

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Metzora)

R. Smulyan, in his book '5000 B.C....', posits the question of two identical twin brothers, one who always lies, and the other who always tells the truth. The truth-teller always tells the truth and is always accurate; whatever is indeed true he actually believes to be true. The liar on the other hand, always lies, and his responses are always false, such that whatever is true he will always believe to be false and whatever is false he will always assume is true.

Thus, posits Smulyan, each brother will always give the same answer to the same question, but for different reasons:

"For example, suppose you ask whether two plus two equals four. The accurate truth-teller knows that it is and will truthfully answer yes. The inaccurate liar will believe that two plus two does not equal four (since he is inaccurate) and will then lie and say that it does; he will also answer yes." (Much like the case in which a schizophrenic patient is being considered for release from a mental institution. Asked if he was Napoleon, he replied "no" and the lie detector showed that he was lying!)

Smulyan poses a puzzle question: Suppose one were to meet one of the two brothers alone. Would it be possible by asking him one yes-no question, to determine which brother he is? (Think about this for a second ... ☺)

In fact, to determine which brother you are addressing, you would only need to ask him one question: just ask him if he is the accurate truth-teller. If he is, he will know that he is (since he is accurate) and truthfully will answer yes. If he is the inaccurate liar, he will believe that he is the accurate truth teller (since he is inaccurate in his beliefs), but then he will lie and say no. So the accurate truth teller will answer yes and the inaccurate liar no to this question.

Even though the two brothers give the same answers to the same questions, by asking each of them "Are you the accurate truth-teller?" they are really being asked two different questions since the identical word 'you' has a different reference for each of them....

This week's portion, *Metzora*, among other things, contains the purification rite of the leper. (Though we will use the word leprosy for convenience's sake, *Tzaraat* is clearly not the disease of leprosy more currently known as Hansen's disease; as an example, the Biblical affliction was not contagious, but rather a spiritual state which was generally viewed as the consequence of slander, amongst other transgressions, such as when Miriam seemed to slander Moshe in some way resulting in her affliction of *Tzaraat*.)

Once the Kohein (priest) has determined that the leprosy has been cured or removed, as part of the Metzarah (leper)'s being allowed to rejoin the main camp, he must (Leviticus Vayikra 14:4) take two live clean birds as an offering of sorts. One of the birds is slaughtered, and the second bird is dipped in the slaughtered bird's blood, before being 'set free upon the field' (14:7)

One cannot help but think of a very similar ritual which appears in next week's portion of *Acharei Mot*, in which the Kohein Gadol (High Priest) is meant, as one of the central points of the Yom Kippur service, to take two identical goats, one of which is slaughtered and the other of which is taken into the desert. Indeed, both of these goats are somehow part of the process whereby the Jewish people are purified and forgiven their sins. And the goat that is not slaughtered is indeed "sent into the desert". (ibid. 16: 10).

Yet, there are two noticeable and fascinating differences between these two rituals. Firstly, unlike the living bird the Metzarah brings, the living goat is not sprinkled with (or dipped in) the blood of the slaughtered goat.

And second, it seems clear that this goat was taken to the desert to die. Indeed, according to tradition, it was cast off a cliff where it would tumble and fall and be torn apart, apparently symbolic of our sins being torn apart as part of our repentance and subsequent forgiveness. (Tractate *Yoma* 67a)

Yet the bird that was set free would obviously not be assumed to die if it was 'set free upon then field'. In fact, the Rabbis (Tractate *Kiddushin* 57b), concerned over this fact, taught that one should not cast it towards the sea, or towards the desert, apparently to prevent its return, bringing the impurity it represented back with it. So why is it set free and what is this ritual meant to symbolize?

There are many different responses in the commentaries regarding this question, my favorite of which has always been the *Sefat Emet*, who suggests that the slaughtered bird represents the *Yetzer Hara* (the evil inclination) while the bird which is set free and lives represents the *Yetzer Hatov* (our desire to do good) dipped in blood, perhaps utilizing our appetite for evil, towards a better good.

However, there is another explanation, which I recently saw quoted in an article on this topic by Dr. Baruch and Judy Sterman (*Freebird*), which suggests a totally different understanding.

The *Chizkuni* (13th century French commentator) points out that a bird dipped in blood, set free upon the field would actually meet a very different fate than one might think. Indeed other birds would most probably see and even smell the blood and, either feeling threatened by a new and different identity, or sensing weakness and perhaps even assuming the bird is wounded, would most certainly attack it and kill it.

And most fascinating, this bird now set free and dipped in blood might have no idea of the danger it was flying into. Longing to return to its flock, it might have no idea of the danger it was flying into, until being attacked, overwhelmed and killed.

So... what does all this have to do with the Metzora? The Metzora (leper), forced to separate from society and leave the camp, was meant to consider the possibility that he or she may have committed the transgression of slander in one form or another. And the most terrible aspect of slander is the character assassination it inflicts on its hapless victim who may have no idea what people are saying about him or her, and may be totally unaware that his status has changed and people no longer see him or her quite the same way. Indeed, one wonders whether things can ever go back to quite the way they were. We may think we have set the bird free, but in reality it is marked with blood, and is already on one level, waiting to die.

And the slanderer too may have no idea of the harm they have inflicted and the damage they have done. Indeed, our general perception is that 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 separating us one from another. But the first time we find an allusion to leprosy and slander in the Torah would seem to belie this supposition:

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 essentially slandering the Jewish people by suggesting they would not believe the messenger of G-d. For this, suggests Rashi, Moshe is 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 Eliyahu (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 though 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 him or herself*.

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.

And the person who slanders is usually totally unaware of the fact that they are no longer the same person having been deeply impacted by the pain they may have caused and 'painted in the blood' of their transgression though totally oblivious of the harm they may have caused.

In order to re-enter the camp, and become part of a community experience that brings people together (leaving behind the behavior that causes us to be set apart ...) we have to both slaughter the bird that represents what we know we are doing wrong, as well as dip the second bird in blood and set it free

accepting that there are mistakes we have made which cannot be undone. Perhaps the sobering realization of the pain we can cause and the damage we may inflict will help us to avoid making the same mistakes in the future becoming instead part of the fabric of building a better, healthier community and society.

As *Smulyan* posits, with two identical birds (or identical twins) everything depends on how we see ourselves, and which 'you' we really want to be.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem, and wishing all a Chag Kasher ve'sameach and a wonderful Pesach.

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