

28.
METZKA
1981

Many people speak ill of others because they hate themselves. They are dissatisfied with themselves so they have to blame someone for it. Instead of looking at themselves they have to blame others.

The story about the man who wanted to perform in a rodeo. The very first time he got on a bucking horse he was thrown off and knocked unconscious. After the doctors worked on him for a while he awoke and said, "My father is going to be very proud of me now". The doctor asked, "Oh, did your father want you to be in a rodeo?" He said, "No, he wanted me to have my head examined".

In this week's Torah portion we learn about a strange disease called leprosy. It is not the modern day disease of leprosy which is incurable which is called Hanson's disease but it was a different disease. The Rabbis say it came upon a person because of loose talk, gossip, slander. The punishment for this offense was to contract this disease and be forced to live outside the camp. If we analyze what really makes us human, it is speech, the ability to communicate with one another. It is this ability which sets us off from the other animals. The other animals cannot talk. They cannot express their feelings and their thoughts. They are not even equipped for it physically. They do not have a larynx. It is true that they have tried to teach chimpanzees to talk and they have succeeded in teaching some of them sign language, but they express only basic needs; food, shelter, etc. They really cannot use language in an abstract or conceptual way. Man is the only one who can communicate and based upon this communication we have families and societies and nations, etc. Words are a very precious thing. They allow us to establish relationships. If they are misused then they destroy. They destroy by eliminating trust in human relationships. Trust is essential if we are to live as families and communities. A person once came to me a few years ago and asked me why nobody seemed to like him. I hesitated to tell him the truth, but eventually I had to. He used words as a seapon. He thought that if people did not answer him back they agreed with him. It usually just meant that they were so mad they just chose not to answer. He thought that with words you could twist people to do things which they should not do and which would actually be harmful to them. One of the greatest lies that was ever said was, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me". Words hurt and we have to be careful how we use them. This plague was said to turn the hair white and to appear to be deeper than the skin. Some people use words to scare us or to appear deeper than they really are. We must learn not only to talk, but also how not to talk. For some reason today people think they have to let it all hang out but sometimes we should not say things. That's why I believe we begin the reading of this week's Torah portion by learning about childbirth. After all, what does childbirth have to do with gossip and slander? What's more, why after a woman gave birth did she have to bring a sin offering? She committed no sin. In Jewish eyes having a child is the greatest blessing.

The answer the Rabbis give is because childbirth is painful and many times a woman would say things in childbirth that she would later regret, like she is never going to come near her husband anymore, or she hates children and she may curse G-d and her family, etc. We live in a world in which there is suffering. Nothing is 100% easy and good, but we have to be careful not to scare people away from the good things in life. Parents who tell their kids how hard marriage is, difficult and painful, stop their kids from marrying. Parents who tell their kids how hard school is may stop them from getting a good education. Parents who constantly harp about how hard kids are stop their kids from having children. Life is not easy but we have to keep our perspective. When we fail to keep our perspective then we are to bring a sin offering. Unfortunately, this is the great problem of the media today. They always zero in on the hardships of any worthwhile enterprise and they discourage people from doing what is right. I remember a friend of mine who was unfortunately suffering from cancer. One day he cut his hand very badly and had to go to the hospital and get stitches. It hurt quite a bit and all he could think about was his hand. Because he concentrated so much on it he skipped several chemotherapy treatments and he lost his life. By his concentration on a momentary painful experience he jeopardized his whole life. Many times we, too, with words jeopardize relationships and even our whole life. The Holocaust, itself, began with words, with lies which exaggerated and highlighted basic human weaknesses. It exploited people's frustrations, latent hatreds. Words are what made possible the Holocaust. We have to be very careful with words because words cannot only build. They can destroy. That's why politicians are not respected because they play around with words. Of course, they have a hard job to bridge the gulf between peoples' dreams and reality, but they have to be careful with their words. In the Middle East today it is clear that the PLO wants to destroy Israel and wants all its Jews dead. No amount of words can paste this over. We have to make sure that the words reflect reality and not just some diplomat's brilliant use of ambiguous phrases. We must make sure that words do not lead to another Holocaust. I am reminded of a story of the time when Margaret Thatcher, Andropov, and Ronald Reagan appeared before G-d. Margaret Thatcher asked G-d what did He think of the war in the

TAZRIA-METZORA 1983
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky
PA GE THREE

Falklands. G-d said, "You know, Margaret, if you had had several thousand more soldiers there in the beginning the war would never have occurred and all the soldiers died in vain". Margaret heard this and went into the corner and started to cry. Andropov then asked G-d what did He think about the war in Afghanistan. G-d said, "This war shows the bankruptcy of communism and is going to go on for a long time with a lot of casualties". Andropov then went into the corner and started to cry. Then Ronald Reagan asked G-d what did He think of his Mid-East Peace Plan. G-d then went into the corner and started to cry. Let us be careful with our words when to say them and when not to say them, and let us hope and pray that they will never again bring a Holocaust.

28.
METZORA 1984
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In this week's Torah portion, Metzora, we learn about the disease of leprosy. This disease is not the same disease which we call leprosy today. The leprosy that we have today is known also as Hanson's disease and is an incurable disease. We have some of it in Texas because it is transmitted by armadillos. It is a good idea not to handle armadillos too much. The Rabbis tell us that this disease not only attacked human beings but houses as well. It was a disease which did not require a doctor to diagnose, but a Kohen, a priest. The Rabbis say that this was a disease which was produced by Motzi Sheimra, by evil talk, by gossip. The punishment for speaking evil was to be put out of the camp. Words are what hold people together. All society is based upon words. Words are what build trust, hope, security, and assurance. When our words maim and hurt they destroy society and they destroy institutions. No relationships can last if there is no trust. Promises made and not kept lead to disillusion and frustrations. How can you deal with people if they do not keep their word? How can you deal with people if every time they tell you something they lie? This leads to great frustration and even violence. One of the roots of family violence today is the failure of the couple to deal with each other in truth. This, of course, is what makes infidelity so bad. The lies and the coverups destroy trust. Some people are even pathological liars. They believe they are telling the truth when they are lying all the time. You cannot reason with people like this. Frustration becomes unbearable and violence is the result. If this happens to governments or people cannot have their voice heard they rise up and take arms. If it happens in a voluntary institution people leave in droves and it collapses. If it happens in a marriage the people either divorce or violence occurs. Words are a wonderful thing, but they can also be a terrible thing and the punishment for misusing words is self-imposed. A person who uses biting sarcasm is shunned by others. That person becomes lonely and is left to his own devices. If certain people in an institution start deriding others their deriding brings division. This year we are commemorating the 50th yearzeit

of a great Jewish leader who was known as the Chofetz Chayim. Actually, his real name was Meyer Cohen. He made his great reputation by one of his early books called Chofetz Chayim: Who Wants Life? This is a quote from the Psalms. It says, "Who wants life? One who guards his tongue from evil.", "Notzor L'Shono Me'ra". We are not supposed to say everything. Even if things are true we are not supposed to say bad things about someone for no reason. If he is applying for a job or about to marry someone and we are called as a reference, then perhaps we can say something, but otherwise no. People have a tendency to criticize too much. In fact, in the United States today we have a false concept that the greatest man is the greatest critic. The greatest man is not the one who does the most good things, but the one who can criticize the most. This tradition started with H.L. Mencken and goes on today. It is a foolish idea because excess criticism can destroy and not build. There is a time for criticism and there is a time to be quiet. The enemy of the better is the best. Things can always be better. Nothing is ever perfect and it is easy to throw potshots at someone, but we should not do it. One of the worst things is when a person who has done 99% of the things right or 95% or 92%, but all he hears is why didn't he do the 1% or 5% or 8% right. It reminds me of the child who came home with all A's and his mother looked at the report card and said, "Why didn't you make all A+'s?" The child was crushed. The child should have been complimented. The enemy of the better is the best. They tell the story of the Chofetz Chayim who was walking in his town of Radin when a stranger appeared and asked him if he knew the great Rabbi, the Chofetz Chayim. The Rabbi looked at him and said, "He isn't such a great Rabbi." The man said, "I am talking about that great Tzadek, the Chofetz Chayim." The Chofetz Chayim looked at him and said, "He isn't such a great Tzadek. I know him real well." At that point the stranger got very agitated and slapped the Chofetz Chayim across the face for speaking bad about that great Rabbi. About a half hour later the stranger happened to come into the Shul where the Chofetz Chayim was teaching

and when he saw who it was that he just slapped he almost had a heart attack and fainted. He did not know what to say. The Chofetz Chayim looked at him and said, "My son, you were right. We are not allowed to talk Loshon Hora, evil things, about yourself either." The terrible damage that words can do to institutions, to all relationships is well known. The phrase "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me" is one of the greatest lies that was ever written. Of course, we should express our opinion but we have to know when to do it, how to do it, and we have to give people credit for all the good things they have done otherwise we will isolate ourselves and destroy our institutions. I am reminded of the story about a French Consul, an English Consul, an American Consul, and a Russian Consul who were all talking and expressing their opinion on many subjects. The Russian was sitting quietly. The American said, "Don't you have any opinions?" The Russian replied, "I have many opinions." The American asked, "Why don't you express them?" The Russian said, "I have many opinions, but I do not agree with them." Sure, everybody should have opinions and we should express them but not in a destructive way. We should not destroy with words. We should give people credit for what they have done and compliment them. We should always remember that the enemy of the better is the best.

METZORA 1985
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In the Torah portion Metzora we learn about the ceremony that the leper performs with the Kohen after he becomes clean. It is interesting to note that the Kohen only tells a person when he is unclean and when he becomes clean. He does not prescribe any remedies for the person's leprous condition after he determines he is a leper. It is up to the person to cure himself.

This is one of the reasons why the rabbis say that this disease is a spiritual disease. The priest can point it out, and he can tell when it is cured, but it is up to the individual, himself, to cure himself. This is true today, too. A rabbi cannot force anybody to do something they do not want to do. All he can do is talk.

A rabbi can offer classes, speak from the pulpit, but he cannot force anybody to come to shul, and he cannot force anybody to send their kids to Hebrew school, he cannot force them to keep their shop closed on Shabbos or keep kosher or live like a mensch. They have to do it themselves.

When the person who has suffered from this spiritual disease, which the rabbis say came upon him because he spoke Loshan Horah, gossip, about others, it is interesting to note that there were two procedures he went through. First, he was to take two pigeons. He was to slaughter one over running water, and he was to dip the living bird in this blood and then let the bird go. This, of course, symbolizes what happens when a person says Loshan Horah. Not only does that person destroy the reputation of others and destroys trust, the living water which holds society together, but he also sets in motion forces over which, many times, he has no control. The lies have a life of their own.

METZORA 1985

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

PAGE TWO

Many times we see how politicians start out by smearing their opponents and, by so doing, create an atmosphere in which people start to look in their background and all the dirt from their own lives comes out, like the case of the congressman who was yelling about homosexuals very loudly so people should not look and find out he was a homosexual, or like the office in which I once worked where there was a man who was always yelling, "There is a thief here," and there was. It was him, but by his actions he tried to shift the spotlight away from himself. I remember, too, 20 years ago when a man came to me very upset about an officer of the congregation whose son was married in a church. He wanted to have this officer removed. I told him, "What are you blaming the officer for?" It was the son who did it, not him, and, sure enough, ten years later his own son was married in a church.

Many times we start things and do not know where it will end. Why, though, does a person tell Loshan Horah? If we look carefully at the sacrifices the person has to bring when he is clean we will perhaps understand why. He has to bring an Oshom, a guilt offering, Chatos, a sin offering, and an Olah, a burnt offering. The rabbis teach us that he brings an Oshom, a guilt offering, because he is guilty before G-d for what he has done. The sin of gossip is a terrible sin also against G-d because it disrupts human relationships, and it does not allow people to fulfill G-d's purposes of helping us build a better world. He brings the Chatos because of the sin he committed, even the unintended effects of the sin, but why should he bring the Olah?

The rabbis say he has to bring the burnt offering because the reason he speaks Loshan Horah in the first place is because he feels inferior.

He feels his arguments are inferior. He cannot make his point any other way, so he feels that he must finagle and manipulate because he has no inner confidence. The Olah is meant to signify to him that he should elevate himself. He should have better thoughts about himself. He should not feel inferior. A person, if he has confidence in his arguments and his presentations, should not resort to tactics of destroying another person's reputation in order to win a point or ignore the truth in order to win a point.

Inferiority is the source of Loshan Horah. All of us should feel confident in our abilities and then we would not have to resort to Loshan Horah. We find, too, many Jews who feel inferior to others so, therefore, they spread bad stories about themselves and their religion. They do not have any self-respect. For example, there are many comics that really just reinforce anti-Semitic stereotypes by their feelings of inferiority, by their twisted humor. Comics and Woody Allen and Joan Rivers end up by spreading lies whose consequences may even affect them. People do not respect others who do not respect themselves. I have even been told of certain Jews in town who sit on important community organizations and when the community organization suggests that, because of their sensitivity to Jewish feelings, affairs be held on Saturday night instead of Friday night, these Jews complain and say, "No, let's have it on Friday night." They feel inferior and spread evil gossip about their own people.

This reminds me of the story of two Jews who were stranded on a wild island. One turned to the other and said, "Listen, I'm hungry and I'm going to go eat some of that bacon tree over there." The other man said, "You can't do that. You're Jewish. Besides, I never even heard of a bacon tree." The man replied, "Yes, there is and I'm

METZORA 1985
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky
PAGE FOUR

going to have some." He returned a short time later with three or four arrows in him. His friend said, "What happened?" He answered, "That's a hambush." We Jews, if we do not show self-respect for ourselves, spread gossip and evil stereotypes which come back to haunt us. That's what happened in Germany, and we do not want that to happen here.

Detachment, Sensitivity & Lashing OUT

APRIL 1986
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

Mezuzah

In life we must all have a certain amount of detachment even from our own problems and from ourselves if we are to function well in life, if we are to have the ability to solve our problems and to help other people solve their problems. One of the reasons why many people fail in life is because they are too sensitive, too sensitive to themselves and to their own needs. This not only blinds them to the needs of others, it also causes them to blow their own problems way out of proportion and, thus, fail to correctly assess ~~the situation~~ ^{their problems} so that they can take the correct remedial action. Their constant dwelling on themselves, on their problems causes them to lose perspective and to be completely insensitive to the needs of others.

A few years ago a couple came to see me. The wife seemed very worried about her husband, and she was constantly hovering over him. It turned out that he had allergies, and she was terribly concerned lest he become uncomfortable. He matter-of-factly accepted all this attention and did not give it another thought. Later I learned that this woman had been suffering from cancer for over a year. The man went on and on about his allergies and how it affected him so badly, and the woman sympathetically concurred with every word he said.

No mention was ever made of the fact that she had cancer and would probably not live too much longer while he, with his allergies, would probably live a long time. His total concern with himself blinded

him to his wife's problems. I wonder ^{often} if, when she ~~will~~ ^{did} get bad, ^{whether or not} he ^{would have} ~~will~~ ^{could} ~~consent~~ ^{to} feed her or help her, or ^{whether} ~~will~~ his allergies ^{would have been} ~~so~~ ^{would} ~~were~~ so overpowering that he ^{would} ~~will~~ not be able to do anything for her, and she ^{that} ~~will~~ ^{would have} ~~have~~ to call a friend ^{or} of a taxi ~~even~~ ^{even} to go to the doctor or to the hospital.

APRIL 1986
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky
PAGE TWO

In life those people who are extremely sensitive lose all sense of proportion and usually end up making terrible decisions which bring them nothing but grief. How many people do we all know who have quit good jobs because of some imagined insult, or who have told everyone off because of some fancied grievance. There are so many people who have denied themselves so much of life because they will not go to a place which might be too hot or too cold or which might have insects or smell bad. In Judaism we are supposed to be sensitive but not overly sensitive. An unlimited preoccupation with a person's self is a disease.

In the Torah portion Metzora we learn about such a disease, a disease which in English we call leprosy but which is not modern leprosy. Modern leprosy is an incurable disease known as Hanson's Disease and does not resemble the disease that is mentioned in the Torah. This disease is curable and, according to the rabbis, has a spiritual cause. The rabbis say that this disease came to a person when he spoke "Loshan Hora", when he brought forth evil gossip against his neighbor. It is hard to understand why a skin disease was chosen to be the punishment for a person who spoke ill of others. Perhaps we can understand it if we examine what skin is.

Skin is composed of many layers, and the top layer is dead. If the top layer of our skin would be alive, we would be in constant pain. We could not touch anything, grip anything, lift anything or even kiss or hug ^{our} ~~or~~ loved ones without writhing in pain. The pain would be excruciating. We need to have this outer layer of dead skin if we are to interact with the world. We need to have a certain detachment

when we deal with life. This applies to both the physical and spiritual realms. Unless we have this detachment, we will always be in pain, if not physical pain then psychic pain. Our lower levels of skin are alive and do contain nerves. This, too, is absolutely necessary. We all need to have a certain amount of sensitivity to ourselves and our problems. However, we also need to put some distance between ourselves and our problems. Just as our dead layer of skin allows us to interact with the physical world, to stand moderate temperatures, touch abrasive surfaces, feed ourselves, walk on the ground, etc., so a certain level of detachment is necessary if we are to interact with others.

In life we must have this certain detachment. We cannot always be sensitive. An especially sensitive person cannot function in this world. He becomes filled with pain, which causes him to always want to strike out. This is the principal reason why people speak ill of others. They are in such pain from their over-preoccupation with themselves that they have to lash out. Excessive sensitivity to oneself leads to great unhappiness. We all know how hypochondriacs, who dwell on every pain and twinge, harm themselves. Of course, one has to be sensitive to warning signals of disease but an excessive preoccupation with oneself leads to great aberrations. A person becomes so sensitive to the remarks of others that he constantly sees insults when there are no insults.

That's why concerning the disease of leprosy the Torah says that if the priest would find that all the skin had turned white, the

leper shall be declared clean, but "if there is just a white spot on the skin, the priest shall declare the leper unclean". In other words, in the first instance, the individual had some real complaint. He was not being overly sensitive and, therefore, he was clean in a spiritual sense while, in the second instance, his complaint was really not justified. He was being overly sensitive and, in a spiritual sense, he was unclean. A person must have a certain amount of detachment from himself and his problems. If he does not have that detachment, he will not be able to solve his problems or function in life. People who do not have this detachment constantly lash out at others because they are in such great pain. Every little thing sets them off. They become angry for no reason or for little reason. They are always unhappy, and they end up isolating themselves from everyone. Just as a doctor or a lawyer or any professional cannot be effective if he becomes too emotionally involved with his patients/clinets, so, too, any individual, if he becomes too emotionally involved with himself or his problems, will never be able to solve them also.

On Shabbos Hagadol we read how Eliahu Hanovi, Elijah the Prophet, will "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers". It is hard to understand why Eliahu Hanovi was chosen for this role. He was a firebrand who became overly emotionally involved in trying to solve the problems of the people of his day. His approach ultimately failed; ~~and~~ he did not succeed in convincing the people. In fact, near the end of his life he fled to the desert and asked G-d to remove him from life because his job was just too painful. G-d then informed him that "He is not to be found in the whirlwind or in the earthquake or in the fire but in

