

The potential of language extends beyond the specific case of *lashon hara*. Even praise, it seems, can backfire. Psychologist Carol Dweck investigated what happened when one group of students were commended for their intelligence while another group of students were praised for their effort when completing the same series of learning tasks. Interestingly, when the focus was on the students' intelligence, they stopped trying—they became risk-averse and their performance suffered. In contrast, students praised for their effort demonstrated greater resilience—they eagerly tackled new academic challenges and their performance improved. Intelligence (and a host of other traits), are not, in fact, fixed—with determination and hard work we can develop these characteristics. We have agency; we have remarkable potential.

Tazria-Metzora contains a cautionary tale—a reminder of the power of language. Dweck's research arrives at a complementary conclusion: Even when we have good intentions, we need to be wary of our linguistic choices. Our words can be limiting and damaging; they can reinforce our beliefs in fixed abilities and hinder our creative, intellectual, and human potential. Or, instead, our words can affirm our capacity to change, improve, and meet life's challenges with honesty, ingenuity, and strength.



Tazria-Metzora 5781

תזריע-מצרע תשפ"א



The Values of a Jewish Home

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

In the precious days “Before the Coronavirus Era” (B.C.E.), the parshiyot of Tazria-Metzora seemed wholly disconnected from our lives, presenting the perennial challenge of relevance (or irrelevance) to even the most talented *darshan* (sermonizer). How are we to connect leprous plagues attacking both body and abode to our daily lives? And to what extent does the experience of quarantine resonate with our modern reality? These are only two of the many questions that we would have posed in a pre-Covid world.

And then the pandemic changed our lives, and transformed our relationship to these previously enigmatic Torah readings. What captured my attention as I turned to Parashat Metzora this year was the idea of the affliction of home. The idea of home, which many of us consider to be a place of refuge and sanctity, is turned on its head as Torah presents us with a case of domestic disease.

Leviticus 14:34–35 teaches, “When you enter the land of Canaan that I give you as a possession, and I inflict an eruptive plague upon a house in the land you possess, the owner of the house will come and tell the priest . . .” This triggers a series of directives in which the priest examines the plague; if the plague is determined to be serious, the house is quarantined for seven days; another examination takes place; and then a process of remediation occurs. What are we to make of this curious phenomenon and ritual?

Basing his commentary on *Leviticus Rabbah* 17:6, Rashi, the prolific medieval commentator, writes, “This was because the Amorites concealed treasures of gold in the walls of their homes during the whole forty years that the Israelites were wandering in the desert; and in consequence, the

plague was sent so the Israelites would pull down their walls and discover the hidden treasure.” Far from being a punishment then, this domestic leprosy is, at its heart, a blessing. It strikes homes with the aim of helping their inhabitants discover treasure that the Canaanites tried to conceal.

The Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, has a visceral reaction to Rashi’s commentary. He responds,

Now really! Did the Creator of the universe need to resort to such contortions? Why would God have given the Canaanites the idea of hiding [things in the walls] so that Israel would have to knock down these houses!

The real meaning of these afflictions of houses is in fact quite wondrous; a demonstration that Israel’s holiness is so great that they can also draw sanctity and purity into their dwelling places. Scripture tells us, “A stone will cry out from the wall and a wooden beam will answer it” (Hab. 2:11), regarding a person’s sin, to which the walls of the house bear witness (Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth*, 173–174).

According to the commentary of the Sefat Emet, our moral and ethical behavior affects our surroundings, and, more intimately, shapes the physical structure of our home. The walls of our sacred dwelling places potentially absorb the consequences of unethical and immoral behavior.

The Sefat Emet teases out a beautiful message: Torah demonstrates a higher level of holiness that is accessible to the Israelite people upon entering the Land of Israel. I would call it the “sensitivity of sanctity.” We are called to live up to our greatest morals and principles. It is through this virtue that we acquire and maintain possession of the Land of Israel. As inhabitants of Israel we must be attentive, vigilant, and caring.

And apropos Yom HaShoah, Arthur Green goes even further, writing,

. . . [A] Jew living after 1945 cannot hear this RaSHI comment quoted without recalling the tales of Jews in Poland and elsewhere being asked by their gentile neighbors, as they were led out to the slaughter: “Where did you hide the gold?” In the face of this horrible

memory, the aggadic tradition underlying RaSHI here serves to protect us from any moral superiority that our status as victims might give us. Under different circumstances, we are reminded, we might have been the ones to go searching for other people’s treasures (ibid.).

Indeed, it is a poetic commentary on the idea of home. In Judaism, we consider home to be a *mikdash me’at*, a sanctuary in miniature. And if so, it should be a place where we try harder—where we have aspirational visions of being the best we can be. Home is not just built of construction materials such as wood, stones, and steel; a home is also built with compassion, love, and an ethical compass. Without soulful work, our home will indeed be plagued with argument, corruption, and isolation. This holds true for both our personal, private home as well as our national home.

As we celebrate Yom Ha’atzma’ut, Israeli Independence Day, and Israel engages in the hard work of putting together a stable government in the coming weeks and months, may the moral, aspirational vision of Torah guide our blueprint.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (ז’ל) and Harold Hassenfeld (ז’ל).

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Guarding Our Tongues

Dr. Abigail Uhrman, Assistant Professor of Jewish Education, William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education, JTS

Becoming is better than being.

—Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*

This week’s parashah discusses *tzara’at*, a skin disease understood in rabbinic tradition as punishment for *lashon hara*, evil speech. The public castigation that the *metzora* suffers is a powerful warning for us to “guard our tongues.” It was with words that God created the world, and our words have potential to build, create, and sustain life and human dignity, or to be a source of pain and destruction.