

**If a man will have on the skin of his flesh, a rising or a scab, or a bright spot, and it will become a tzaraas affliction on the skin of his flesh.....it is a tzaraas affliction; the Kohen shall look at it and declare him contaminated. (13:2;3)**

If we were to consider the *avos ha'tumah*, main categories of spiritual contamination, i.e.: *tumas meis*, corpse of a human being, *sheretz*, *neveilah*, dead bodies of large and eight small mammals, *shichvas zera*, *zav*, *zavah*, various body emissions, *niddah*, menstruate and *yolodes*, a woman who has just given birth, we would note that the one common theme among them is death or cessation of life. In one way or another, each one alludes to a termination of life, a lost opportunity for producing life, or a time frame in which reproduction is not a viable condition. Even the new mother is *tamei* because she has just given birth; a life has left her body. Given this common theme, why is *tumas tzaraas* included in the above list?

**Horav Yitzchak Goldwasser, Shlita**, suggests a distinct correlation between *tzaraas* and death. *Chazal* tell us that the plague of *tzaraas* is a spiritual affliction visited on a person for poor use of the G-d-given gift of speech. *Lashon hora*, slander, stands at the top of the list of offenders. Disparaging others - be they people, organizations, or institutions - is one of the most destructive non-violent crimes one can perform. In a number of places the *Torah* addresses us regarding the gravity of *lashon hora*. It clearly states the prescribed punishment for one who slanders- *tzaraas*. We are exhorted to "*Remember what Hashem did to Miriam*" as a way of telling us, "If you speak *lashon hora*, you will be stricken with *tzaraas*."

The *p'gam ha'dibbur*, debasement and blemishing of one's power of speech, is essentially equivalent to the destruction of one's *chiyus*, life. Regarding the *pasuk* in *Bereshis*, 2:8, "*And man became a nefesh chaya, a living being*," *Targum Onkeles* explains, "*And He MADE MAN for a spirit/being that speaks*." According to *Onkeles*, the concept of "*nefesh chayah*," the *Torah's* allusion to a living human being, refers to the power of speech that is invested into every human. Man's supremacy over the animal world is based on his ability to express himself through intelligent speech. Is it any wonder that *Chazal* maintain that "life and death is in the 'hands' of the tongue."? One who degrades his speech destroys a part of his life!

*Horav Goldwasser* applies this idea to interpreting the words in the *tefillah* of *Nishmas*, "*Therefore the organs that You set within us, and the spirit and soul that You breathed into our nostrils and the tongue that You placed within our mouth*." If we note the text of the *tefillah*, the "tongue" is not included among the "organs." Why? It must be that Hashem's infusing of life into man is a reference to the gift of speech. While it is the organs and physical makeup of a person that renders him a human, the power of speech actually gives him life, distinguishing him from the animal world.

The power of speech serves as the link that connects the spiritual *neshamah*, soul, with the physical body. "The mouth is *kodesh kodoshim*, holy of holies," writes the *Gaon M'Vilna*. It is the bridge that unites the spiritual with the physical. Indeed, *tzaraas*, which is the result of *lashon hora*, is very much involved with death, just like the other instances of *tumah*. In fact, it is his own life - his power of speech - that he is destroying. Is there a greater form of *tumah*?