



Confronting the Consequences

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Parashat Tazria-Metzora 5778

In this week's *parashah*, we encounter the mysterious disease of *tzara'at*.¹ We learn about the procedure for identifying it and the rituals associated with recovering from it, rituals whose strangeness can be used to understand a critical lesson about human behavior and particularly, human speech. A person who has been afflicted by *tzara'at* is completely exiled, **וְיָשָׁב מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה מוֹשְׁבוֹ, טָמֵא הוּא בָּדֵד**, **He is impure, he sits alone, dwelling outside of the camp** (VaYikra 13:46). Only once he is healed and his body and property have resumed their original appearance, does the afflicted person come back into the camp.² A week before going home, they participate in a fascinating and somewhat unusual ritual of purification:

ויקרא יד:ד-ז

⁴וַיֹּצֵא הַכֹּהֵן וְלָקַח לַמָּטֶה שְׁתֵּי צִפֹּרִים חַיִּים טְהוֹרוֹת וְעֵץ אֶרֶז וְשָׁנִי תוֹלַעַת וְאַזְבִּי: ⁵וַיֹּצֵא הַכֹּהֵן אֶת הַצִּפֹּר הָאֶחָת אֶל כְּלִי חֶרֶשׁ עַל מֵיִם חַיִּים: ⁶אֶת הַצִּפֹּר הַחַיָּה יָקַח אֹתָהּ וְאֶת עֵץ הָאֶרֶז וְאֶת שָׁנִי הַתוֹלַעַת וְאֶת הָאַזְבִּי וְטָבַל אוֹתָם וְאֶת הַצִּפֹּר הַחַיָּה בְּדָם הַצִּפֹּר הַשְּׁחֵטָה עַל הַמֵּיִם הַחַיִּים: ⁷וַיִּזְחַק עַל הַמָּטֶה מִן הַצֶּרֶת שִׁבְעַת פְּעָמִים וְטָהָרוּ וְשָׁלַח אֶת הַצִּפֹּר הַחַיָּה עַל פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה:

VaYikra 14:4-7

⁴The priest commands, and for the one who is being purified, he takes two live pure birds, along with a branch of the cedar tree, a red thread, and some hyssop. ⁵The priest commands, and one of the birds is slaughtered over a clay vessel with fresh water. ⁶He takes the living bird along with the branch of the cedar tree, red thread, and hyssop, and dunks them and the live bird into the blood of the bird that has been slaughtered over the fresh water. ⁷And he sprinkles the one who is being purified from the *tzara'at* seven times. And he purifies him. Then he sends the living bird out across the field.

¹ *Tzara'at* is often translated as leprosy. Like leprosy, *tzara'at* can produce lesions and discoloration of the skin. And though *tzara'at* is not itself contagious like leprosy, the person who suffers from *tzara'at* is sent from the camp, not unlike lepers.

² This moment occurs one week later and is marked by its own set of rituals including bringing a sacrifice and shaving one's body. See VaYikra 14:9-31.



Much of this ritual is familiar from other sacrifices. The sprinkling of sacred water with a hyssop brush is part of the process for cleansing death impurity.³ Two birds is a standard sacrifice. And even the taking of two animals, one of which will be sacrificed and one of which will be cast away, is reminiscent of the lottery on Yom Kippur. One goat is designated as a sacrifice “for God,” while the second is cast into the desert “to Azazel” (VaYikra 16).

Some of this ritual, however, constitutes a major departure from sacrificial norms. Sacrifices are offered on the altar; but in this case, though one is slaughtered, neither of these birds is offered as one of the recognized categories of *korbanot*, e.g. a sin-offering or burnt offering. Sacrifices are also paid for by the person or people who benefit from them. If I need atonement, if I want to celebrate or commemorate an event, if I have promised God a sacrifice, I have to donate the elements of the sacrifice myself. Yet in this procedure, the verse says, **וְלָקַח לַמַּטְהָר, and for the one who is being purified, he takes.** The one who is being purified does not purchase the bird, but rather the bird is taken for him, by someone else on his behalf.⁴

But, perhaps the most perplexing detail of all is one that strikes even the reader who is unfamiliar with standard sacrificial rites. In this ritual, the live bird is dipped into water which is mixed with the blood of the bird that was killed. Although the Torah allows the killing of birds for sacrificial purposes or for food, it commands us to shoo away the mother before taking the young.⁵ If the Torah were so concerned for the psychological welfare of the surviving bird in one law, why be so cruel to the live bird in this ritual? There must be an invaluable lesson to be learned from the symbolism of these two birds lest the Torah be guilty of wantonly wasting the life of one bird and traumatizing the other by mandating this ritual.

Rabbinic tradition teaches that *tzara'at* is a consequence of wicked speech, *lashon hara*. An examination of and understanding of what characterizes *lashon hara* can help us understand the drama that these two birds re-enact and the lesson that they teach.

The Talmud indicates that these birds are representative of the one who speaks (and the one who is spoken about):

תלמוד בבלי ערכין טז:

אמר רבי יהודה בן לוי מה נשתנה מצורע שאמרה תורה יביא שתי ציפורים לטהרתו? אמר הקב"ה הוא עושה מעשה פטיט לפיכך אמרה תורה יביא קרבן פטיט.

³ See BeMidbar 19:18.

⁴ R. Avraham ibn Ezra (1089-c.1167) suggests that the cost of the bird comes from the pocket of the *kohen*, the Sifra (a midrashic collection on VaYikra from around the same time as the Mishnah) suggests that the birds can be obtained by anyone!

⁵ Devarim 22:6-7.



Talmud Bavli Arakhin 16b

R. Yehudah ben Levi said: What is different about the *metzora* that the Torah said that he should bring **two birds** to purify him? The Holy Blessed One said—He did an act of babbling [through speaking *lashon hara*], therefore the Torah said that he should bring a sacrifice that babbles [i.e. chirps].

R. Yehudah ben Levi explains why birds are chosen for this procedure: birds “speak” and so do human beings.⁶ The birds represent us. But why do they need to undergo this ordeal? In order to understand this, we need to probe the nature of *lashon hara*. The Yerushalmi in Peah explores three aspects of what makes *lashon hara* so dangerous and insidious:

תלמוד ירושלמי פאה דף ה, א / א:א

חצי גבור שונים עם גחלי רתמים (תהילים קכ"ד) כל כלי זיין מכין במקומן וזה מכה מרחוק כל הגחלים כבו מבחוץ כבו מבפנים ואלו אע"פ שכבו מבחוץ לא כבו מבפנים...
אמר ר' שמואל בר נחמן- אומרים לנחש- מפני מה את מהלך ולשוך שותת?
אמר לון: דו גרם לי.
מה הנייה לך שאתה נושך? אריה טורף ואוכל זאב טורף ואוכל את מה הנייה לך?
אמר להן: **אם ישוך הנחש בלא לחש** (קוהלת י"א) אילולי איתאמר לי מן השמים נכית לא הוינא נכית.
מפני מה את נושך אבר אחד וכל האיברים מרגישים?
אמר להם: ולי אתם שואלין?! אמרו לבעל הלשון שהוא אומר כאן והורגו ברומי, אומר ברומי והורג בסוריא...

Talmud Yerushalmi Peah 5a / 1:1

The arrows of the mighty [warrior] are sharpened with coal from the broom tree

(Tehillim 120:4). All weapons strike where they are, but [arrows] strike from a distance. All coal when extinguished on the outside, is extinguished on the inside, but this [broom tree coal] even when extinguished on the outside, is not extinguished on the inside...

R. Shmuel bar Nahmani said: We say to the snake, Why are you walking with your tongue dragging [on the ground]?

He says to us: This [i.e. my tongue] has caused me [to do so].⁷

[We say to him]: What benefit is there to you in biting? A lion devours and eats, a wolf devours and eats! [But since a snake does not eat the human it bites,] what benefit is there to you?

He said to them: **Does the snake bite without being whispered to?! (Kohelet 10:11)** If it were not told to me from the heaven to strike, I would not strike.

[We say to him]: Why is it that you strike only one limb, but all of the limbs are affected?

⁶ Though many animals make noise, the chirping of birds is more constant and can appear from the human vantage point to be unprovoked.

⁷ The snake explains that he is living out the curse that was pronounced on him by God in Bereishit (3:14), **על, גחנך תלך ועפר תאכל כל ימי חייך, You shall walk on your belly and you shall eat dirt all of the days of your life.** He received this curse on account of his speaking to Havah with a misleading or cunning tongue.



He said to them: You're asking me?! Speak to the slanderer who speaks [*lashon hara*] here and kills in Rome. He speaks in Rome and kills in Syria...

The image of the eternally burning coals indicates why *lashon hara* can be so devastating. Long after an incident has passed, the story of it passed from mouth to mouth keeps it alive. One shameful character trait, one specific sin can come to define a person if it is gossiped about, if it becomes part of a person's reputation and constitutive of the way they are perceived. It replaces the narrative that a person has the right to tell about themselves with the stories, true or false, that the person who speaks *lashon hara* wants to tell about them. The flames would die out, were it not for the gossip that fans them. A person would be able to start a new life in Rome or Syria, were it not for the speed at which *lashon hara* travels.

R. Shmuel bar Nahmani illustrates the evil of evil speech by comparing it to the sinister behavior of the serpent. Just as the venom from a serpent is lethal, so too damaging speech—the poison that human beings emit from their mouths—is lethal.⁸ Both the serpent and the slanderer kill their victims. Both the serpent and the slanderer are able to effect this damage from a great distance. But the slanderer is worse. The snake bites at God's behest, but the slanderer is acting of their own volition. And this is senseless killing; neither the snake nor the slanderer necessarily benefits from their damaging behavior.

As R. Yehudah ben Levi taught us, the birds in this ritual represent us. Through the process of slaughtering one bird and dipping the live bird in its blood, we re-enact the drama of the speaking of *lashon hara*. The ritual forces the one who watches it to vicariously experience the cruelty of their words. One bird, the person who speaks evil, chirps and lives at the expense of the person who dies on account of those words. One who speaks *lashon hara* is effectively experiencing what the live bird experiences, wallowing in the pain of another being and then flying away. This other bird did not deserve to be killed, it did not die for good reason, and were it not for the divine intervention of the *tzara'at*, it would have flown away with impunity.

It is especially the case with *lashon hara* that the perpetrator needs to come face to face with their actions, because part of what makes *lashon hara* so easy to engage in is that it takes place behind the back of its victims. When I speak ill of someone else, I don't see the effect that my carelessness or maliciousness has on them. I don't see their face fall, I don't see the panic that flashes in their eyes, and I certainly don't see the effect that my words can have months or years down the line.

⁸ This idea is also reflected in the Rabbinic notion that to shame someone, "to whiten their face in public," is equivalent to or perhaps even worse than killing them outright. See Talmud Bavli Bava Metzia 58b.



We speak *lashon hara* because we don't feel bad when we speak it, and to the contrary, we feel good. Gossiping is fun and entertaining, it bonds us with the people we speak it to, and it makes us feel better than the people we speak it about. We can convince ourselves that whomever we're speaking ill of deserves it. We can convince ourselves that because we don't mean any harm that means that, in fact, we aren't causing any harm.

The Torah teaches in Parashat Mishpatim that the usual penalty for stealing is to pay a fine of "double." If I steal an ox from you, then I repay you the value of two oxen. However, if I don't limit myself to just stealing your property, but I even go so far as to slaughter or sell the animal that I stole from you, the fine goes up to four times the value of a sheep and five times the value of an ox. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakai explains the disparity in these two payments:

תלמוד בבלי בבא קמא עט:

אמר רבן יוחנן בן זכאי בא וראה כמה גדול כבוד הבריות שור שהלך ברגליו חמשה שה שהרכיבו על כתיפו ארבעה:

Talmud Bavli Bava Kama 79b

Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said: Come and see how great human dignity is. The theft of an ox, which walked on its own legs [as the thief stole it], incurs a fivefold payment, whereas the theft of a sheep, which the thief carried on his shoulder, incurs a fourfold payment.

The experience of carrying the sheep counts as a type of payment because the thief experiences the shame of what he's done. He literally feels the weight of his crime on his shoulders. So when he comes to court to pay the penalty for his crime, the function of which is to deter him from committing that sin again, he has already absorbed some of the lesson. He is already less likely to steal again because he has himself carried the sheep. He is not removed from the crime he has committed. One who slanders, however, is removed from their sin and they need to be brought to see it, to experience it, albeit through the vicarious drama of these chirping birds.

But why doesn't the slanderer, the tale-bearer, the gossip bring his own sacrifice? Why doesn't he have to pay for it out of his own pocket? The *lashon hara* is only spoken if it is heard. If there weren't willing ears, the problem of evil speech would dry up of its own accord. The person afflicted with *tzara'at* doesn't have to pay for these birds, because there is a third bird in the drama. In addition to the victim, the bird who dies, the perpetrator, the bird who flies, there is the bird who observes, we who enable and who listen to things that we ourselves wouldn't say and would prefer not to hear.⁹

⁹ See Talmud Bavli Arakhin 15b.



It is ill-advised at best, cruel and obnoxious at worst, to interrupt someone who is speaking *lashon hara* and ask them to stop. Good manners and kindness often force us to engage in conversations that are uncomfortable, but good manners don't force us to endorse this speech. Don't show interest in the conversation. Don't extend the conversation by asking follow-up questions. Gently redirect the conversation.

Evil speech thrives on the remoteness of its consequences, on its veneer of innocence. Society as a whole enables it, and the ritual outlined in our *parashah* forces us to confront the ways in which we too, even in our silence, are complicit.

Wishing you a Shabbat of sacred speech.

