

Mourning for Oneself and Consolation

Parshas Tazria-Tahara

By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

"The first thing I do in the morning," a man said jokingly, "is to open the obituary page of the newspaper, and if I don't see my name in it I give thanks to the Al-mighty." To which the listener replied in the same frame of mind, "And what do you do if you do find your name therein, do you sit Shiva for yourself?"

The humor turns into grave seriousness in the context of this week's parsha, where mourning for oneself is an actuality. It is experienced by a leprous person. "And the leper in whom is the plague, his clothes shall be rent.." (Vayikro 13:45), "as a sign of mourning for the sins which had reduced him to this state" (Ibn Ezra, and see Rashi *ibid.*). This behavior, resembling a mourner, can be understood in the light of the Torah perspective regarding an evil tongue, which, as Rashi explains (*ibid.* 14:4) brings the retribution of leprosy.

Two basic laws are recorded in one passage in the Chumash, which at first glance seem unrelated: "Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people; thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor" (Vayikro 19:15). The RaMBaM remarkably points out (Hilchoth Daioth 7:1) that these two laws are mentioned together because talebearing can cause bloodshed. (See also Medrosh Hagodol Vayikro *ibid.*) The Targum Jonathan calls the Rechilus'nik (talebearer): "Lishne telisoe", a triple tongue, because an "evil tongue "kills" three individuals, the disparager himself, the person spoken to, and the person spoken about" (Airuchim 15b). When evil is uttered about a fellow man, it is carried away as with a stormy wind. The damage is done; it cannot be rectified. It is as a bullet already fired, beyond control. The defiled impression can never be erased. It is a deadly shot "killing" the good name of the

individual. It is also venom poisoning the mind of the listener who accepts it. It is also, above all, a deadly blow against the scandalmonger himself.

In creating man, the Al-mighty "formed Adam of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a LIVING soul (Braishis 2:7). Onkeles translates: "And man became a SPEAKING spirit". The human faculty of speech, according to Onkeles is synonymous with life itself. Man's ability to communicate with fellow man is the substance of human life. When it is misused, and instead of promulgating peace and understanding one promotes suspicion and hatred, he sows not life but death. The slanderer himself is the first victim of his own venomous tongue. For he chokes that "breath of life" (NISHMAS CHAIM) which made him a speaking spirit. When the punishment ensues, and he suffers leprosy, he experiences a mourning period of seven days for his own "death", or waste of life.

There is only one solution for the dilemma of the evil tattler. He can go through a metamorphosis by returning to the original purpose in according man the power of speech, the ultimate of which is communicating in Torah.

On the surface one finds it difficult to see an evil tongue as a disease, and Torah study as the healing process. However, it is King Solomon, the wisest of all (Melochim 1, 5:11), who authors the above advice. His vast knowledge included medical insight (Ramban's introduction to Chumash, quoted in Tosfos Yom Tov Psochim 4:9).

The Talmud states (ibid.): "What hope is there for one who spoke evil? Let him study Torah, as it says 'The tree of life (Torah) is a healing of the tongue' (Mishlei 15:4)". The tongue has been endowed with the power not only to sow death but also to breed life. "Death and life is in the grip of the tongue" (ibid. 18:21). By using the faculty of speech to convey Torah insights, the Jew is bestowed a chance for the revival of life, once again becoming truly a NEFESH CHAYO, a speaking spirit.

The leper's cleaning process, thus, is to bring an offering of two birds (14:4). Since leprosy comes as punishment for evil talk, babbling words, consequently, his purification requires birds which babble continually with chirping sounds (Rashi ibid.). "Let the chirping sounds of the birds atone for the sounds of malicious gossip" (Medrowh 16:7, Airuchim 16b). The Maharsha explains: One of the birds is slaughtered and one remains alive, (14:5,6). The slaughtered one symbolizes the deadly nature of slander and evil talk. The living bird symbolizes the healing process and the revival of life by the sounds of Torah study.

Conversely, a clean tongue is a pivotal prerequisite for success in the pursuit of Torah knowledge. Thus at the conclusion of the Shemona Esrei, the Jew supplicates: "Guard my tongue from evil... Open my heart to Thy Torah..."

It should be emphasized that in addition to "thinking" thoughts of Torah, there is an advantage in "speaking" words of Torah, i.e. communicating Torah to others. The spoken Torah possesses the value to rectify the sin of "speaking " guile.

Tosfos (Berachos 40a) relates that R' Menachem was cautious to bring salt (which has quality of atonement, as with a Korbon) to the table. The atonement was needed, because following Netilas Yodayim, as he waited for his guests to wash hands, they lacked "communication" of Torah, though one was able to think silently in Torah.

The Mishna (Avoth 3:3) likens a table with three studying Torah at their meal to eating a Korbon at the altar in the Beth Hamikdosh. The Mishna specifies, however, this applies to a discussion, communicating in Torah.

