

TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

Is Gossip a Disease? Is Silence the Cure?

Parshat Tazriah-Metzora, Leviticus 12:1 – 15:33:47

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z"l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Parshat Tazriah - Metzora deals primarily with the laws of 'leprosy.' This mysterious ailment is described in great deal in the Torah: how to identify it, what to do once a person (or an object) has been deemed contagious, and how to reintegrate a person into the community once the contagion has passed. The Torah speaks of *nega tzara'at*, "the affliction of leprosy." Modern scholars, however, have suggested that we are talking about something different here. *Tzara'at* is not the disease that we know as Hansen's disease. What's more, the contagion described in the Torah has more to do with spiritual purity than it does with a physical ailment. Still, the fact that the Torah uses of the word *nega*, "affliction," suggests that this disease is somehow a sign of divine displeasure or punishment. Of course, this idea is troubling to the modern reader of the Torah. If *tzara'at* can be deemed a punishment from above, where do we draw the line in making such judgments: heart disease, cancer, AIDS?

Much of the sermonic material on *Parshat Tazriah-Metzora* deals with gossip and slander. This idea is based on the story of Miriam who is stricken with 'leprosy' after criticizing her brother, Moses. The Torah reminds us never to forget what happen to Miriam, suggesting that there was more to her affliction than ill health. And while it is tempting to 'play' with the linguistic connection between *Metzora* (the term for a gossip) and *Motzi Shem Ra* (the Hebrew expression for slander), we must beware of the danger of afflicting a second injury on those who are already suffering from a physical illness.

Pirke Avot Chapter 1:17 Shimon his son (of Rabban Gamliel) said: All my days have I grown up among the wise and I have not found anything better for a person than silence. Studying Torah is not the most important thing rather fulfilling it. Whoever multiplies words will cause sin.

Sources

Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:8, Sifre Devarim 275

Rabbi Hanina said: Plagues of leprosy come on account of gossip (*lashon harah*). The Sages said that you can see for yourself that such plagues result from gossip. Even the righteous Miriam, who gossiped about her brother Moses--plagues clung to her, as a sign [and a warning] to all given to speaking slander. Hence, "remember what the Lord thy God did unto Miriam" (Deut. 24:9). Now, the matter may be reasoned *a fortiori*: if Miriam--who made certain not to speak to Moses directly, did so for Moses' own benefit [so he would take back his life and have more children], and spoke for the glory of Him who is everywhere and for the increase of the population of the world--was punished thus, how much more and more will he who speaks publicly in disparagement of his neighbor be punished!

(note: *a fortiori* is a technical term for a particular type of reasoning in which one deduces something obvious from something less obvious: if X is true, how much more so should that be in the case of Y)

Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 99a

Bar Kapara taught: Silence is seemly for the wise, all the more so for fools. Thus Solomon said, "Even a fool, when he holds his peace, is counted wise" (Proverbs 17:28). And it goes without saying that it is so when a wise man holds his peace.

Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 17a; compare with the conclusion of the Amida

Mar bar Rabina on concluding his Amida added the following: My God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking lies. May my soul be silent to them that curse me and may my soul be as the dust to all. Open Thou my heart in Thy law, and may my soul pursue Thy commandments, and deliver me from evil hap, from the evil impulse and from an evil woman (?) and from all evils that threaten to come upon the world. As for all that design evil against me, speedily annul their counsel and frustrate their designs! May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable before Thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer!

Jerusalem Talmud Pesachim

All chitchat is bad, except chitchat about Torah, which is good.

Commentary

Shimon ben Gamliel does not address the subject of gossip and slander directly in Pirke Avot but he draws the only logical conclusion we can possibly reach from the many statements and insights in rabbinic literature concerning the dangers of wicked speech, *lashon harah*. The sages suggested that God put our tongue in our mouths behind two lips and a set of teeth to protect us from ourselves: as long as we keep our mouths closed we are safe from injuring ourselves and others. Furthermore, the lobes on each of our ears are placed in a convenient location so that when people speak ill of others, we have something with which to stop up our ears and block out the sound of their voice.

That leprosy is not necessarily caused by gossip is obvious to us today. It is also proven by the fact that more of us aren't lepers. After all, there are few people who don't gleefully engage in this practice from time to time. Still, there is room for poetic and creative thinking in describing gossip as a disease, not much better than leprosy. First, gossip, like leprosy, is contagious; it affects everyone who hears it and not just the victim against whom it is spoken. Second, like leprosy, gossip has the power to isolate one person from another. It breeds distrust, anger and hurt. And third, both the disease called tzara'at and gossip affect both the body and the soul. A broken heart is not just a metaphor – it has real physical implications for a person's wellbeing.

So where do we draw the line. The sages distinguish between *rechilus* (tale bearing), *lashon harah* (spreading negative and embarrassing stories about others, and *motzi shem ra* (slander or spreading false tales about others). While one is worse than the others, all three forms of illicit speech are strictly forbidden according to Maimonides and other decisors of Jewish law. So what can we say? According to the sages, the best choice is to remain silent. But that is not always possible or feasible. So what are we to do? Possibly the only choice we have is to be as self conscious and aware as possible when we speak; to recognize that we are entering into a mine field in which even the most harmless words can quickly become toxic. And of course there are times when silence may not be the right choice. Still we must recognize the dangers every time we open our mouths!

Questions to Ponder

1. Should rabbis continue to give sermons in which they equate sin and disease? Why or why not?
2. Ecclesiastes said: "There is a time to speak and a time to be silent." When is the time to speak and when should we remain silent?
3. The statement of Mar bar Rabina is included at the end of the daily Amida three times every day. It is one of several such prayers included in the Talmud as examples of how the sages added their own personal supplications to the fixed liturgy. How is this version of the prayer different from the one included in our prayer book? What do you make of his statement asking God to protect him from evil women?
4. Almost daily in the newspaper and on television we hear the latest gossip about celebrities and movie stars. Do you think this is a form of gossip? How are we to treat such statements?
5. Do you agree with the statement that "all chitchat" is bad? Why or why not? If you could remove one thing from your daily conversation what would it be?

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