

# **SAVING THREE LIVES**

**Parshas Taharas Mitzora**

**By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach**

The Sidrah outlines the procedure of the Metzora's purification. A Metzora is one who suffers a discoloration of part of the skin. The Talmud teaches (Arachim 16b) that it is a punishment for the sin of evil speech, such as gossip (even when true) and slander (which is not true). Thus it is the Kohain who treats him. The Torah regards the Kohain an authority whose speech is circumscribed with sanctity. "For the Kohain's lips are to keep knowledge, and the Torah law are they to seek from his mouth..." (Malachi 2:7). Thus it is the Kohain who is authorized to declare someone as contaminated, a Metzora. And it is the Kohai who can declare him TOHOR (clean) following the completion of the purification process. The Kohain's position in the process is most appropriate, since it is evil speech that caused contamination. It is therefore the Kohain's pronouncement "TOHOR" that transforms him into being TOHOR.

The author of the sefer Chofetz Chayim on the laws of the forbidden Loshon horo (evil speech) is also the author of Mishna Brura, which covers the daily essentials of a Torah Jew twenty four hours a day, every day of the year, and is studied diligently by all Bnei Torah throughout the Torah world. Yet this author is identified by the name Chofetz Chayim, a reference to the passage "Which man desires life..., guard your tongue from evil..." (Tehilim 34:13,14), It is because it is an issue of life and death. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21). The Talmud states (Arachin 15b): "Evil speech about another kills three people: the speaker, the listener, and the person spoken about".

The temptation and instinctive enchantment to murder experienced by the Nazis, yemach shemom, still exists by those enemies who dance when four members of a Jewish family are murdered, and brazenly calling the murderer a hero, as occurred recently. Among, lehavdil, the sacred Jewish people, this enticement does not exist. However, in a fraction, miniature touch, the comparison is not utterly inconceivable. Thus, the one who guards his tongue from speaking detriment of another is indeed described as one

who loves life. The same is applicable to the one who would not listen to Loshon hora.

At creation of man the Torah states "And Hashem formed the man ... and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a LIVING being". The Targum translates the word "living", "a speaking spirit". The power of speech is identified with life itself. No wonder, then, that the Talmud regards evil talk of another, contamination of that power of speech as crushing life itself. And overwhelming that temptation is tantamount to saving three lives, justifying the title of this essay, regarding the cleansing procedure of the Metzora.

The procedure itself in the cleansing process is also focused on the effects of evil speech about another. It is unique, unlike a Korbon. The Kohain takes two Tziporim (birds), brings them out of the Jewish quarter, where the Metzora is isolated, slaughters one bird. The living bird is dipped in the blood of the slaughtered bird, and sprinkled on the contaminated, the Metzora. The thought-challenging here is grippingly profound. When one speaks evil of another, he KILLS his reputation, denies him opportunities to succeed. The tale-bearer erroneously thinks he did nothing terrible. It is not so. As the living bird is dipped in the blood of the slaughtered bird, the tale bearer is dipped in the "bloody" reputation he caused the victim.

Only after the completion of the process of purification can the Metzora return back into the camp, together with members of Klal Yisroel, joining them in Torah study, in prayer, and mitzva activities. Purity of speech is a fundamental principle without which one cannot expect favorable Heavenly response to supplications and entreaties.

In Parshas Haazinu, Moshe exclaims: "Ki Shame Hashem..." I will call upon the name of Hashem... (Devorim 32:1-3). Targum Jonathan counts eighty-five letters from the beginning of "Haazinu" till "Hashem", the numerical value of "Peh" (mouth). The Targum interprets this number to mean that Moshe sanctified his mouth (PEH) with 85 letters before pronouncing the name of Hashem. This is the passage recited before the Shemona Esra (for Mincha). At the conclusion of Shemona Esra, again, we pray "guard my tongue from evil..."

As we are nearing the Yom Tov Pesach, it is apropos to mention here the daily chapter "Hodu" which concludes with a Passover concept, and is recited before the chapters of Tehilim (called Psukei deZimra), and in Nusach Sefard even before the Bracha Boruch Sheomar. That passage reads, "I am Hashem your G-d Who raised you from the land of Egypt, open your mouth wide and I will fill it". The Targum adds: "with words of Torah", i.e. opening the mouth with words of Torah. "I will fill it", i.e. respond favorably.

The perspicacious "davener" understands that "opening wide the mouth" does not refer to the physical size, but rather to the sanctity of what is being uttered. This is clearly related to Pesach which sforim say stands for Pe Soch (a mouth that speaks). Having exiting from Egypt, and ascending, "Hamaalcho", the mouth, the speech, is purified and gets favorable results.

Another connection of our theme to Pesach should hereby be mentioned. The Ramban expounds the two Tziporim used in the process of purification of the Metzorah to refer to special kinds of birds that rise early morning, as soon as they notice a ray of light, and begin flying around chirping and twittering. "Tziporim", says the Ramban, comes from the Aramaic "Tzafra" (morning). The Toras Kohanim is quoted disapproving the use of doves or turtledoves for this purpose (see Minchas Chinuch, mitzvah 173:3).

The advantage of Tziporim "early birds" over other birds, one may suggest, lies in the Torah character of sanctifying the early, the first, action of the day. The first possesses the natural tendency to influence all that follow afterward, to remain on course. "Sanctify to Me every first born" the Torah reads in connection with the Exodus from Egypt (Shemos 13:2,3). The sanctified level of the first born is based on the fact that he is first, and followed by siblings. When Hashem sent Moshe to Pharaoh to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, He called them "My firstborn son is Israel... send out My son..." (Shemos 4:22,23). Some philologists may concur with the thesis that the complimentary description "early birds" to early risers, stems from this week's Sidra, according to Ramban, that Tziporim is a reference, exclusively to early birds.

