

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

VAYIKRA

TZAV

SHEMINI

TAZRIA

METZORA

ACHREI MOT

KEDOSHIM

EMOR

BEHAR

BECHUKOTAI

METZORA

28

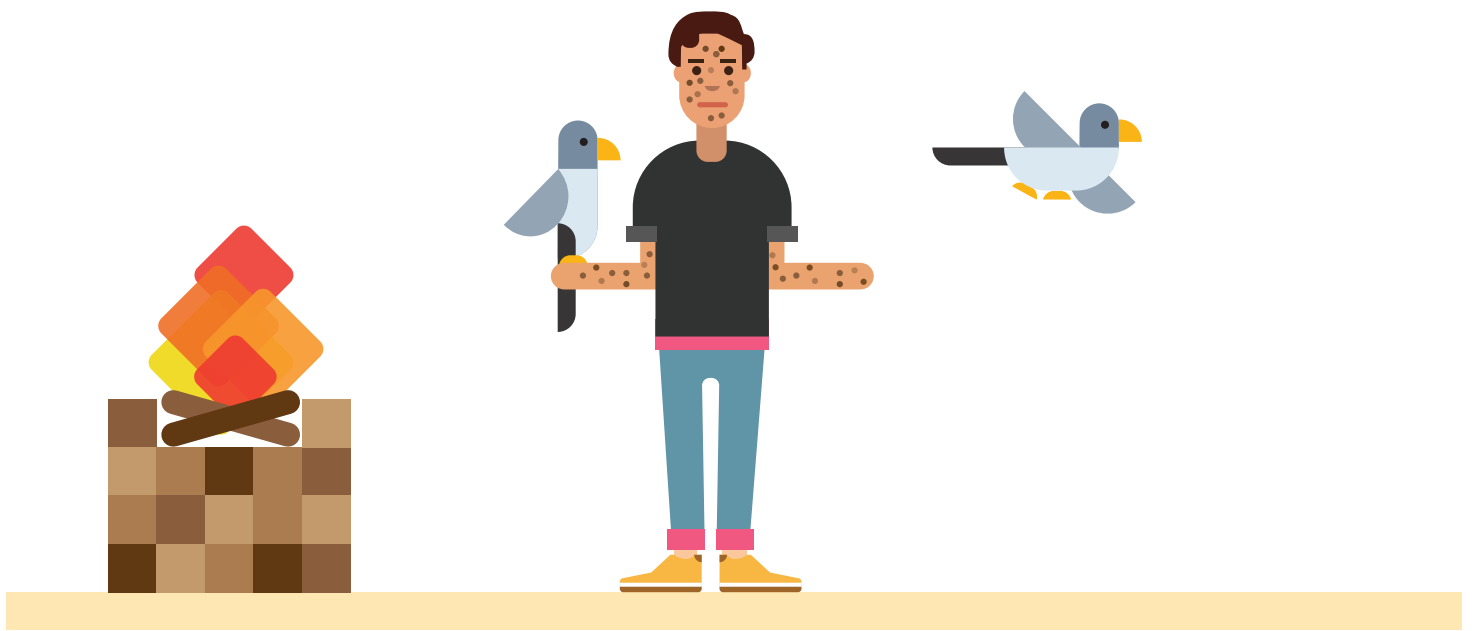
ABSTINENCE IS STAGE ONE

Tzaraat, commonly translated as leprosy, is the physical manifestation of a spiritual malady, and there is an entire section of the Torah named for it - *Parashat Metzora*. The Talmud identifies seven different potential causes for this disease, the most well-known of which is *lashon hara*, or slander and malicious speech.¹ As *tzaraat* is not considered to be a physical disease, a spiritual remedy, with an educational message, is prescribed by a priest, rather than conventional medicine being prescribed by a doctor. The sickly person is told that in order to be cured, they must begin by bringing 'two live pure birds' - one bird is to be sacrificed and the other is to be set free.² Rashi explains that **since birds constantly chirp, they are brought as the remedy for misguided chatter and malicious slander.**³ Whilst this explains why birds are singled out, the question may still be asked: Why are two birds necessary? Would one not be sufficient?

Holiness is often defined as the separation from sin.⁴ Those who endeavour to become holy traditionally do so by isolating themselves from that which may lead them to encounter sin. For example, the *nazir* - Nazirite - is one who voluntarily takes a vow to separate himself from certain physical pleasures in order to achieve an elevated level of holiness.⁵ The term *nazir* is understood to mean both consecrated and separated. Similarly, if someone is deemed a menace to society, they may be sent to a rehabilitation facility or a jail in order to remove them from the context where they caused damage. There are even entire sects that are founded on this principle, that attempt to maintain purity and innocence by refraining from contact with the outside world.

The stage of separation, however, is only the first stage of treatment. The next requisite step is to reengage with society. This is represented through the process of combatting the negativity that was generated through one's encounter with the profane - a process that not only requires abstaining from the negative influence, but calls for the active promotion of positivity. Therefore, with regard to one who was a societal menace, once he has separated himself, developed an awareness of his actions and improved his behaviour, he then needs to reintegrate and actively contribute to society through endeavours like community service.

In honour of a speedy and complete recovery for our precious daughter
Lital Gila bat Renana Yael
 מוקדש לרפואתה השלמה
 והמהירה של ביתנו היקרה
 ליטל גילה בת רננה יעל



According to the enigmatic words of the Zohar, one who is guilty of malicious slander is not only punished for negative speech, but also for positive speech.⁶ Whilst the punishment for negative speech is self-explanatory, the *Sefat Emet* suggests that the punishment for positive speech refers to all the missed opportunities to say something positive.⁷ **Not only can negative words destroy, but the lack of positive words can as well.** Thus it is not enough for one to abstain from saying and doing something wrong, but rather we need to seize opportunities to say and do that which is right. This idea is embedded in a psalm often associated with malicious speech: ‘Flee evil and do good.’⁸ Fleeing from evil and abstaining from that which is wrong is essential, but it is only the first stage. Once we have mastered not pulling others down with slanderous speech, we must endeavour to use any means we have in order to build people up.

The *Keli Yakar* explains that the two identical birds, which symbolise our speech, represent the past and the future, respectively.⁹ The bird of the past is sacrificed, to signify the cessation of negativity. The bird of the future is set free, signifying the potential for positive change. It is simply not enough to separate ourselves from negativity. Rather, **it is vital that we counterbalance the negative with the positive, using our words and abilities not to destroy, but to build** - spreading our wings for a positive transformation.

Notes

- ¹ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Arachin* 15b.
- ² *Leviticus* 14:4, 50, 53.
- ³ Rashi on *Leviticus* 14:4; Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Arachin* 15b.
- ⁴ Rashi on *Leviticus* 19:2.
- ⁵ *Numbers* 6:1-21
- ⁶ *Zohar* 3:301b.
- ⁷ *Sefat Emet*, *Metzora* (5661).
- ⁸ *Psalms* 34:15.
- ⁹ *Keli Yakar* on *Leviticus* 14:4.

Parasha Fact:

A gossip’s house was also afflicted emphasising the idea that how we act affects everything around us.

Next week in Achrei Mot:

In our modern world, it is easy to view freedom as the ultimate value - freedom from oppression, freedom to act, freedom to choose, freedom to speak - after all, it is our right to sail freely through our world. What happens, however, to a boat with no rudder, a map with no legend, or a sailor with no compass? A single phrase that is repeated over and over in the Torah’s description of immoral relationships, offers insight into the ultimate moral compass that guides our navigation of this world.

שבת שלום