

If a tzaraas affliction will be in a person. (13:9)

Tzaraas, spiritual leprosy, is visited upon a person who fails to curb his tongue. *Lashon hora*, slanderous speech, is the rubric under which sins of verbal expression fall. Veritably, it does not have to be verbal; it may be a non-verbal expression, such as a turn of the nose, a “hrrumph” negatively dispatched with enough venom behind it to destroy a person: all this falls under the *lashon hora* classification. We also recognize such a phenomenon as *lashon tov*, good, complimentary speech, words that soothe, embrace, empower, ennoble and show that someone respects and cares about you. Sadly, the negative trumps the positive in random interchange. It requires a greater degree of effort to think positively than to denigrate. Most who minimize the achievements of others, who disparage their characters, who seek avenues to vilify their goals and objectives, are people whose envy of others has compromised their cognitive abilities, leaving them with nothing but hostility and vindictiveness – all the products of self-loathing.

I would much rather write about something pleasant – a positive action performed sincerely – an action that saved the present and established the foundation for a wonderful, secure future. The following story related by Rabbi Henoah Teller is inspiring. It shows how a well-placed word at a critical moment elevated a person’s self-worth and enabled him to continue his journey to live a Torah life.

It was *Erev Yom Kippur*, the busiest time of the year for *mikvah* goers. It is crowded all day, as Torah Jews from all walks of life and every religious persuasion immerse themselves in the water in preparation for the holiest day of the year. Understandably, most *mikvaos* are not built for the crowd that comes en masse on this special day. People make do with some of the inconveniences, hygienic and physical, which are the inevitable consequences of being at the *mikvah* on *Erev Yom Kippur*. No one seems to care, because it is *Erev Yom Kippur*. Included in the crowd was a young man who was “trying out” Yeshiva Ohr Sameach to see whether he was willing to adopt this lifestyle. He looked different, being that he was the only male in the room sporting a long ponytail. He felt self-conscious about his hair, especially when he removed his rubber band that kept it all in place. There was, however, more.

People do not immerse themselves fully-clothed in a *mikvah*. Our young man had recently been a member of a cult that was into physical gratification of every sort. As such, he had various tattoos on his body declaring his affiliation with this cult. [This is often part of the baggage that a *baal teshuvah* brings to the fore. With love and sensitivity, it can be addressed and ameliorated.] When his tattoos were exposed, a hush pervaded the crowded *mikvah*. The people did not want to be rude. It is just that they were not accustomed to such an artistic display – especially on the human body, the repository of the Divine soul and the manifestation of the *Tzelem Elokim*, Divine Image. He had impressive artwork, the pride and joy of the finest Asian body artists. The silence continued, as the young man slowly made his way to the steps going down to the *mikvah*. To say that he felt self-conscious would be an understatement. He felt like going into the water and staying there, rather than face humiliation. Suddenly, an elderly Jew made his way to the steps and went

over to the young man who was about to descend. The elderly man took hold of the shoulders of the young fellow and, with glistening eyes, said, "Look here, young fellow, I, too, have a tattoo." He then pointed to the row of numbers that were tattooed on his arm, courtesy of the Nazi murderers: "Just in case I ever forget what those monsters did to me, I have the tattoo. You, too, have come a long way. You have something to remind you how far you have come."

As soon as the elderly Jew said his piece, the sounds of lively conversation returned to the *mikvah*. The young man was now one of them – all because someone said a kind, thoughtful word to the "visitor" from a different culture who was returning "home" to where he belonged.