

# INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Binyomin Yitzchok ben Meir (Barry Ross). "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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1 IYAR

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS TAZRIA-METZORA

## Dealing with Addictive Behavior

This week's *parsha* addresses the laws of *tzoraas*. The Midrash (*Rus Rabbah* 2:10) explains the purpose of the three types of *tzoraas*: 1) *tzoraas* of the body 2) *tzoraas* that appears on personal items such as clothing and 3) *tzoraas* that appears on the walls of one's home. The Midrash explains the progression: When a person engages in *loshon hora*, he is first punished by *tzoraas* appearing on the walls of his house. If he repents and desists from speaking *loshon hora* then it gets cured. If, however, he continues this evil practice, *tzoraas* appears on his clothes, and if, after that, he still continues to speak *loshon hora* then he is afflicted with *tzoraas* on his body.

As discussed in a prior edition of INSIGHTS, *loshon hora* is considered by Chazal as a very severe transgression — as heinous as murder, adultery, and idol worship. Yet the punishment, *tzoraas*, seems to be a minor inconvenience. After all, the size of the *tzoraas* discoloration can be relatively small, around the size of a nickel. Such a discoloration on a house can be easily ignored or covered up. Similarly, *tzoraas* on one's clothes can also be easily hidden by discarding the clothing, and *tzoraas* on the body can be hidden by wearing something to cover the discoloration such as makeup.

While the process of abating *tzoraas*, once it is confirmed, is pretty involved and

demeaning—in extreme cases it requires quarantine and other strict measures—as a “punishment” for speaking *loshon hora* it seems to be easily circumvented or at least delayed for a very long time. In other words, without the afflicted person's cooperation it is highly unlikely that *tzoraas* will be confirmed in a timely fashion. How is this an appropriate punishment for such a severe transgression?

The Torah is teaching us an incredible lesson in how we are to begin to approach solving certain character flaws. The Talmud (*Baba Basra* 165a) makes a remarkable statement: R' Judah said in the name of Rav: Most [people are guilty] of robbery, some are guilty of illicit relations, and all are guilty of *loshon hora*. The Talmud then clarifies that this refers to some shades of slander. Meaning, language not necessarily forbidden by the Torah but prohibited by the Rabbis for its resemblance to *loshon hora* or because it may lead to *loshon hora* (see *Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchos Loshon Hora, Klal 9* for a thorough discussion of *Avak Loshon Hora*).

In any event, Chazal are clearly telling us that *loshon hora* is, at some level, an innate issue for every single person. This means that everyone has to struggle with this temptation and anyone who has studied the laws of *loshon hora* knows how difficult it is



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to overcome this temptation. The Torah gives us the most successful approach to solving character flaws: We have to own up to it by accepting that it is useless to try and ignore the temptation. We must face the fact that we are trapped by this addictive behavior and actively work on ourselves to resolve this serious issue.

It is exactly for this reason that *tzoraas* is the most appropriate punishment. It is absolutely true that it is hardly ever diagnosed without the guilty party's cooperation—which is **exactly** the point of the punishment. Until one is ready to own up to his “addiction” he will **never** be able to defeat it. His cooperation is needed to determine *tzoraas* because only then is he beginning to own up to his failings. Without this step he will never be able to stop speaking *loshon hora*.

## Constructive Criticism

**When a man shall have in the skin of his flesh a swelling, a scab, or bright spot, and it is on the skin of his flesh like the disease of tzoraas; then he shall be brought to Aharon the priest, or to one of his sons the priests [...] (13:2).**

There are several perplexing points in the above verse. First of all, why does the Torah mandate that the person needs to be brought to the Kohen? After all the Kohen is merely examining the spot. The Torah could have simply said that the man will show the affliction to Kohen; why is it that he needs to be brought to the Kohen? Additionally, why

does the Torah give an elongated description of what a Kohen is, “Aharon the priest or one of his sons”? In fact, since this is a law for all times why mention Aharon at all? The Torah could have simply said that this person must be brought to the local Kohen for a diagnosis.

Lastly, there is a very perplexing law that applies to diagnosing *tzoraas*: If the Kohen is ignorant as to the laws of *tzoraas*, the affliction must be shown to a *Talmid Chacham* who in turn tells the Kohen whether or not it is actually *tzoraas* and the Kohen then proclaims

(continued on reverse)

## Constructive Criticism Continued

the individual pure or impure based on what the *Talmid Chacham* told him (*Yad, Tumas Tzoraas* 9:2). But if the Kohen is ignorant why is he involved in the process at all?

The Torah's description here is of the disease known as "tzoraas" — commonly mistranslated as "leprosy." While some of the afflictions are similar to leprosy-like symptoms, *tzoraas* is most certainly not Hansen's disease caused by the germ *mycobacterium leprae*. Rather, as Maimonides explains, *tzoraas* is a physical symptom of a spiritual defect, occurring even in individuals on a high spiritual level — as we see by Miriam, sister of Moshe Rabbeinu (*Yad, Tumas Tzoraas* 16:10).

In other words, *tzoraas* is a direct message from Hashem that a person has sinned and needs to repent and mend their ways.

In general, it is very hard to accept criticism. The usual knee-jerk reaction to criticism is to look for an ulterior motive in the person giving the criticism. This is probably because we ourselves give criticism to those we have issues with; not to help them improve but rather because we want to put them down and cause pain.

This is why the Torah goes to great lengths to describe who should be the vehicle to deliver the criticism: "Aharon or one of his sons." The main attributes of Aharon HaKohen were "*Ohev Shalom*" and "*Rodef Shalom*." Aharon exhibited boundless love

for his fellow man and wanted everyone to get along. Aharon went to great lengths to make sure husbands and wives got along and realized their true love for each other. Criticism can only be readily accepted when the one being criticized understands that it is coming from an individual who loves them and has a true desire to see improvement. This is why the individual must be brought to "Aharon HaKohen or one of his sons" i.e. those that personify *Ohev Shalom* and *Rodef Shalom*.

*Tzoraas* is a criticism from Hashem and only the Kohen can make sure that the message is properly received.

## Fountain of Youth?

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 16:2) relates an interesting story: There was a certain peddler, who would wander among the towns near Tzippori [in the Northern Galilee], and would announce [to his would-be customers]: "Who wishes to purchase the elixir of life?" Rabbi Yannai was learning in his study hall and called to him: "Come here, and sell it to me." He [the peddler] said to him: "You [Torah scholars], and those like you, don't need it." [Rabbi Yannai] persisted, so the peddler came over and brought him a book of *Tehillim* (*Psalms*), and showed him the verse in *Psalms* 34:13, that reads: "Who is the man who desires life, and loves many days, that he may see good?" And what does the verse say after that? "Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking falsehood." Rabbi Yannai said: "So too did Shlomo say in *Proverbs* 21:23, 'Whoever guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles.'" Rabbi Yannai said: "All my life I would read this verse and did not know where it was explained, until the peddler came and informed me, 'what man is he that desires life?'"

What was the great lesson that Rabbi Yannai learned from this peddler? Seemingly, R' Yannai was merely told a verse in *Tehillim* of which he was already most certainly aware. So what did he learn from the peddler?

The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 30b) calls the Torah "a perfect elixir" — it is the ideal cure for the *yetzer hora*. Similarly, continues the Gemara, Hashem says, "My son, I created the evil inclination and I created the Torah as its *tavlin*." Now the word *tavlin* in its literal translation means a spice. This Gemara is delivering an astounding revelation. We generally understand that Hashem created the Torah as a guide for man to follow with the *yetzer hora* as the obstacle which man must overcome in his pursuit of Torah study and adherence to the *mitzvos*.

This Gemara informs us that this assumption is absolutely incorrect. In reality, the main creation was the *yetzer hora* and the Torah is only the "spice" that enhances the experience. What does this mean? The answer is found in the other statement made in that Gemara: "Every day the *yetzer hora* threatens to overwhelm a person and tries to kill him." What does this mean?

Man was created with enormous potential to accomplish, in fact our mandate is to become God like. This results in the ultimate good — a relationship with Hashem. The awareness of this potential is both exhilarating and debilitating; exhilarating in the breadth and scope of what we may achieve, and debilitating in the fear of failing this enormous opportunity. The *yetzer hora*

is what constantly reminds us of this potential. Except that the *yetzer hora's* approach is to dull the fear of failure in a two fold manner: 1) Lessen the drive to achieve by judging ourselves more accomplished than our peers (this is the source of *lashon hora*) 2) Dull the pain of failure by constantly seeking pleasures which distract us from our true mission. This is what the Talmud means that the *yetzer hora* is trying to kill us by preventing us from achieving a true bond with Hashem.

The peddler taught R' Yannai that the process of guarding your tongue (i.e. not judging your accomplishments by what others have done or not done) is itself an elixir of life. In other words, the efforts we make in trying to become better are actually achieving what we are attempting to accomplish. That is, we don't judge ourselves by how far we got, we judge ourselves by the journey to get there. The process is what makes us closer to Hashem.

Learning Torah also allows us to connect to our true selves. This is why the peddler initially told R' Yannai that "you and those like you do not need this," because those who learn Torah can self-actualize through Torah study, which is the source of all truths and a direct route to connecting with Hashem.

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