

”מות והחיים ביד הלשון”

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This week’s *parsha* is *Tazria*, separated from *Parshas Metzora* because this year is a *shana me’uberet*. The reason why they are usually connected is because both *parshiyos* deal mainly with the *machla* of *tzara’as* and how to go about it and examine it, etc. These are obviously difficult *parshiyos* and a difficult *mesechta* in *Shas (Maseches Nega’im)* to understand. I would like to focus on the culmination of the *tahara* process for a *metzora* as he prepares to re-enter society and shed his *tamei* status.

The first few *pesukim* in *Parshas Metzora* describe that the *metzora* brings two birds as *korbanos*, and while one is *shechted* the other is dipped into the blood of the first and is then sent away. This is the only time in *toras korbanos* where a *korban* is not *shechted*, but is instead sent away.

The question is what is the message of sending away the second bird? Why with the *metzora* do we break *korban* procedural norms to send away the *korban* instead of *shechting* it?

Before we answer this question, I would like to be *makdim* with two *divrei Chazal*.

The first is a famous *gemara* in : מס' ערכין טז. The *gemara* asks why the *metzora* must bring two birds for his *korban*. While we do find that sometimes birds are brought for *korbanos*, this usually happens when the person bringing the *korban* cannot afford the more expensive animal. However, with the *metzora* no matter what his or her financial status is, two birds are brought. The *gemara* explains that since this *metzora* did a “*ma’aseh patit*”, he must bring a *korban patit*. This means that because the *metzora*’s guilt, at least most conventionally, is due to speaking *lashon hara* [improper speech] which is usually a result of excessive speech, the Torah requires him to bring a *korban* from the animal that “speaks” excessively with its constant chirping-the bird. This is the message which the Torah is sending to the *metzora*.

We are still left with the question of why one bird is *shechted* while the other is sent away.

There is a fascinating *Zohar Hakadosh* which will help us understand this. The *Zohar Hakadosh* says that one bird is brought on account of “*lishna bisha*”, which is Aramaic for *lashon hara*. The other bird is brought for “*lishna tava*”, good speech. The obvious question becomes, why would one bring a *korban* for good speech?

The message of the *Zohar Hakadosh* is that there are two different ways one can do this *aveira* verbally. One is speaking ill and the other is refraining from speaking positively. We *shecht* the first bird because of the negative speech, symbolizing killing and getting rid of ill speech. The other bird, which is for good speech, is sent away.

What does “an *aveira* of good speech” mean?

The answer is that sometimes the Ribono Shel Olam holds us responsible for not speaking well to others, for not giving encouragement, or for not giving a compliment. If someone gives a nice speech or *davens* beautifully for the *amud*, or even takes on a nice *chessed* project, we should go over to them a say, “*yasher koach!*” Everybody enjoys a compliment and everybody enjoys being appreciated.

The *Zohar Hakadosh* is telling us that when someone deserves a pat on the back or is going through a hard time and needs encouragement, instead of backing off which is our natural tendency we should go ahead and give them *chizzuk*. Obviously, one needs to know the correct thing to say and not to, *chas v’shalom*, make things worse. Whatever it may be, there are so many opportunities in life to lift someone up.

With this, perhaps we can gain a new appreciation of the *posuk*, (משלי יח, כא) "מות והחיים ביד הלשון". The conventional way of explaining this *posuk* is that one can literally destroy and murder someone with *lashon hara*. One can ruin a *shidduch*, a reputation, even a business through *lashon hara*. This is not merely hyperbole.

We can suggest that this *posuk* has more to it. One can also be *mechaye meisim* with speech. One can speak words of encouragement or praise and breathe fresh life into someone else. There are two different types of speech which can affect someone else- killing them or giving them life.

This can explain another interesting *ma'mar Chazal*. The *Medrash* (ויקרא רבה לג, א) in *Parshas Behar* relates a story with R. Shimon ben Gamliel who sent his famous servant Tevi to the souk to buy him the best item to be found. Tevi returned with fresh tongue. We know that tongue is a delicacy as evidenced by its price per pound, which is tremendously higher than other cuts of meat. It is also rare, one the smallest portions of meat in a cow. Then, when R. Shimon ben Gamliel sent him out a different day with the instruction to buy the worst item in the souk, Tevi returned once again with tongue. When asked how tongue could be both the best and worst thing in the market, Tevi replied that it is indeed true.

Obviously, this *Medrash* is a metaphor. Tongue could be the best thing in the world because it could be *mechaye meisim*. *Chayim* is indeed in the hand of the *lashon*. Yet, tongue could also be the worst thing in the world when it kills. *Ma'ves*, too, is *b'yad halashon*.

Last year, I remember hearing the following story which really brought home this lesson to me:

There was a brother and sister, young adult age, who were Pesach shopping. The brother saw a *rebbe* of his from a few years back, and he told his sister that he wanted to go across the street to wish the *rebbe* a *gut Yom Tov* and thank him for the learning he gained from being in his *shiur*. While the sister was sitting in the car waiting, she sees her sixth grade English teacher walking down the street. She thought to herself that her brother had just done such a nice thing, and she wanted to do the same to this past teacher of hers.

She told her old English teacher that her English class made a tremendous difference in her life. When she applied to a high-standard Bais Yaakov for high school, she had to write an essay to get in. "Because of your English class," she said, "I was able to write a beautiful essay and succeeded in gaining admission to the school. Attending that school has had a profound effect on my life." So, she thanked her sixth grade English teacher.

The sequel to this story is that the teacher subsequently wrote a letter to the girl's parents. In it, she explained that she had been teaching for thirty-seven years. When it came the time of year for her to inform the school whether she would be returning for the next school year, she was torn. She had been teaching for such a long time and the generations had changed so much over her tenure. Maybe it was time to hang up the gloves. She didn't relate so well to the girls anymore and she didn't really need the *parnasa*, and she really didn't know what to do. So, she asked the Ribono Shel Olam to send her a *siman* for what her choice should be, whether to continue teaching or to retire. The day before her deadline to give notice, her old student came over to her on the street and thanked her for her English class and how much it meant to her. That was her *siman* from the Ribono Shel Olam to continue to teach for at least another year. Why? All because one student told her how she had really made a difference.

That is *lishna tava*. Who knows what would have happened if the girl had not gone over to the teacher? That is irrelevant to us. The point is simple. I always like to say, there are many types of *chessed*: There is *bikur cholim*, *hachnosas kallah*, *levoyas hameis*, *chessed b'gufo*, *chessed b'mamono*, there is no shortage of opportunities. But, the easiest type of *chessed*, which doesn't cost a dime nor cost any *tircha*, is a simple compliment.