

## A Weekly Byte... Of Isralight (Metzarah)

### *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality* **From Rav Binny Freedman**

*In September of 2000, after the Arabs renewed the fighting in Israel over Rosh Hashanah, my unit was called up in the middle of the night as part of the massive call up of reserves that occurred as fighting broke out all over the country. It was the first (and I hope the last) time I was ever called up on a 'tsav shmoneh' which is an emergency draft order approved by the Knesset and requiring neither advance notice, nor a stated date of conclusion. We had no idea how long we would be in for, which of course made the experience all the more difficult.*

*Ours is a unit set up after the infamous tunnel riots in 1996, when some of the senior Israeli army commanders began to see the writing on the wall. Those riots were a watershed event, in that policemen from the Palestinian Authority opened fire on Israeli soldiers, using guns they received from Israel as part of the Oslo accords. In giving away large portions of land to the Palestinian Authority we had multiplied our borders nearly fifteen-fold, and there was a need for units on the ground, comprised of battle-worthy soldiers who lived in these areas, who could protect Jewish settlements within a reasonable response time.*

*As such, I was transferred from my old Tank unit, and given the task of helping to set up and command this unit. Which was why I found myself patrolling the 'border' between Efrat, where I live, and Beit-Lechem and its environs, which lay a short ten-minute, walk to the North.*

*One afternoon, I got an urgent call from one of our lookouts that there seemed to be a large crowd gathering in one of the villages, which borders Efrat, and that it seemed they were surrounding a Jewish man with a gun.*

*Given the context of those days, a Jew caught in an Arab village amidst a mob, was certainly a life and death situation so we pulled out all the stops to get to the other side of Efrat and see what was going on.*

*Sure enough, there was a rather large crowd of Arab villagers gathered around someone who was clearly a Jew, with a Kippah on his head, and as there was obviously no time to wait for any backup vehicles and units to arrive I headed into the village with the two other men in my jeep now hurriedly putting on their flak helmets and checking their weapons and ammo.*

*As it turned out, the fellow caught in the middle of this crowd was someone I knew very well as he was the civilian deputy in charge of security for Efrat, who worked with the local council to ensure the*

*security needs of the city. As such we often worked together to coordinate the military and civilian security needs of the city.*

*It transpired that the Arabs in this local village (which had and still has very good relations with Efrat) had seen that the council of Efrat was putting up street lights, in between Efrat and the Arab village, along the dirt road that led to Beit Lechem. We were very nervous that terrorists, hearing of the good (and most importantly, quiet) relations we had with this village, would be tempted to sneak in to the village at night and open fire on Efrat, which of course would cause our men to fire back and enflame the area, as well as risking the lives of all concerned. As such, in a meeting prior to this, it had been decided that we would fund and undertake the project of putting up these streetlights. (The theory was that if the area was illuminated, especially as the road was under the watchful eye of our guards and patrols, it would be more difficult for the ‘Tanzim’ (terrorists) to sneak into the village, as well as giving us a better response time in the event that they did.)*

*The local Arab villagers, seeing a bulldozer and some engineers taking measurements, had become convinced that we were somehow trying to usurp their land, or perhaps fence them in (separating them from their vineyards that lie between Efrat and their village). So this deputy of security went in on his own to calm everybody down. (In normal times, he was often in and out of this village because of the close relationship they had with Efrat.)*

*When we calmed everybody down, and got this fellow out of there, I really let him have it. He had endangered me as well as my men, not to mention himself, and these were not the times to be walking into an Arab village alone with a gun, even if we had previously shared good relationships with these particular villagers.*

*But his response took the edge off the whole situation:*

*“You think I went in there because I care so much about those villagers? The reason I went in there was because I care so much about what this whole situation is doing to us. When we wake up in the morning, and this has all calmed down, I’m not worried about what we will have done to the Arabs, because that will be their fault. I am worried about what everything we have to do to the Arabs may do to us. It’s not their bodies I am worried about; it’s our soul.”*

*And while I still disagree with how he went about it, thinking back, it still makes me proud to be a part of an army and a people that think that way.*

*The real question, with all that is going on today, is how we protect our souls. When you hear about and see Jewish soldiers offering water to Arab terrorists, or cleaning up their homes after being forced to use them as lookout posts, what they are doing is not about the Arab property; it is about their Jewish souls.*

*This week, hidden between the lines of the portion of *Metzarah*, is a very powerful message about how what we do affects who we are.*

*In both this week’s portion, as well as last week’s (*Tazriah*), the Torah speaks of the *Metzarah*, a person who is ‘diagnosed’ by the Kohen (priest) as being afflicted by *Tzara’at*, a spiritual disease akin*

to (but not identical with) leprosy. This affliction comes, according to our tradition, as the result of the sin (mistake) of speaking *lashon hara'*, or slander. (See **Maimonides** *Hilchot Tuma't Tzara'at* 16:10) Once it is clear that an individual is in fact suffering from *Tzara'at*, he must leave not only his home and family, but the camp of Israel as well.

Only after the proscribed period of time, can he begin the process of re-entering society.

*“And the one becoming pure must wash his clothes, shave his hair, and wash in water and become pure, and (only) then may he come (back) into the camp, and sit **outside** his tent for (another) seven days.”*

(VaYikra 14:8)

Even after an extensive period of purification, the *Metzora* is still excluded from his home and family, and left outside his tent to continue his process of purification.

Given that the malady in question is clearly viewed by Jewish tradition as a physical consequence of a spiritual mistake, one wonders why the process of mending the error of his ways necessitates being shunned by society and excluded from even physically being a part of the community. Wouldn't it in fact be more productive to include such a person in the community in order to teach him the value of a positive relationship with those around him? Wouldn't we be better off showering him with love, rather than punishing him with banishment? Even the wicked son still joins us at the Pesach Seder, so why is this fellow, guilty of slander, banished from the camp?

Maimonides (quoted above) suggests that the penalty of the *Metzora* is so severe precisely because of the error in his ways, which we are attempting to correct: Since his sin is so destructive to the fabric of society, let him sit alone and contemplate what he was done. If his tongue (in slandering his fellow human beings) was used for such negative purposes, it is better, for a while, for him to have no one to talk to. Indeed, the Talmud (*Erchin* 16b) suggests that since he caused husbands to separate from wives, and friends to become separated from each other, let him now experience the same and be separated from everyone.

And while this is all true, it still seems at first glance that this punishment is counter-productive to what this process is hoping to achieve. How do we teach a person the value of one-ness, when all we do is to separate him from everybody else?

A closer look at this issue, however, reveals that all is not as it seems. If, indeed, the problem with slander (*Lashon Ha'Ra*) is that it causes people to think ill of each other, and distances the listener from those he is hearing slander about, causing rifts in society and undermining the goal of a people, and in fact a world, where we all learn to live as one, then we would have a hard time explaining a case of someone speaking slander being punished even when such a consequence to his actions could not possibly exist.

The best example of this, of course is the case of none other than Moshe himself. Moshe, in the midst of his dialogue with G-d at the burning bush, is suddenly made to experience the pain of *Tzara'at*, (Shemot 4:6), which **Rashi** explains comes as a punishment for his slander of the Jewish people. In declaring that the Jewish people would not believe he was indeed sent by G-d (4:1), Moshe is both

questioning the Jewish people's integrity, as well as slandering them in describing them as a people that would not believe the messenger of G-d. For this, suggests Rashi, Moshe is, fittingly, punished with a degree of *Tzara'at*, which, as mentioned is the consequence of slander. But what transgression has actually occurred?

Obviously, it is ludicrous to suggest that hearing the 'slander' of Moshe somehow impacts G-d's perception of the Jewish people! And it is equally absurd to imagine such slander can cause G-d to somehow distance Himself from the Jewish people. And the case of Moshe is not unique, as we find similar occurrences with both Eliayhu (Elijah) (*Melachim* (Kings) I, 19:10) as well as Yishayahu' (Isaiah) (6:5), who are both punished for their harsh criticism of the Jewish people, even they are speaking to no-one else but G-d!

Perhaps the transgression of slander is so severe, not only for its impact on society, but as well (and perhaps even foremost) for *its impact on the speaker himself*.

If a person can speak negatively about his or her fellow human being, then he or she does not really see the image of G-d that is part of every human being, and that has to gradually destroy your soul. If I speak ill of another person, I am not just damaging them (and their reputation), I am actually damaging myself as well.

Which leads us to an crucial idea that Rav Avigdor Nevehnsahl points out in his *Sichot Le'Sefer VaYikra*, and that is the relationship between where we are spiritually and where we are physically.

On Yom Kippur, as an example, the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) doesn't just walk straight in to the holy of holies in the Temple. He first has to undergo an extensive process, which prepares him for that moment. He too, like the *Metzora*, must leave his home for the seven days prior to Yom Kippur, only he is headed in the opposite direction: he actually lives on the Temple mount for seven days before he is considered ready to enter the temple and the Holy of holies. Apparently, part of the process, which elevates him spiritually, is that he lives in a place of sanctity. And where he is living is actually a part of who he is trying to become.

Conversely, the *Metzora* is forced out of even the Jewish camp (considered less sanctified than the Temple area, or the camp of the Kohanim (priests) or even the camp of the Levites), precisely because his soul is on a lower level. When he speaks slander, he damages his soul, and the desolation he may cause others, is first and foremost the desolation that affects himself. So he has to spend some time in a place of desolation, as befitting the spiritual state of his own soul.

This, incidentally, is why, when the Jewish people, through their misdeeds, reach a particularly low spiritual level, they are no longer worthy of living as a people, in the land of Israel, and are ultimately forced into exile. And even today, when we are in the midst of the incredible process of the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, we are still far from being worthy of a holy united city with a Beit HaMikdash, a home of sanctity, on the Temple mount.

In fact, one might even go so far as to suggest that the fact that there are today ten times as many Arabs living in the old city as there are Jews, and this despite the fact that we have a modern state of

Israel, is not because the Arabs are doing something wrong, but rather because we are. We are, it seems, not yet worthy of truly being home.

Sometimes, we become so immersed in our mistakes, that we don't appreciate how much work we have to do. We assume we are in great shape because after all, we are doing so many wonderful things. We (hopefully) give a lot of tzedakah; we celebrate Shabbat, and eat (some of us) the most kosher meat in town. We have only to look around, suggests the Torah, and see *where* we are, to realize, to some extent, *who* we are.

It is, therefore, not accidental that the **Chofetz Chaim** believed that the single transgression which was preventing us from the final redemption and the return home to Israel, was the monumental tragedy of *Lashon Hara* (slander).

Indeed, tradition tells us that this was in fact the terrible mistake of the spies who spoke ill of the land of Israel (and perhaps, in assuming they could not conquer the land even with G-d's help, of the Jewish people as well). Thus, the consequence of their error was 'exile', or forty years in the desert, on a par with the desolation this transgression brought in their hearts and souls.

And this is why the Torah commands us not only not to do bad things, but not to *think* them as well.

*"Lo' Tisnah' Et Achicha' Bi'Le'vevecha"* "And you shall not hate your brother in your heart."

Clearly, this is not about what you are doing to your fellow human being, but again, what you are doing to your self.

The problem of slander is that it destroys my perception of the G-dliness in others, and that destroys my soul. Which is why such a person is separated from society, and sent off to be alone. Because he needs time to do some serious thinking, or, quite literally, soul-searching.

Which of course leaves us with one last question: how does one accomplish this? If in fact the lower spiritual level a person is on demands he be sent to the wilderness, how does he get back home? What will actually cause the *Tzara'at* to leave him, and allow his body and soul to become pure again?

The *Tosefta* (*Sotah* 4:1) points out that the value of a good deed is five hundred times as much as the destruction caused by a 'bad' deed. Even if we choose not to take this literally, the rabbis are clearly pointing out that the value of goodness is not simply parallel to the negative consequences of evil. Consider then, the implications of one positive thought, if a negative one (such as speaking ill of the land of Israel) had such severe consequences. Imagine what it must do for your soul, to actually think *well* of another human being, or to praise a community (or its rabbi) rather than denigrate it.

To be sure, you won't get as many listeners if you are speaking positively about someone (or everyone), because we love to hear the 'dirt'. But by speaking positively, we succeed in cleaning up the dirt in our souls.

This, perhaps, is the essence of the Seder night, when we spend an entire evening, praising not only G-d, but also the entire Jewish people. The Mitzvah of this night is "*Ve'Higad'ta'...*": to tell over or

speaking, and the central part of the Seder is the *Maggid*, when we tell over to each other the story of the Exodus, and recognize the common bond we all share.

The solution to the challenge of avoiding the temptation to speak ill of each other, is simply to speak words of praise all night long. Which, of course, is how we get to the climax of the entire process: “*Le’Shanah Ha’Ba’ah Bi’Yerushalayim*”, the chance to finally come home to Israel and Jerusalem.

Because where we are effects who we are, even if we can’t always see it. And if we want to become the nation we are meant to be, maybe, finally, it is time to go home. Maybe this year will finally be the year; May Hashem bless us all to dance together soon in the alleyways of Jerusalem, and may we find the strength to see all the good in those around us, because that is how we will truly come home at last.

Best wishes for a sweet, happy, and, most importantly, a peaceful Pesach.

Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman