

A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

This weekly sheet is brought to you by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman of the New West End United Synagogue in conjunction with Shapell's/Darché Noam

PARSHAT METZORA

DVAR TORAH: TWO BIRDS BY RABBI ELIE SILVERBERG

The beginning of Parshat Metzora discusses the procedure a metzora-leper must go through once his tzara'at-leprosy goes away. One element of the cleansing process is to take two live birds. One of them is slaughtered and the other is eventually allowed to fly away (Vayikra 14:4-7).

Rashi explains why birds are involved in this process. Tzara'at afflicts one who spoke lashon hara, negative speech, which involves פטפוטי דברים, chattering. Hence the metzora brings birds, who are constant chatterers, to remind him how he brought the tzara'at upon himself. However, this does not explain the significance of one bird being slaughtered and the other bird being sent free.

Harav Shlomo Yosef Zevin, זצ"ל (1888-1978), in his sefer לתורה ולמועדים, offers the following idea. Lashon hara is an act that represents using the gift of speech in a very negative way. The first step in correcting this sin is to simply stop talking. When and if the urge to speak lashon hara comes to a person – he must, quite frankly, “keep his mouth closed.” As the famous verse about lashon hara says, “נצור לשונך מרע ושפתיך” – “Stop your tongue from saying evil and your lips from treachery” (Tehillim 34:14). Doing this leads to silence, and this is signified by the bird that is being slaughtered, as its chattering is silenced.

But this is only the first step in overcoming the temptation to speak lashon hara. The vacuum created by stopping negative speech must be filled with positive speech. Indeed, as the pasuk quoted above continues, “סור מרע ועשה טוב” – “You must do good, טוב, and טוב represents Torah. As it says, “כי לקח טוב נתתי” – “For, [says Hashem,] I have given you a good acquisition, the Torah, do not desert it” (Mishlei 4:2). The Torah itself hints at this remedy, as it says, “זאת תהיה תורת המצורע” – “This will be ‘the Torah’ of the metzora” (Vayikra 14:2). To be fully cured, the metzora needs to take the vacuum created by desisting from lashon hara and fill it with speaking words of Torah. The need for positive action is represented by the sending of the second bird, taking one’s speech and sending it in the positive direction of learning and disseminating Torah.

SOURCE GUIDE: WHO WANTS LIFE?

The Midrash tells an anecdote about a peddler calling out, “Who wants the elixir of life?” This became one of the most oft-quoted passages about lashon hara, prohibited negative speech. Harav Yaakov Kamenetsky, זצ"ל (1891-1986), opened his Shabbat Hagadol drashah in 5687 (1927) with five questions on that story. Here are two versions of that story, Rav Yaakov’s difficulties with it, his answers and presentation of the message Chazal are trying to convey. His approach dovetails with that of Rav Zevin quoted in Rav Silverberg’s article.

A. Who Wants Life? 2 Versions

Similar anecdotes appear in Midrash Rabbah (in great detail) and in the Gemara (more compact):

<p>1. Vayikra Rabbah 16:2</p> <p>... An anecdote: A certain peddler was making the rounds in the villages near Tzipori, and would announce, "Who wants to buy the elixir of life?" People gathered around him. Rabbi Yanai was sitting and learning in his living room. He heard the peddler announce "Who wants the elixir of life?" and said to the peddler, "Come up here and sell it to me." The peddler responded, "You and your like do not need it." Rabbi Yanai persisted and he went up. The peddler took out a book of Tehillim and showed him the verse, "Who is the man who wants life ..." What is written immediately afterwards? "Keep your tongue from evil ... turn away from evil and do good" (Tehillim 34:13-14). Rabbi Yanai said, "Shlomo also declared, "One who watches his mouth and lips will protect his soul from troubles" (Mishlei 21:23). Said Rabbi Yanai: "All of my days I would read that verse and I didn't understand its simple meaning until that peddler came and told me, 'Who is the man who wants life?'"</p>	<p>ויקרא רבה טז:ב</p> <p>... מעשה ברוכל אחד שהיה מחזיר בעיירות שהיו סמוכות לציפורי, והיה מכריז ואומר, "מאן בעי למזבן סם חיים?" אודקין עליה. ר' ינאי הוה יתיב ופשט בתורקליניה. שמעיה דמכריז "מאן בעי סם חיים?" א"ל "תא סק להכא זבון לי." א"ל "לאו אנת צריך ליה ולא דכותך." אטרח עליה. סליק לגביה. הוציא לו ספר תהלים. הראה לו פסוק "מי האיש החפץ חיים." מה כתיב בתריה? "נצור לשונך מרע ... סור מרע ועשה טוב" (תהילים לד:יג-יד) א"ר ינאי: אף שלמה מכריז ואומר "שומר פיו ולשונו שומר מצרות נפשו" (משלי כא:כג). א"ר ינאי: "כל ימי הייתי קורא הפסוק הזה ולא הייתי יודע היכן הוא פשוט עד שבא רוכל זה והודיעו, 'מי האיש החפץ חיים.' ..."</p>
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<p>2. Avodah Zarah 19b</p> <p>Rabbi Alexandri announced: "Who wants life? Who wants life?" Everyone gathered around him and said to him, "Give us life!" He said to them: Who is the man who wants life ... hold your tongue back from speaking evil ..." (Tehillim 34:13-14). Perhaps a person will say, "I kept my tongue from evil and my lips from treachery – I will go and succumb to the temptation of sleep? The verse therefore teaches us: "Turn away from evil and do good" (Tehilim 34:15). Good is none other than a reference to Torah, as it says, "For, I have given you a good acquisition, the Torah, do not desert it" (Mishlei 4:2).</p>	<p>עבודה זרה יט:</p> <p>מכריז רבי אלכסנדר: "מאן בעי חיי? מאן בעי חיי?" כנוף ואתו כולי עלמא לגביה. אמרי ליה: "הב לן חיי!" אמר להו: "מי האיש החפץ חיים וגו' נצור לשונך מרע וגו'" (תהילים לד:יג-יד). שמא יאמר אדם נצרת לשוני מרע ושפתי מדבר מרמה [אלך] ואתגרה בשינה? תלמוד לומר "סור מרע ועשה טוב" (תהילים לד:טו). אין "טוב" אלא תורה, שנאמר, "כי לקח טוב נתתי לכם תורת אל תעזבו" (משלי ד:ב).</p>
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B. 5 Questions on the Midrash

Rav Yaakov asks 5 questions on the Midrash:

1. Why does the Midrash mention that the peddler was making his rounds in the villages around Tzipori?
2. Why does it mention what Rabbi Yanai was involved in when the peddler came?
3. Didn't Rabbi Yanai know the verse that the peddler quoted?
4. What great revelation did the peddler make to Rabbi Yanai, inspiring him to say, "All my life I would read this verse but did not know its real meaning until that peddler came and revealed it to me"?
5. What was the real profession of the "peddler"? If he was really a preacher just masquerading as a peddler, why does the narrator of the Midrash refer to him as a "peddler"? But if he was really a peddler, what were his wares?

C. Rabbi Yanai's Lesson

First of all, says Rav Yaakov, since the narrator refers to him as a peddler, he must have indeed been a peddler. Besides his other merchandise he also sold books. That is why the Midrash mentions that he was selling around Tzipori, an area of Torah scholars. And the peddler's method of getting people interested in buying his books was to call out, "Who wants the elixir of life?"

Note the difference between the peddler's call and Rabbi Alexandri's. Rabbi Alexandri would call out "Who wants life?" but the peddler would call out "Who wants the elixir, the potion of life?" Rabbi Alexandri's message was that avoiding negative speech brings life. But the peddler's message was slightly different. He was teaching the **means** to avoid speaking negatively.

This explains Rabbi Yanai's excitement with the peddler. Of course Rabbi Yanai knew the verse in Tehillim and understood that long life comes through avoiding negative speech; but he wanted a strategy to avoid it. Rabbi Yanai was in the middle of learning the straightforward meaning of verses in the Tanach when he heard the call of the peddler. He understood the peddler's real message and knew he could learn something from him. The conversation with the peddler would not be considered *ביטול תורה*, a break from Torah study.

The peddler's lesson was that through learning Torah a person can avoid negative speech. Talmud Torah is the secret to avoiding *lashon hara*. This is what excited Rabbi Yanai. This, says Rav Yaakov, is the message of a different Midrash:

<p>3. Emet L'Yaakov Parshat Metzora Israel said to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Master of the universe, you have given us a number of commands against forbidden speech. Give us a muzzle for our mouths." The Holy One, blessed be He replied: I have given you my Torah. Be involved with it and you will not speak evil, gossip, or falsehood."</p>	<p>אמת ליעקב פרשת מצורע אמרו לו ישראל להקב"ה: "רבש"ע, הזהרת לנו כמה וכמה מצוות (היינו ל"ת התלויים בלשון). תן לנו מחסום לפינו". אמר לו הקב"ה: "נתתי לכם תורת. עסקו בה ואין אתם מספרים לה"ר ורכילות ושקר וכו'."</p>
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The editor of Emet L'Yaakov notes that he did not find the source of the above Midrash. Perhaps, though, Rav Yaakov was paraphrasing the following:

<p>4. Midrash Tehillim Psalm 39 "I will guard myself with a muzzle" (Tehillim 39:2). Is there a muzzle for the mouth? They replied: "Yes – 'Healing for the tongue is the tree of life' (Mishlei 15:4). This refers to the Torah, as it says, 'For it is a tree of life for those who cling to it' (Mishlei 3:18). From here you learn that Hashem only gave the Torah to Israel so that they should not be involved in negative speech and idle words." Thus David says: "Who wants to acquire the World to Come?" They said to him: "Who is able to acquire it?" He said to them: "There is an inexpensive way, as it says, "Who is the man who wants life ... keep your tongue from evil" (Tehillim 34:13-14).</p>	<p>מדרש תהילים מזמור לט "אשמרה לפי מחסום" (תהילים לט:ב). וכי יש מחסום לפה? אמרו, "הן – 'מרפא לשון עץ חיים' (משלי טו:ד) זו התורה, שנאמר 'עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה' (משלי ג:יח). מכאן את למד שלא נתן הקב"ה תורה לישראל אלא כדי שלא יהו עסוקין בלשון הרע ולא בדברי הבטלה." וכן דוד אומר: מי רוצה לקנות העולם הבא? אמרו לו: ומי יוכל לקנותו? אמר להם: בזול, שנאמר, "מי האיש החפץ חיים ... נצור לשונך מרע" (תהילים לד:יג-יד).</p>
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The Gemara also elaborates on that verse:

<p>5. Mishlei 15:4 Healing to the tongue is the tree of life, but perverseness in it causes destruction by wind.</p> <p>Erchin 15b Said Rabbi Chama son or Rabbi Chanina: What is remedy for those who speak negative speech? If he is a Torah sage he should be involved in Torah, for it says, "Healing to the tongue is the tree of life" (Mishlei 15:4). "The tongue" refers to negative speech, <i>lashon hara</i>, as it says, "Their tongue is a slaughtering arrow" (Yirmiyahu 9:7). The "tree [of life]" refers to Torah, as it says, "It is a tree of life for those who cling to it" (Mishlei 3:18). And if he is not learned he should humble himself, as it says, "but perverseness in it causes destruction by wind (he should break his spirit to heal his perverse speech)" (Mishlei 15:4).</p>	<p>משלי טו:ד מִרְפָּא לְשׁוֹן עֵץ חַיִּים וְסֻלְף בַּהּ שִׁבְרָ בְרוּחַ.</p> <p>ערכין דף טו: אמר רבי חמא בר' חנינא: מה תקנתו של מספרי לשון הרע? אם תלמיד חכם הוא יעסוק בתורה, שנא' "מרפא לשון עץ חיים" (משלי טו:ד). ואין "לשון" אלא לשון הרע, שנאמר, "חץ שחוט לשונם" (ירמיהו ט:ז). ואין "עץ" אלא תורה, שנאמר, "עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה" (משלי ג:יח). ואם עם הארץ הוא ישפיל דעתו, שנאמר, "וסלף בה שבר רוח" (משלי טו:ד).</p>
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There are two paths to dealing with *lashon hara*: We can elevate our speech through Torah and rise above *lashon hara*; or we can humble ourselves, and remove its cause, arrogance, looking down on others.

DVAR TORAH THE GREAT SHABBAT

In the special addition to Birkat Hamazon for Shabbat we refer to Shabbat as "השבת הגדול והקדוש הזה", "the great and holy Shabbat." Every Shabbat is really a great Shabbat, a Shabbat Hagadol. Yet, we refer to this Shabbat, the one preceding Pesach, as Shabbat Hagadol, the Great Shabbat. Harav Avraham Weinberg, זצ"ל, (the Slonimer Rebbe, 1844-1933) asks: Why does this Shabbat merit being the greatest of the great?

The Tur tells us that a great miracle took place on the 10th of Nisan. On that day the Jews took their sheep for their Pesach sacrifices as the Egyptians looked on. Even though Egyptian idolatry involved worshipping sheep and the Jews took them to slaughter, the Egyptians did nothing. They looked on and didn't harm the Jews. This Shabbat, when we celebrate that great miracle, is referred to as Shabbat Hagadol. There is an obvious difficulty here. Why don't we celebrate that miracle every year on the 10th of Nisan? Why do we celebrate it on the Shabbat before Pesach even when it falls out on the 12th or the 8th, not the 10th?

The author of Netivot Shalom, Harav Shalom Brazovski, זצ"ל (1911-2000, the previous Slonimer Rebbe), calls our attention to a quote from the Zohar that says how all of the coming week's שפע, Divine flow, comes through the Shabbat that precedes it. That might explain why wedding celebrations begin the Shabbat preceding the wedding and a Shabbat evening Shalom Zachor precedes a Brit Milah. That also explains the special nature of Shabbat Hagadol preceding Pesach and Shabbat Shuvah preceding Yom Kippur.

Shabbat Hagadol focuses on אהבת ה', love of Hashem and Shabbat Shuvah on יראת ה', fear and awe of Hashem. Shabbat Shuvah precedes Yom Kippur, where we focus on sin, repentance, and atonement, on fear of Hashem. But Shabbat Hagadol ushers in Pesach, when we focus on Hashem's love for us and ours for Him; Pesach is the holiday of Shir Hashirim.

The Slonimer Rebbe gives two reasons we refer to this Shabbat of love as Shabbat Hagadol. First, אהבה-love is greater than יראה-fear and awe; it is the greater of the two focal Shabbatot. Second, love is associated with חסד, lovingkindness, which is, in turn, associated with the word גדולה, in the verse "לך ה' הגדולה והגבורה" – "Yours, Hashem, is the greatness, the might, and the splendor ..." Love and chesed involve leaving one's constricted boundaries, extending one's self towards another, becoming a bigger person. This Shabbat is the Shabbat of becoming a greater person through love.

שבת שלום ומבורך

*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v'Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples' programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at www.darchenoam.org +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

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