

When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male... if a person will have on the skin of his flesh a seis, or a sapachas. (12:2) (13:2)

As happens often, I received a call from a father who was celebrating his son's *bar-mitzvah* on *Parashas Tazria*, and he wanted something to say for a *Dvar Torah*. Obviously, I had written *Parashas Tazria* a few weeks ahead of time. After giving it some thought, I began to wonder: What is the connection between *Parashas Tazria* and *bar-mitzvah*? The question actually goes deeper. *Tazria* begins with the laws concerning a woman who gives birth, the *korbanos* she should offer after a period of time and other laws connected with birth. The Torah then moves on to the laws of *tzaraas*, a sort of spiritual leprosy. We read about *tzaraas* for the remainder of the *parsha* – and the next *parsha*, as well. A woman bringing life into the world; a person relegated to living his life in seclusion in quarantine – almost like death. Do these two topics have a common denominator? Perhaps we may suggest the following.

Ishah ki sazria, parents have a child. It is not pre-determined that they will have *nachas* from this child. It depends upon the various educational and parental choices they make. This, in addition to the many factors and circumstances in life which always seem to crop up when we expect and need them the least, most often determines the child's success. It all depends upon choices. The right choices most often engender success; the wrong choices invariably spell disaster. The issue often boils down to the definition of right and wrong. I must add that success is relative, and its definition is often subjective – but that is a separate discussion.

lashon hora, evil speech. Here, too, choices play a critical role. *Chazal* teach, *Ha'chaim v'ha'maves b'yad ha'lashon*, "Life and death are in the hands of the tongue." One does not have to speak ill of others; one is not compelled to slander them. One individual may actively desire to impugn the reputation of another maliciously. A second person simply does not think before he speaks, with the result that someone becomes his victim.

The tongue is not a bad organ. It all depends how one uses it. One can choose life; one can choose death. Regrettably, the choices are not always so clear. Often what one thinks is life is actually the long road to death – and vice versa. This is why we have the benefit of Torah to guide us in making the correct choices.

The greatest gift other than life itself, is the ability to choose one course of action from a set of alternatives. The ability to choose sets us apart as intelligent humans from those who are not so. With the opportunity of choice comes responsibility, which is the prelude to reward. We take responsibility for our choices, and we follow through to our goals. When we achieve those goals, our reward is the happiness accompanying the realization of our goals.

Choice is the creative power of life. One who ignores this gift goes through life in a static sense,

without feeling, without enthusiasm, without goals. He does not lead. He is led by the flow. Some of us are afraid to make choices, because of the responsibility they incur; others fear making the wrong choice. We must determine what we ultimately seek out of life, what our goals are. If we use a modicum of intelligence, we will choose to follow the path that leads to the fruition of our goals. When there are bumps in the road, we change course when necessary. Life offers no guarantees. One who makes poor choices, however, or lacks the intelligence or maturity to enter into the process of choosing, is probably assured of some form of failure. Indeed, even if he just goes with the flow and somehow makes it, it will have been an uneventful, bland journey. P.S. There is one thing worse than making the wrong choice in life: perpetuating that wrong decision.