that nothing of the sort is true.

However, has the UN the right to criticize Israel and "deplore" this parade? And has Mr. U Thant the moral right to be as active as he was in objecting to the parade? Where was Mr. U Thant when Nasser massed his troops on the Sinai desert just about one year ago? Why did we hear no protest from the Secretary General of the UN when Nasser ordered UN troops to be pulled out of Sharm el Sheikh? Why was he silent when Jordanian artillery rained fire and death on Jerusalem? Why is he and the entire UN silent when the El Fatah terrorist infiltrate into Israel to kill men, women, and children? Can the UN not distinguish between terrorism and a peaceful parade, which will be held– indeed, was held– without the Damascus-type incendiary rhetoric and terrorism aimed at killing indiscriminantly?

Clearly, this is a case of *gassut ha-daat*, of vile intellectual vulgarity. And, of course, it is at its worst not a failure of intellect as much as a willful intellectual obfuscation that issues from what at bottom is *gassut ha-ruah*, spiritual vulgarity. For the UN has become a convention of people who speak in moral categories and intend only political issues. Perhaps it ought to be primarily a place of political confrontation; but it is vulgar to clothe political strategies in moral terms.

Vulgarity– whether emotional, spiritual, or intellectual– is indeed a plague which infects young and old, in places high and low, in circles Jewish and non-Jewish. In this sense of its widespread character, *gassut* is really vulgar: it is common, it is ordinary.

No wonder that every morning, almost immediately

upon arising, we ask God to let us be popular and respected and acclaimed by all those whom we meet:  
*u-tenenu ha-yom u-ve'khol yom leh'hen u-lehessed*  
*u-le'rahahim be'einekha u-ve'einei kol ro'einu*, give us this day and every day the charm and grace and favor in Thy eyes and in the eyes of all those who behold us. In a word, we want to be accepted by the masses.

But this involves a danger. If we are going to appeal to *kol ro'einu*, to all those whom we meet, if we are going to pander to the taste and judgment of the lowest common—the most common!—denominator, then we indeed may very well become the victims of vulgarity!

Therefore, we immediately continue our prayers: may it be Thy will, O Lord my God and God of my fathers,  
*she'tatzilenu ha-yom u-ve'khol yom me'azei panim u-me'azut*

## Who Am I?

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

In this week's parsha, the Torah presents the purification process for a person afflicted with tzora'as, as well as the laws of tzora'as that appears on the walls of a house. The Talmud (Arachin, 16a) lists seven sins for which one is afflicted with tzora'as, but the best-known reason for it is for transgressing the prohibition against speaking *leshon hora*, or evil talk. Rashi on our parsha writes that this is the reason that birds are used in the purification process, since birds are typified by their chirping. He also mentions another reason for tzora'as, which is 'gasus horuach,' or arrogance. Rav Dovid Feinstein explained that the other five sins are all a result of one or the other of these two sins, while Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Lunshitz, author of the commentary *Keli Yakar*, wrote in his *Olelos Ephraim*, that *leshon hora* is, in reality, a result of arrogance (see Netvort to parshas Metzora, 5763, available at [Torahheights.com](http://Torahheights.com)). The Midrash Rabbah on our parsha, however, focuses specifically on the prohibition of *leshon hora*, and relates a very interesting story regarding it, that helps shed light on the mind-set of the person who is addicted to *leshon hora*, and who is, as a result, afflicted with tzora'as.

The midrash, in Vayikra Rabbah (16:2), relates that a certain merchant went around asking, "who wants to buy a medicine that gives life?" Rav Yannai came over to the merchant and asked to see the medicine, but the merchant said it is not for him. However, after repeated requests, the merchant finally gave in to Rav Yannai, and cited the verses

*panim... u-mi-pega ra...*, that You save this day and every day from impudent people and form impudence within ourselves... from any evil and disconcerting confrontation, whether with Jew or non-Jew. In a word, spare us, O Lord, from the bitter encounter with vulgarity – in any form and manner, in any variety or of any people.

For the plague of vulgarity, in all its varieties, is the most pernicious of all.

And the only way of avoiding it is to remember that while there is nothing wrong in wanting to be popular and accepted and acclaimed by all the circles of our acquaintance, it is still more important to strive for favor *be'einekha* rather than *u-ve'einei kol ro'einu*, in the eyes of God more than in the eyes of man.

in Tehillim (34:13-14), "who is the person who wants life, who loves days of seeing good ? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceitfully." Rav Yannai responded that King Shlomo made a similar remark when he said "He who guards his mouth and tongue from evil guard his soul from troubles" (Mishlei 21:23). However, continued Rav Yannai, he had never understood this verse until this merchant came and announced, "who wants life?" Therefore, he said, Moshe told the Jews, "This will be the law of the metzora" (Vayikra 14:2) - the law of the 'motzi shem ra,' or the one who 'brings out a bad name,' i.e., a slanderer. We need to understand why the merchant felt that Rav Yannai did not need his advice, and what it is that Rav Yannai actually did learn from it.

Rabbi Reuven Katz, in his *Dudaei Reuven*, explains that Rav Yannai already understood that one can attain life in the world to come through guarding one's tongue from speaking evil. What he didn't understand was that one can attain life in our present world in this way, as well, and this is what he learned from the merchant. As Rabbi Katz explains, a person who engages in *leshon hora* alienates himself from other people, is considered as a person who cannot be trusted, and eventually loses his livelihood because no one wants to associate with him. Thus, he really does not have a life. Part of the purification process for the metzora - the person afflicted with tzora'as - is to live outside all three camps, alone. By doing so, he will have

an opportunity to contemplate his loss of status within society, which came as a result of his uncontrolled gossip and slander. If he hasn't yet come to that point in his life, the tzora'as serves as a warning to him of where his current life-style will eventually lead him. I would like to expand on this explanation, through an understanding of the root causes behind the practice of leshon hora, and show that there is a further dimension of the negative results of this practice, not touched upon by Rabbi Katz.

A primary reason for people engaging in leshon hora is, actually, a sense of low self-esteem, and a feeling that in order to build oneself up, he must bring others down. Viewing leshon hora as the primary cause for tzora'as, with all the other sins coming as a result, perhaps we can then view arrogance as an outgrowth of leshon hora. As a result of the leshon hora one speaks, bringing other people down, the one who speaks becomes arrogant, building his self-esteem atop the edifice of other people's shame. In both cases, the offender is not evaluating himself accurately, but basing his assessment on his view of others. Thus, he

never truly understands his inner self, who he really is, because he is always defining himself in terms of other people. Perhaps it is for this reason that the rabbis tell us (*Nedarim*, 64b) that the metzora is one of four people who are considered dead even during their lifetime. The person who is addicted to leshon hora never develops his true self, and, thus, is, in a sense, dead, and draws those who listen to him into his web of deceit and self-alienation. By slandering others, he robs them of their identity, as well. It is, perhaps, this process that is reflected in the statement of the rabbis that leshon hora kills three people - the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the one of whom it is told. To paraphrase, albeit in a different context, Fast Eddie Felson (aka Paul Newman), the main character in the classic 1961 film, *The Hustler*, the metzora is dead inside, and, so, he makes everyone around him dead, as well. Therefore, he must remove himself from the company of others, for a time, so that he can reconsider his role in life, unrelated to the success or failure of others, and try to understand who he really is.

## Lashon HaRa, Tzaraas, and Loopholes—The Power of Words

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from a shiur given in the Gruss Kollel on April 3, 2014)

In this week's Parsha, there is a din of nigei batim, the tzaraas of houses. And there is an interesting halachah there. *Ve-tzivah ha-kohen u-finu es ha-bayis be-terem yavo ha-Kohen li-ros es ha-nega ve-lo yitma kol asher ba-bayis*. You go to a Kohen and say: *ke-nega nira li ba-bayis*—I think I have tzaraas. What did the Kohen say? You might think you have tzaraas, but there is no chalos tzaraas until I come and check it out. Therefore, you should take all your keilim out of the house first so they would not become tamei because there is no chalos tzaraas until I get there and pronounce it tamei. I am giving you an eitzah tovah to save all your keilim from tumah. Rashi says, what is the pshat in this pasuk? *Chasa Torah al mamonam shel Yisroel, al klei cheres, she'ein lahem tahara be-mikve*. It's Hashem being nice to us—He's giving us a kulah. Here's a makor—in case anyone ever asks you—for why Orthodox Jews always come up with loopholes in halachah. There are profound philosophical answers to that. But if you don't want to get into philosophy, you should just tell them: Ah, it's because the Chumash already gave us a loophole. Your house has tzaraas. But what does the Chumash say? Ah, it's not tamei

until the kohen gets there, and therefore you could take everything out when it's not tamei yet. And you see from this that we are good ovdei Hashem, even if sometimes we avail ourselves of loopholes. But perhaps there is something deeper and more substantive to **this** loophole. Why is it that out of kol Ha-Torah kulah did Torah choose to give us this trick, this loophole, this ha'arama, specifically in the context of tzaraas? It could be that the Torah is trying to emphasize a theme that is true about tzaraas in general. What is it? That tzaraas is not *chal, bein be-guf adam, bein be-beged, bein ba-batim*, until the kohen paskens, and says: *es tamei hu*. Even if this happened to a Talmid Chacham, who knows kol Ha-Torah kulah, who happens to be a Yisroel, and he is 100 percent sure that it's tzaraas. And the only available kohen is an am ha'aretz, who doesn't know which way to hold a gemora, this way or that way. Nonetheless, even though it's obviously tzaraas, that means nothing I tell this kohen am ha'aretz—Say "It's tamei"—and when he says that it's tamei, it magically becomes tamei. So, what's the pshat here? Simply, I think we can explain based on one of the most famous ideas of

Chazal—that one gets tzaraas for talking Lashon Ha-Ra. And why would a person say Lashon Ha-Ra? He might be an evil person—who tries to hurt and humiliate people and ruin their relationships. There are evil people out there. But that's a milsa de-lo shechicha—it rarely happens. That's not why a statistically significant portion of Jews tell Lashon Ha-Ra. Why else would they do it? Very pashut. Most Jews have a sentiment that they would never shoot someone or beat someone up, that they would never steal their money. They think, in the words of a popular adage—Stick and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me—they see Lashon Ha-Ra as just talking. Nah, words don't really have an effect. It's not a big deal. It's not important. Therefore, what does Torah teach us about Lashon Ha-Ra? Torah penalizes the speaker by making him ugly. It legislates the destruction of his house and commands the burning of his clothes. What does a

Metzora say? Here I am, disfigured, an outcast of society. He feels what he made other people feel. Everyone looks down on him. He is humiliated and looks different than everyone else. And what does he say? He says: Oh, I am in big trouble now. Look at the objective reality. And he goes to halachah, and it tells him: you can handle the objective reality. People have a lot of things wrong with them—no one is perfect. And we can all get along anyway. But once someone goes and calls you tamei, now you are an outcast. Now, mi-chutz lamachane moshavo. Once someone calls you tamei, it changes your entire life and existence. And therefore, the ba'al Lashon Ha-Ra learns his lesson. He thought that words are harmless. And then he realized that, in fact, words are sometimes even more powerful than deeds. Words have a tremendous effect, and hopefully, he will do teshuva and be careful with his words in the future. Shabbat Shalom.

## The Bridge of Reeds

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Some predicaments in life can be quickly repaired. Others require patience and waiting. Severe forms of halachik impurity or tumah cannot be resolved overnight and, instead, require waiting periods of different lengths. For example, a post-partum mother must wait either 40 days (after a boy) or 80 days (after a girl) before her korbanot transition her back into society.

Similarly, a man or woman who experience repeated bodily emissions (zav or zava), must count seven days without secretion before immersing in a mikvah, offering sacrifices and rejoining the mikdash experience.

A metzora as well, must wait seven days before his immersion in a mikva and korbanot. However, unlike other halachikally impure people, a metzora performs a preliminary ceremony BEFORE the seven day “waiting period” commences. On the day he is healed, he delivers twin birds- one of which is sacrificed and mixed with natural water. The other bird is bundled with a tree-branch, a string and a reed. This wad is used to brush blood upon the hand of the metzora. After the blood is applied, the remaining live bird is set free and the metzora is fully shaved of his bodily hair. Only after this preliminary ceremony has concluded can the metzora begin his seven-day waiting period leading up to his korbanot and to his reentry into society.

The vivid tiglachat ritual of shaving bodily hair provides a metamorphosis for a metzora. He has suffered a terrible illness and endured a painful quarantine which may have lasted three weeks. Severed from his family and from his community, he had ample time to ponder his isolation. Why was he afflicted with such a hideous illness which repelled any visitors? The metzora disease isn't physically pleasant and it exacts a heavy psychological toll upon its victims.

In addition to “processing” his unsightly illness, a metzora also contemplates the underlying reasons for his ailment. The Torah doesn't assign any particular sin as the root cause of infection, but Chazal trace the disease to the sin of slander or to excess egotism. Having spent a few weeks sunken in physical struggle and wrestling with psychological anxiety, the metzora looks for renewed purpose and for new horizons of meaning. Shaving his hair, literally, creates a clean slate and a fresh tomorrow. Bodily hair is a vestige of his broken past and is now removed, readying his body and his soul for a fresh start. Nothing speaks “renewal” and “rebirth” more than removing hair, unencumbering his body and liberating his spirit.

While the tiglachat erases his failed past, the ceremony of the reed revives the past - not a personal “past” but a national “past”. Thousands of years ago, in Egypt, during

our epic night of liberation, we glazed the doorposts of our homes with blood, applying the blood with a bundle of reeds. Utilizing a reed to spread blood upon the metzora revisits that seminal moment in our collective past- the moment we departed Egypt.

The symbolic return to Egypt provides a very different makeover for the metzora. Perhaps his illness and his struggle induced a crisis of identity. Perhaps his extended and harsh quarantine blurred personal meaning or distorted purpose in life. However, meaning and identity lie beyond the “personal”. Every Jew – healthy and ill, sinner and saint, belongs to the great trail of Jewish history which began that fateful night in Egypt. We may face personal breakdowns and we may struggle with meaning as we face the harsh conditions of our personal lives. However, the broader narrative of Jewish history endures, and we are part of that magnificent journey. On the one hand, a metzora recovers meaning by peering into a unsullied future of “tomorrow”. Shaving his hair deletes past mistakes and provides a fresh start. The ceremony of blood and reeds resurrects past national meaning and timeless historical identity. A metzora is part of a collective legacy and during the ritual of the reeds he taps into that larger meaning and into that communal identity. His personal life may be in disarray, but Jewish history beckons him. Having returned to Egypt and having regained

meaning, he can begin his seven day countdown toward entering the mikdash.

Though the word metzora and the name mitzrayim are not etymologically related, they each contain the three letters of מצר which implies “constriction” or narrow straits. The Jews in מצרים were constrained by slavery and bondage. By placing blood upon their doors, they quit their dwindled worlds while opening horizons to a more expansive future. That night they metaphorically walked through a “door” toward a “spacious” new future. No longer would they suffer as slaves bereft of identity and sold as nameless chattel. No longer would they be disenfranchised of family, community or nationhood. They walked out on their past world of suffering into a new world of family and mission. National identity beckoned them.

The מוציאו struggled with similar restraints. He has been severed from his family, his society and from any contact with the house of Hashem. He too, must walk through a “door” to discover renewed meaning. The reeds bridge him back to the iconic doors in Egypt. To rediscover meaning, he walks back to Jewish history and walks through those doors. There is always meaning awaiting a Jew in his past. There is always meaning awaiting a Jew in his people and their mission. It only takes one reed to find that meaning. One reed and spirited imagination.

## The Sweet in the Bitter

*Mrs. Michal Horowitz*

In this week's parsha, Parshas Metzorah, the Torah continues to teach us about negah tzara'as - the affliction of tzara'as. The pasuk tells us: *כִּי תָבֹא אֶל־אֶרְצֵנוּ, אֲשֶׁר אַנְיִ נְתַן לְךָם לְאַחֲזָה; וְנִתְחַי נָגֵעַ צְרוּתָה, בְּבֵית אֶרְץ אֲחַזְתֶּךָ - When you come to the land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession, and I will place a tzara'as affliction upon a house in the land of your possession; and the one to whom the house belongs shall come and declare to the Kohen, 'something like an affliction has appeared to me in the house' (Vayikra 14:34-35).*

Rashi comments, quoting Medrash Rabbah:

וְנִתְחַי נָגֵעַ צְרוּתָה. בָּשׂוּרָה הִיא לְהַמְשִׁיכָם שְׁהַגְּנָעִים בְּאַמְּתִימָה; לְפִי שְׁהַטְמִינָה אָמָורִים מִתְמֻונִיות שֶׁל זָהָב בְּקִירוֹת בְּתֵיתָם כֹּל אֶרְכָּعִים שָׁנָה שְׁהַיִשְׁרָאֵל בְּפָזָבָר, וְעַל יְדֵי הָגָעָנוּ נוֹתֵן הַבֵּית וּמוֹצָאָן

*This is good news for them (the Bnei Yisrael) that afflictions*

*are to come upon them; for the Emorim hid treasures of gold in the walls of their houses all forty years that Israel was in the desert, and as a result of the affliction (of tzara'as that the Jews would find on the walls of the homes), he (the Israelite) breaks down the walls and find the treasures.*

It is compelling to note that the Torah tells us that when the ba'al ha'bayis (home owner) comes to the kohen to inform him of the tzara'as affliction, he says: *בְּנָגֵעַ נִרְאָה לִי בְּבֵית - like an affliction appeared to me in the house.* Why doesn't he just say “an affliction appeared to me in the house”? Why must he say “like an affliction”?

How do we understand these verses? Is the tzara'as in this case a reward or a punishment? Is it good news, or bad news? What is Rashi coming to teach us? And why can't the owner say definitively: ‘I saw an affliction’?

Putting it all together, weaving a beautiful tapestry of

Torah, Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski zt'l teaches, "Why should the owner say 'Something like an affliction has appeared to me in the house?' Why not say, 'An affliction has appeared to me in the house'?

"The Divine statement *גַּעַת תְּחִי גַּעַת צָרֻעַת בְּבֵית אֶרְצֶךָ - I will place an affliction upon a house in the land of your possession*' appears to be a promise rather than a punishment. Rashi explains that the Canaanites used to hide their treasures in the thick walls of their houses. The affliction in the house resulted in the walls being demolished, which would expose the hidden treasure. Thus, the affliction in the house was a blessing rather than a punishment.

"This is why the owner should not say 'An affliction has appeared to me in the house.' An affliction is a punishment, whereas the lesion in the wall of the house was a blessing leading to the discovery of hidden treasures. Therefore, all he may say is 'it seems like an affliction to me.'

"This has far-reaching application and relevance. We all experience unpleasant things which at the moment are distressing and appear to be bad. In many instances, we realize much later that what we had assumed to be bad was really something good in disguise.

"The Baal Shem Tov said that when an adversity occurs, one should not say: 'It is bad.' G-d does not do bad things. Rather, we may say, 'This is a bitter happening.' Some life-saving medications may have a bitter taste. Remembering this should help us keep our bearings in times of adversity" (Twerski on Chumash, Artscroll, p.221).

This is a powerful message and lesson for our lives. Often what seems to us like difficulties, trials and tribulations are part of Hashem's Master Divine plan to bestow goodness upon us. Though to us it may look like the "negah tzara'a" - the affliction of tzara'a, from Hashem's vantage point, it is nothing but bountiful treasures to bring great wealth upon us and into our lives.

## The Nidah—Affirming the Infinite Value of Human Life

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

Toward the end of this week's parasha, parashat Metzorah, we learn the laws of the *בָּזָב*—Zav, the *בָּעֵל קָרֵי*—Baal Keri, the *נִזְהָה*—Nidah and the *זָבָה*—Zavah, the various natural and unnatural emissions discharged from the bodies of both men and women.

And so, we must say "it seems to be, it looks like, it appears as if" it is an affliction; but in reality, it is a treasure of Hashem.

On Leil ha'Seder, we are involved in many unique mitzvos on this glorious, holy night when we celebrate our freedom from slavery. One of the mitzvos of the night is achilas marror - eating the bitter herbs. These bitter herbs remind us that the Egyptians embittered the lives of the Israelite slaves, as the verse says: *וַיִּמְرֹרֶוּ אֲתָּה-תְּחִיָּה בְּעֵבֶד הָעָבֶד קָשָׁה, בְּחֹמֶר וּבְלָנִים, אֲכַל-עֵבֶד בְּשָׂדָה - and they embittered their lives with hard work, with mortar and bricks, and with all work of the field* (Shemos 1:14).

And yet, before we eat the marror we recite a special bracha: *ברָקָדָה הָאֱלֹהִים מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קָדְשָׁנוּ בְמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל אֲכִילַת מְרוּרָה - Blessed are Your Hashem our G-d the King of the world, Who sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to eat the marror.*

If achilas marror is to remind us of the bitterness our forefathers faced in Egypt, why do we bless G-d for it?!

Perhaps, based on the above insight of R' Dr. Twerski, we can answer as follows: A Jew must always have the fortitude, faith and courage to say: "This looks like it's bitter; this looks like an affliction; this looks like a terrible time in life." And yet, we must remember that hiding behind the tzara'a's stricken walls were great treasures. Within each difficulty we face, there is certainly Divine blessing. We may not recognize it, we may not be able to see it, we may not understand it - but we are still able to say: *כִּנְגַע נִרְאָה לִי בְּבֵית* - like an affliction appeared to me in the house.

From the bitterness of marror came the sweetness of redemption. And so for this, indeed, we must bless G-d.

May we merit the end of this bitter galus, may we merit the ultimate geula for our nation and our Land, and may we see the fulfillment of *לָשָׁנָה הַבָּא בִּירוּשָׁלָם הַבְּנִיה* immediately and in our days.

The text, in Leviticus 15:19, reads, *וְאָשָׁה פִּי תְּהִי זָבָה, כִּי יִהְיָה זָבָה בְּבָשָׂרָה, שְׁבֻעַת יְמִים תְּהִי בְּנִקְדָּתָה*, When a woman has a discharge, her discharge from her flesh being blood, she shall be in a state of nidah for a seven day period. The Torah further states that anyone who touches the woman

and anything she touches, will be rendered impure until evening.

The laws of a menstruant woman are both complex and complicated. In addition, they are broadly misinterpreted and often misunderstood. Contrary to popular belief, the menstruant woman is not regarded in Jewish law or Jewish philosophy as “unclean” or “contaminated.” Jewish “ritual impurity” is something entirely different.

To understand the concept of “ritual impurity” in Judaism, one must first recognize that the “bottom line” of all of Jewish law and practice is the sanctity of human life. In fact, all of the 613 mitzvot of the Torah can be traced to that value and that ideal. If life is the highest value, then, of course, death is the greatest contaminator.

When a woman ovulates, an ovum is released. If the ovum is fertilized, it may hopefully develop into a living fetus. However, if it remains unfertilized, the ovum withers and dies. It is soon expelled from the woman’s body, along with the nutrients that would have sustained that life, resulting in the menstrual flow. The menstruant woman, in effect, encounters death in her body—the death of a potential life that has not been realized and is therefore regarded as ritually impure.

Some commentators explain that ritual impurity comes to underscore the concern that one who frequently encounters death (through monthly menstruation), may become inured to the sanctity of life. We, who live in the age of extraordinary media proliferation, are uniquely qualified to appreciate this concern. As a result of the constant “bombardment” of news, we, not infrequently, hear reports of hundreds if not thousands of victims who die and of those subjected to inordinate suffering. Rather than commiserate with the pain and loss of the victims, we often simply turn away, switch channels, turn to the sports columns or the fashion pages. The constancy of death reduces us, often rendering us indifferent to life.

A woman who menstruates is required to count a minimum of five days of bleeding. After the bleeding ceases, a period of seven clean days are counted, during which, according to the experts, the lining of the uterus is regenerated and restored. On the night of the eighth, the woman goes to the *mikveh*—mikveh, the pool of primordial natural water, representing a return to creation. This serves as a reaffirmation of life in a most profound way.

By immersing in the waters of the mikveh, the woman, in effect, pronounces that she wishes to rid herself of the

contamination of death, declaring a reaffirmation of life. There is no more meaningful way of expressing the value of the sanctity of life than through enveloping oneself in the waters of the mikveh.

This practice of reaffirming life through immersion in a mikveh, is life-affirming in another important way. In our over-saturated sexual environment, we know, only too well, that the intensity and overwhelming attraction of the physical relationship all too often obfuscates the spiritual love relationship between individuals. According to traditional practice, from the start of the menses, until the woman goes to the mikveh, husband and wife do not engage in sexual contact. It is meant to be a period in which husband and wife engage in an intensely spiritual, rather than physical, relationship, where, in effect, husband and wife declare to one another, “I love you for who you are, rather than for what I can get from you.” Indeed, the laws of Taharat Hamishpacha, of family purity, have profound psychological merit, reaffirming and strengthening the spiritual bond between husband and wife, resulting in a sexual relationship that is all the more powerful and meaningful.

These are the laws of our Torah. They are eloquent, insightful and psychologically sound. They deserve to be embraced by all!

May you be blessed.