

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



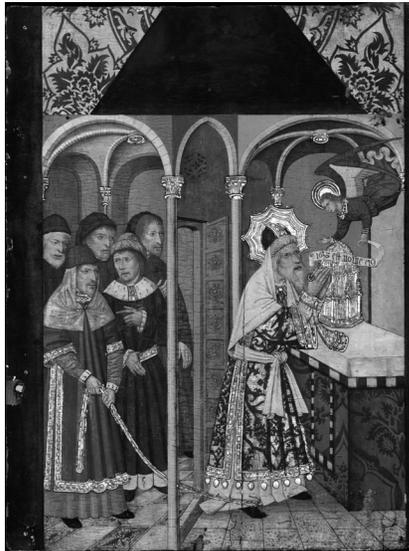
The Saint and the Zohar

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We often think of Jewish life in Spain in terms of the massacres of 1391 and the Spanish Expulsion in 1492. But the art made for the Church between those two dates presents a more nuanced view of Christian–Jewish relations. Many of the 15th-century painters who worked for the Church in Spain adopted the conceit that the communal spaces of Jewish life—the synagogue and the Jewish quarter—could represent the ancient Temple and the Holy Land in paintings of the lives of Jesus and the saints, and that contemporary Jews could be stand-ins for those who lived during the early centuries of Church history. As a result, 15th-century Spanish altarpieces are a rich source of information on synagogue interiors and the ceremonial art used there. In the altarpieces, the Jews of Spain become living, breathing individuals, rather than mere names.

The origins of the Christian subject illustrated here, the Annunciation to Zacharias (father of St. John the Baptist), are even more complex. Zacharias is depicted as the High Priest on Yom Kippur, alone in the Holy of Holies. Much of what we know about the Yom Kippur service in the Temple comes from earlier sources such as this week's parashah, but one detail in the painting is derived from a later text. The Zohar, written or compiled in late 13th-century Spain, tells of a golden chain that was attached to the High Priest's leg in order to pull him from the Holy of Holies if he died while performing his duties. The inclusion of that detail in this altarpiece—dated 1464 or later—reveals that some of the contents of the Zohar were known in Spain—by Christians—just 150 years after its compilation.

View a larger image of this painting in color on learn.jtsa.edu.



Panel with the Angel Appearing to Zacharias (from a Retable depicting Saint John the Baptist and scenes from his life), Domingo Ram (Spanish, Aragon, active 1464–1507), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1925.120.929. www.metmuseum.org.

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Aharei Mot - Kedoshim 5775

אחרי מות - קדשים תשע"ה



A Holy Tongue: Kedushah and the Ethics of Speech

Marc Gary, Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer, JTS

A few years ago, my wife and I attended a retreat at Camp Ramah Darom in northern Georgia. The scholar-in-residence for the Shabbat was Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, a widely respected author of popular books on Jewish literacy and Jewish ethics. He suggested that all of us in attendance—approximately 100 adults—commit to one of the most difficult challenges we had ever faced: refrain from talking about other people for the duration of Shabbat. That is to say, for an entire day, we should speak not a word of gossip. I will not tell you whether we succeeded or failed in that challenge, but I will tell you that it was a very long 25 hours indeed.

In this week's parashah, we read the enigmatic verse "Do not deal basely with your countrymen. Do not profit by the blood of your fellow: I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:16). The Hebrew phrase "*Lo telekh rakhil*" is an idiom that can be translated as "Do not act as a merchant toward your own kinsmen," leading the Sifra—the halakhic midrash to Leviticus—to interpret the injunction as a prohibition against conducting one's personal relationships as if they were business transactions ("Don't act like a merchant who loads up his horse and departs"). But Rashi understands the idiom to mean "You shall not go up and down as a talebearer among your people." In other words, it is a prohibition against gossip. Bringing these two threads together—the commercial aspect reflected in the Sifra and Rashi's conclusion that the verse condemns slander—Ibn Ezra observes: "Just as the merchant buys from this one and sells to that one, so a slanderer tells this one what he heard from that one."

Of all the soaring concepts and stirring commandments contained in this parashah, I have chosen to address this one for two reasons. First, as Rabbi Telushkin's experiment at Ramah Darom brought home to me, this prohibition against gossip is an exceedingly difficult mitzvah to observe, and it is worth considering why our tradition places such great importance on it. But the second reason for focusing on this verse is what it tells us about the nature of *kedushah* (holiness), which is not only the major theme of this dual parashah

(which contains the “Holiness Code” of chapters 17–26), but also the concept that permeates virtually the entire book of Leviticus.

What is encompassed by the commandment against gossiping? Surely the most obvious form is slander—spreading false, defamatory information about another person (what is known in Hebrew as *motzi shem ra* [giving another a bad name]). But the larger category of *leshon hara*, which applies to statements about another that are verifiably true, was deemed by the Rabbis as being just as pernicious. There are many classical definitions of *leshon hara*, but I prefer the one offered by Philip Roth in *Operation Shylock: A Confession*:

Loshon hora: the whispering campaign that cannot be stopped, rumors that it's impossible to quash, besmirchment from which you will never be cleansed, slanderous stories to belittle your professional qualifications, derisive reports of your business deceptions and your perverse aberrations, outraged polemics denouncing your moral failings, misdeeds, and faulty character traits—your shallowness, your vulgarity, your cowardice, your avarice, your indecency, your falseness, your selfishness, your treachery. Derogatory information. Defamatory statements. Insulting witticisms. Disparaging anecdotes. Idle mockery. Bitchy chatter. Malicious absurdities. Galling wisecracks. . . . They will make a shambles of the position that you worked nearly sixty years to achieve. No area of your life will go uncontaminated. And if you think this is an exaggeration you really *are* deficient in a sense of reality.

The Rabbis surely were not deficient in a sense of reality. They understood well the severity of the harm *leshon hara* could visit on its victims. Maimonides observed in *Hilkhot Deot* that the sages identified three transgressions for which retribution is exacted in this world and a person's portion is forfeited in the world to come: idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed. But, according to Maimonides, *leshon hara* outweighs them all.

What is more, *leshon hara* contaminates not only the talebearer and the victim, but the listener as well. According to the Akedat Yitzhak, the last phrase of verse 16—“Do not profit by [literally, ‘stand by’] the blood of your fellow”—applies to the one who listens to *leshon hara* without objecting: “The listener's sin is tantamount to murder, being in the position of one who stands idly by the blood of his neighbor whom he loves.”

As is often the case, this ancient wisdom reverberates today. Perhaps we think that the tradition's equation of *leshon hara* with murder is hyperbole—at least until we recall the high school student who took her

own life after being subjected to a barrage of vicious gossip and slander, or the college student who committed suicide because he was publicly humiliated through perhaps the greatest gossip engine in history: social media. But one does not have to refer to tragedies of that magnitude to see how our words can hurt our friends, invite others to take misguided actions, or generally cheapen and degrade our discourse.

In the greater context of our parashah and the book of Leviticus, the prohibition against gossip exemplifies the notion of *kedushah*. Modern society has little patience for the concept of *kedushah* because holiness insists on the importance of distinctions and separateness, which in turn focus on details and seeming trivialities. What is more, the notion of *kedushah* appears countercultural in today's society, elevating distinctiveness over universalism. Leviticus, however, insists that distinctions are of paramount importance: spatial distinctions (inside the camp and outside the camp, inside the Tent of Meeting and outside it, etc.); temporal distinctions (the Shabbat, the holidays, time periods of purity and impurity); animal distinctions (clean animals and unclean animals); and a multitude of others. As Leon Wieseltier observed, “Leviticus is a manual for the religious organization of reality.” (“Leviticus” in *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible*)

That reality, of course, includes the ethical as well the ritual. Even acts as ephemeral as speaking must be segmented into categories and ordered: pure speech and impure speech; words of Torah and words of *leshon hara*; “words that hurt and words that heal” (to use Rabbi Telushkin's felicitous phrase). The concept of *kedushah* embodies these distinctions as the foundation for developing a virtuous character. By committing to the difficult practice of refraining from gossip, we not only avoid harming others, we also develop within ourselves the virtues of empathy, humility, and graciousness. In this respect, *kedushah* reflects the Torah's concern “not only with behavior but also with character; not just with what we do but also the kind of person we become” (*Covenant and Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible—Leviticus: The Book of Holiness*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks). That is the meaning of holiness.

As the poet and Torah teacher Danny Siegel wrote, in preface to *And God Braided Eve's Hair*: “If you always assume /the man sitting next to you / is the Messiah / waiting for some simple human kindness— / You will soon come to **weigh your words** / and watch your hands. / And if he so chooses / not to reveal himself / in your time— / it will not matter.”

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