

This shall be the law of the metzora on the day of his purification: He shall be brought to the Kohen. (14:2)

Chazal (Arachin 15) Reish Lakish said: “What is the meaning of that which is written, ‘This shall be the law of the motzi shem ra (slanderer)?’” Chazal equate the affliction of tzaraas with the prohibition against motzi shem ra, slander. One who resorts to evil/defamatory speech will deservedly become afflicted with tzaraas, spiritual leprosy (for lack of a better term). Certain aspects of tzaraas/motzi shem ra should be addressed. Shlomo Hamelech says (Mishlei 18:21), Ha’ma’ves v’ha’chaim b’yad ha’lashon; “Death and life are in the hand (power) of the tongue.” This often - quoted pasuk is most identified with lashon hora, evil speech. The tongue has enormous powers: positive, life-sustaining – as well as devastating, death-inducing – powers. It is up to the person to determine how he uses his mouth. Since the pasuk seems to address the power of the tongue, it should have said so: ma’ves v’chaim b’lashon. Why does it add b’yad ha’lashon, in the hand of the tongue? What does the hand have to do with it?

Another area that begs elucidation is the Kohen’s function vis-à-vis the tumah process of tzaraas. No other tumah, ritual contamination, is dependent upon the Kohen uttering the word, tamei, “impure.” This is true even if there is no question concerning the affliction; it is clearly tzaraas. Yet, until the Kohen gives the “word,” the person remains clean/pure. This is true even when all signs of affliction have disappeared, and the person is clearly healed; unless the Kohen gives the word – tahor, the metzora remains in his state of impurity. Why?

Last is the manner in which the afflicted person presents himself and his plague to the Kohen. The Torah insists that he say: K’nega niraah li, “It seems to me that I have seen a nega.” He may not make a definitive statement: Nega niraah li; “I have seen a nega.” In other words, the afflicted person must rely solely upon the Kohen’s decision, specifically the Kohen’s articulation of the word tamei. The rendering of tumah had to be enunciated by the Kohen; indeed, in the event that Kohen was not well-versed in Hilchos negaim, the laws that apply to plagues, he was required to summon a talmid chacham, Torah scholar, to view the affliction and to make the decision regarding its impure status. Then – after he had made the decision and conveyed it to the Kohen, the Kohen vocalized the word, tamei. Does this not beg elucidation? Does the Kohen’s verbalization of the Halachic status of this person render him tamei? Since when does a state of being depend on defining it by oral expression?

The purification process, which the Torah describes for the metzora, employs the use of cedar wood and hyssop, crimson wool dyed with the pigment of a worm. Rashi explains that the metzora should lower himself from his arrogance (cedar wood) like a worm (a low crawling creature) and like a hyssop (an herb which does not grow very high). In other words, these three items are to imbue the metzora with a sense of humility.

This implies that the sin of the metzora is generated by excessive pride. How does this reconcile

with the earlier Midrash which attributes the transgression of the metzora to speaking slanderous speech?

Horav Nissan Alpert, zl, explains that unmitigated, excessive pride in oneself lies at the very crux of the sin of motzi shem ra. The fellow who slanders, who speaks ill, of his fellow man often justifies his nefarious comments with comments such as, "Well, I am only speaking the truth. Check it out. I am not saying anything new. Everyone knows that so and so is a dangerous, wicked swindler, etc." He does not view his "commentary" as sinful. On the contrary, he considers himself a saint for performing a public service for the community. He is capable of taking any situation involving his fellow man and vilifying it, transforming what might have been ambiguous behavior to the nadir of infamy.

The motzei shem ra considers himself a tzaddik, righteous person. Because he is so wrapped up in himself, he does not see lucidly. He views the actions of others who do not see eye-to-eye with him as contemptuous. Thus, he maligns anyone who, in his distorted arrogance, does not agree with or support him.

The Rosh Yeshivah adds that the term, "weapon of destruction", which most often refers to the tongue, is not exclusive to the tongue. There are times when a well-timed gesture of contempt, such as a wave/flip of the hand (a dismissal of the man and his reputation), is equally defamatory and destructive. Sometimes it is the tongue and, other times, it is the "hand." This is what is meant by "the hand of the tongue."

The source of the problem, the origin of motzi shem ra/slander, defamation of character in its various forms, is a lack of humility. Excessive pride, foolish misplaced haughtiness, and downright crude arrogance are all responsible for the slanderer's slander. We define people and their actions through a misguided lens of subjectivity – to fit our envious nature. If we would not be victims of gross arrogance, we would view ourselves as inappropriate to pass judgment concerning the activities, character motivations, of others. One who lacks humility finds himself hard-pressed to refrain from judging others – and, for the most part, rendering a subjective judgment based on personal envy.

Furthermore, when the support system that provokes his low opinion of his fellow is his personal arrogance, he sticks to his guns, maintaining his propriety, despite all of the proof to the contrary. Arrogance deludes; arrogance born of envy and low self-esteem corrupts one's mind and actions. The latter type of person never agrees with reason. Thus, his first step toward humility, and eventual teshuvah and purification, is to come to the Kohen, the individual who is totally dedicated to Hashem, and say, "K'nega niraah li, "It seems to me that I might have seen a plague." Humble, unpretentious – this is how he should approach the Kohen. Then we can hope for a cure. He now realizes that pronouncements are not made by people whose subjective leanings cloud their judgment. The Kohen views life and people through the lens of clarity – the lens of Torah.

Limud z'chus, judging people favorably, giving people the benefit of the doubt, is much more than an exhortation against a subjective/negative outlook on people. It means simply that unless one knows for certain that there is a negative twist to what he has just seen, he must take a positive, favorable outlook. This can, at times, distinguish between life and death. No dearth of stories demonstrates the error of negative judgment of others, but the following is an instance (which could happen to any one of us, at any time and in any place).

This incident took place in the famous Lederman Shul, but it could have happened anywhere.

This story was related first-hand by the gabbai of the second Netz, sunrise, minyan in the Lederman Shul. There are two daily simultaneous minyanim at Netz. The large minyan convenes in the large street-level beis medrash. The second minyan is the quicker one and meets upstairs. On the day in question, the upstairs minyan had some difficulty putting together a minyan. They finally had ten men and began davening. Alas, when it came to chazoras ha'Shatz, repeating the Shemoneh Esrai, one of the worshippers "ran" and they now had only nine men. The gabbai went outside and discovered the elusive tenth man sitting outside, seemingly relaxed, hands folded, almost as if he did not have a care in the world. "Why did you leave?" the Gabbai asked. "We need you." "I cannot go back. There is no air. I cannot breathe in there," was the man's reply.

"What do you mean there is no air? There are ceiling fans that are circulating the air. The windows are open. There is plenty of air." (Veritably, Bnei Brak does get quite hot and humid in the summer. I assume that, even if the incident occurred in the summer, since it was early morning, it was still cool.)

The gabbai was visibly upset, but seeing that the man was not moving, he left to look for another tenth man. This is how the story should have ended. Sadly, this is not how it ended. The original tenth man waited outside until his wife concluded davening. (She, too, had joined him daily for netz Shacharis.) He then told her that he did not feel well and could not breathe. They immediately went to Maaynei Ha'Yeshua Hospital, where the emergency room doctors checked him out. By the time they confirmed that he had suffered a serious heart-attack, he had passed on to his eternal rest!

Now, let us catch our breath and go back a few hours to the time when the gabbai had confronted the man who was complaining of a lack of air and ask ourselves: Would our response have differed from that of the gabbai? Probably not. The man was young, strong, and in seemingly good health. I am positing that the end would not have been different. Hashem Yisborach determines this. Imagine, however, having to live with the idea, in the back of one's mind, that had he given greater credence to the man's reiterating that he lacked air – the story's conclusion might have been different.

It does not have to be a heart attack. It could be depression or a host of other causes of a person's unusual behavior. It does not mean that he is "strange," in a bad mood, etc. By taking people seriously, we might prevent something serious from happening to them.