

Tazria

Projection, Inferiority, Superiority, Leprosy

In the *Torah* portion *Tazria-Metzora* we learn about a peculiar disease called *Zoras*, or leprosy, which the rabbis say does not conform to the leprosy that we know today. This type of leprosy was brought upon a person because he talked *Loshan Hora*, because he gossiped about another person. However, *Loshan Hora* is not when you tell a lie about a person; it is when you tell the truth about a person because you know you can do more harm many times by telling the truth than by telling any lie. As William Blake said, "The truth that is told with bad intent beats all the lies that you can invent." It is not important to tell truths about an individual unless the other individual needs to know. Just spreading the truth about an individual when there is no reason for anybody to know about these things is a terrible sin according to Judaism. So what if a person in his youth did bad things? That was 20 or 30 years ago and nobody needs to know about them now. Or what business is it of other people to know that a person had a fight with his wife? It is nobody's business except their own, especially since there was no violence or trickery or deception involved. The truth should be told when it is detrimental to a person only if there is a need to know. If somebody calls you up and asks you about a reference for a person for a job then you should tell them the truth about that person. If someone calls you up and wants to make a *Shiddah*, a marriage arrangement for somebody or they just want somebody to go out on a date, then it is important that the person's characteristics should be known, of if you want to take out a loan from somebody or give a loan to somebody, then, of course, you have to know the facts that are relevant to the case, but in most instances it is not important to talk about bad things about people, even if they are true because there is no point to it. It only spreads rancor, and it only creates disunity and destroys trust between individuals. We all know, too, that if a person is constantly talking bad about other people, even though at first glance the person who is talking bad seems to get a positive response from everyone to whom he is telling all this gossip and tidbits, it is not so. If we examine carefully what happens in this case, we will see that the person who hears all this gossip may look like he is enjoying it and maybe he is enjoying actually hearing about all

these true things that are detrimental about another person, but the moment the person who told him these things leaves, he has a very bad feeling about that person. He has a very bad feeling about that person because he knows that if that person can talk about a third person the way he has, what is that person going to tell another person when he talks about him, when he talks about the person to whom he has just talked? We know we get very worried about these kinds of people because if they can talk badly about other person, what are they going to say about us? That, of course, means that that person who tells *Loshan Hora* is going to be shunned. People are not going to be too anxious to get into contact with that person, and it will cause that person not to even understand what he has done wrong, but people really do not want to hear *Loshan Hora* from another person about a third person because it skews the relationship. Oh, yes, they like to read about *Loshan Hora* and will buy the *National Inquirer* and all sorts of other smutty magazines that malign people's characters but in a personal relationship, you do not want to hear things from a person about a third person because you know that that person is going to start talking about you as soon as he leaves your presence.

In fact, the rabbis say that a person talks *Loshan Hora* because he has a compulsion to run other people down. That person, himself, has no feelings of self-worth, and that is why the punishment for a leper, for one who has this disease of always speaking *Loshan Hora*, is to go outside the camp. When he goes outside the camp, the *Torah* says, his clothes should be rent and the hair of his head should go loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and shall cry, "Unclean, unclean." The rabbis explain that what it means is that he has to cry and say "unclean" because I am unclean. In other words, I called other people unclean because I, myself, am really unclean. He projects his own sense of inferiority onto other people, and this sense of inferiority makes him try to act superior. He tries to hide his sense of inferiority. He tried to hide what he really feels about himself. He tries to pretend that he, himself, does not have these faults that he is finding in others. The truth of the matter is that a person who usually speaks *Loshan Hora* about others, knows that he has these same faults that he finds in others. He knows that these faults are really faults that he has. Therefore, you find people who are constantly yelling, "Stop shouting. I

hate people who shout,” and they are the ones who shout the loudest. Have you ever noticed in *shul* that the people who are always complaining about people talking in *shul* are the ones themselves who talk in *shul*, and the people who complain about other people not paying their dues are usually the people who pay their dues at the very last minute in order to get their High Holiday tickets, and you almost always find, too, that people who complain about egotistical, self-engrossed people are, themselves, usually very egotistical and self-absorbed. They project their faults on others and when they yell this is no good, this is no good, the reason they are yelling that is because they, themselves, really do not feel good about themselves.

That’s why the rabbis tell us why when this person who has this leprosy is cured, he has to bring three sacrifices. He has to bring an *Oshom*, a *Chatas*, and an *Olah*. We can understand why he has to bring an *Oshom* because that is a guilt offering and he stands guilty before G-d because he has destroyed society by his type of talk. You will destroy the trust that is necessary between individuals so that people can speak freely without being afraid that their words are going to be transmitted in a different context, and their reputation is going to be smeared. Therefore, it destroys all sorts of trust, and we can understand why he has to bring a *Chatas* because he has sinned against a particular individual, but why does he have to bring an *Olah*? In fact, the rabbis say that when a person is cleansed from his leprosy, he has to take two birds, and one of them he slaughters and the blood falls into the living waters, into running water that he catches, of course. The other bird is dipped into the water, and it flies away. We understand why one of the birds is killed because the effect when you slay a person’s reputation is as if you are killing him, and then mixing the blood into the living waters shows that you are destroying the trust that society needs in order to function. If you cannot have trust in an organization, if you cannot tell people things so that ideas can be exchanged and things can be improved, you cannot run an organization. Then the living bird is put in that water to show that once you let *Loshan Hora* go you have no control over it. It goes in all sorts of directions. I remember once working for someone who was always complaining that there was a thief there in the office. He said you have to look at the janitor and the cleaning lady, and, sure enough, there was a thief, and it was that person who was the

thief. He tried to divert attention from himself by yelling thief, thief. I remember a Congressman who used to yell so badly about homosexuals and talk badly about homosexuals and, finally, some reporters investigated him and, sure enough, they found that he was a homosexual. We have to be careful what we say because we never know the consequences of what we say. In fact, I remember the case about eight years ago where someone brought down another person to work with him, a friend, and this person was working in this large company, and he brought him down to work as his assistant. This fellow who was brought down to Houston started talking badly about the department and about his boss who brought him down. He kept complaining how this was not right and how that was not right. He talked to the bosses above his boss, and after a few months, the bosses thought they had to investigate these complaints. They investigated and got rid of the whole department. They got rid of the guy who hired him, and they got rid of him, too. He did not realize that this was going to be the consequence of his act, but this is, in effect, what the consequence of his act was. He destroyed himself as well as destroying his boss. He just wanted to ingratiate himself with the bosses of his boss. He thought he would get a raise that way. He thought he would be more appreciated that way, but what he did, in effect, was destroy himself and destroy the friend who brought him there. Unfortunately, many times people who do these things do not even understand that they are doing them. That is why it says here in this *Torah* portion that when a person has this leprosy, this disease of always trying to make himself big by running other people down, he has to be brought to the *Kohen*. A person who tries to cause pain, especially psychological pain, many times does not realize what he is doing. That is why it says he had to be brought to the *Kohen*. People do not recognize what they are doing many times, and, therefore, it is the responsibility of the people around them to say, "Listen, what are you doing?" Of course, you have to do it in a nice way and a serious way. You cannot use sarcastic remarks or little digs the same way that this person has done to harm you and to harm others. You have to bring him to the *Kohen*, and then the *Kohen* has to examine him. The *Kohen* examines him and what does the *Torah* say about the examination? It says if he has a few white spots, you keep him in quarantine for a week and, afterwards, you examine him. If he

only gets a few more white spots, then he is unclean, but if his whole body turns white, he is clean. What sense does that make? Actually, we can understand it because if he just gets a few more spots, that means that he does not even recognize the problem. He does not recognize what he is doing, but if he is completely covered with white, then he, himself, will realize he has a problem. Once he, himself, realizes that he has a problem, then he can start solving his problem. Nowhere does it say here that the *Kohen* cures him. He does not cure him. He only announces that he has this terrible disease, and he only announces when this terrible disease is cured. The person has to cure himself. He has to realize what he is doing, that his behavior is counter-productive, that it is harming himself and everybody who comes into contact with him. As we said before, the ceremony that is used after he has been purified is that he has to bring an *Oshom*, which means he has sinned against G-d; and he has to bring a *Chatas*, which shows he sinned against an individual, but why does he have to bring an *Olah*? *Olah* is usually a sacrifice which connotes getting close to G-d. The rabbis answer the reason why this person was a *Metzora* in the first place was because he had an inferiority complex. He did not have any feelings of self-worth. He did not think that he could accomplish anything. Therefore, he adopted this superiority complex, this negative attitude toward everybody else. He brings an *Olah* to show that he has worth in the sight of G-d, that he can be positive. He does not have to be negative. In this way, the underlying cause of this disease can be cured. When the person realizes that he can be a positive person and does not have to be a negative person, then he will stop speaking *Loshan Hora*.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a woman who came to a shoe store, and she drove the salesman there crazy. She made him show her fifty pairs of shoes and, finally, he looked at her and said, "Lady, what do you want from me? I have shown you almost all my shoes. What can I do for you?" She said, "Well, you see I have water on my knee, and I am looking for special shoes." The clerk looked at her and said, "Well, have you ever tried pumps?" Of course, the reason I am bringing that up is that when you are dealing with this type of negative, difficult person, there are only two things you can do. You can either shun them because they are going to try to harm you and harm others (while actually harming them-

selves) or you can try with humor to deflect what they are trying to say. Of course, humor is a great tool, but I know from many, many years of counseling that unless a person recognizes that he has a problem, he is not going to change, and it is very important that he change because unless we have solid relationships in our families and in our community, we are not going to have successful families or a successful community, and we all need to have successful families and a successful community so that our children can grow up to live the correct Jewish way, so that they can be *Mentschen*, fine human beings. Let us all hope and pray that we will have such relationships so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.

Slander Destroys Especially the Slanderer

In the *Haftorah* to the *Torah* portion *Tazria* we learn about a Syrian general, Naman, who was suffering from leprosy and who heard from an Israelite servant girl whom he had captured that there was a prophet in Israel who could cure leprosy. He made arrangements to go see him. The King of Syria wrote a letter to the King of Israel saying that he was sending his trusted general to the prophet of Israel to have him cured from leprosy. The King of Israel thought that this was a pretext for war. When Naman, the Syrian general, came, Elisha the prophet told him to dip in the Jordan seven times. Seven is a number of holiness and also of continuous action. The rabbis explain that it was the immersion in the Jewish tradition which cured Naman. The Jordan was to be the symbol of Jewish tradition.

The Jordan also symbolizes each of our lives. The Jordan flows from the Sea of Galilee, a sea which teems with life and activity, into the *Yam Hamelech*, or the Salt Sea. The rabbis say that the Sea of Galilee is a life-giving sea because it not only takes in, it also gives out, while the Dead Sea is a sea of death because it only takes in, it does not give out. The River Jordan is composed of three tributaries: the Dan; the Sneer; and the Chermon. The Dan stands for man's judgmental faculty; the Sneer stands for man's need and capacity to love; the Chermon stands for man's violent impulses. Without these violent impulses, we would not be able to kill

insects or even kill to obtain food.

Each of us is composed of these elements. When they are in harmony, they form a broad stream, but if they are in disharmony, they cause us to act in unsociable ways and to make nothing of our lives. The Jordan, as it flows from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, leaves strips of green along its banks. However, if a person's personality is not integrated, if his judgmental, love, and violent impulses are not in harmony, he will leave nothing behind. The river will cut very thin channels all of whose waters will evaporate, and there will be no trace of the person left behind.

The rabbis say that the plague of leprosy came upon a person when he spoke evil of others. Malicious gossip, the rabbis say, is even worse than murder because it kills three people. It kills the person about whom it is spoken because it destroys their reputation; it destroys the person who tells it and the person who hears it because from now on, neither of them can look upon the person who is slandered in the same way. Gossip destroys all faith and all trust. It destroys all relationships and institutions. The rabbis say that a person who speaks evil of others should be set out of the community. He is unclean. He contaminates everything he touches. It is interesting to note that if all a person's body was covered white, he was not unclean, but if a person had white spots on him, he was unclean. A person who is at the fringe of society, a buffoon and marginal character, when he says bad things, he is not taken seriously. After all, everybody knows that what he says is not true. He is all white and not unclean. However, when a respected member of the community speaks evil of someone else, it is a different situation because people are likely to believe him and take him seriously. That person is not only unclean, he is dangerous and should be put outside the camp.

The rabbis say that a leper, a gossip, is really suffering from a personality disorder. His judgmental faculty, his need for love or approval, or his violent impulses have gotten out of hand. They are not integrated. Some people in striving for perfection malign and harm others. They do so either because they are jealous or they want honor or power. Nobody and nothing is perfect so it is easy to start nitpicking on things. It is easy to get people riled up on some minor point, even though the job done was better than anybody else had done it before by all standards, except that of per-

fection; it was a very good job. Others, because of their need for approval and love, constantly knock supposed rivals so they can get the love and approval they need. Others, like Naman, have their violent impulses unchecked. They find life difficult. They must constantly lash out at others and harm them because inside they hurt so much. Those people who feel that they must engage in evil gossip are sick. They suffer from a very great spiritual sickness. They have a personality disorder. They can only destroy and not build. When they leave this earth, they leave nothing behind. It will have all evaporated. Only people who are whole, who do not have personality disorders can be like the Jordan, and will be able to leave patches of green behind, will leave behind living legacies.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a woman who came to a rabbi with a problem. She poured out her heart to the rabbi for over two hours, talking about this relative, that relative, her daughter-in-law, her son-in-law. Finally, at the end of two hours, she turned to the rabbi and said, "Rabbi, you have wrought a miracle. Two hours ago I came to you with a splitting headache, the worst headache I have ever had. Now it is gone." The rabbi replied, "Mrs. Goldberg, rest assured your headache is not gone. I have it now." *Loshan Hora*, evil gossip, indicates that a person has a personality disorder. It indicates a person does not feel he has self-worth and dignity. He, therefore, must stoop to devious and slanderous means in order to achieve his goal. All he ends up doing is destroying, not building. Slander always hurts everyone.