

The Tongue of the Leper

A *Derasha* on the Parasha of *Metsora* (Leviticus 14:53-57)

By Jacques B. Doukhan

Jewish tradition has related the disease of leprosy to slandering. There are a number of reasons for this connection, one of them being the story of Miriam. She and her brother Aaron spoke bad things about their brother Moses. As a result, she became a leper. And for that reason there is a connection between slander and leprosy. In fact, leprosy was understood to be the punishment for a slanderer. Ultimately he would become a leper.

Another reason for the connection comes from a linguistic play on the Hebrew word for leprosy (*metso-rah*). Since in the Torah there is no vowel, it is read as *metsirah*, which means “to bring evil out of your mouth.” Yeshua himself warned, “What comes out of the mouth this is what defiles men” (Matthew 15:18). *Metsirah*—this is what makes a leper. What you say defiles you.

When the ancient rabbis read Leviticus 14:53-57, they found clues in the text suggesting that leprosy was to be understood as something more than just an organic disease. It has to do with a spiritual situation—speaking evil. The Torah required lepers to offer birds as an offering when seeking to be saved from leprosy. The ancient rabbis concluded that it was very appropriate to sacrifice gossiping birds which fly all over chattering *tweet, tweet, tweet*, because slanderers have done that too. In sacrificing the birds they remember who they are.

An old Midrash, an ancient commentary on the text, tells the story of a peddler who traveled throughout all the cities of Palestine. He would shout in the center of the market: “Look, come, I have found the magic potion, an elixir of life. If you take it you will enjoy life, be healthy, and live forever.” That would get the attention of the people. Once he had a crowd around him, he would pull a little book from the bottom of his bag. It was the *Tehillim*—the book of Psalms. Then he would read, “Who is the person who desires life? Guard your

tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit” (Psalm 34:12-13). This is the elixir of life—the magic potion. If you want to enjoy life and live forever, this is the recipe. No wonder we are all dying!

The rabbis compared the impact on a person who has been slandered as having been shot by an arrow. When we shoot an arrow, it may hit somebody. Even if we aim well, the arrow may go elsewhere. Likewise, as soon as we have spoken, we no longer have control over our words. The very powerful tongue cannot retrieve its slander.

There is another story about a person who committed slander which resulted in a lot of evil. After a while, this person realized the harm which had been done, went to the person who had been harmed, and said, “Please, forgive me. I was talking about you, even against you. I don’t know what to do. Forgive me.” The wronged person said, “Alright, I will. But come, and take your blanket with you.” It was a very special blanket made with thousands of feathers. They climbed upstairs to a window on the second story of a house. When they arrived, the one wronged said, “Take your knife.” The slanderer was a bit intrigued, but took the knife. He was told: “Cut the blanket and throw all the feathers out of the window.”

After the slanderer threw out the thousands of feathers, the wronged person said, “Now go and pick up all the feathers and put them back into the blanket.” The slanderer said, “I can’t. It is impossible.” The wronged person responded, “Well, I can forgive you, but too many hurtful words have already been disseminated, just as with all these feathers. I have no control over them.”

We all have experienced slander in one way or another, either by committing it or being a victim of it. There is nothing like being the victim of slander to realize how painful it is. The Bible has many examples of slander: Moses dealt with it. The three Hebrews

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in Babylon were thrown into the furnace because of slander, and Daniel was cast into the lions' den. Yeshua was crucified because of slander. Throughout history the Jewish people have experienced the pain of being slandered. It started with seemingly beautiful words, but Church fathers were preaching against the Jews. Chrysostome, named "the golden mouth" because of his preaching, encouraged hatred for the Jews. From the time of the Church fathers to Luther, the slander continued. Hitler only acted upon what others were saying. Words can kill. We have experienced that for thousands of years.

Calumny in Aramaic is called *lishan tletha*—"the tongue of three." When we slander we harm three people. We, of course, harm the person we gossip about. We destroy that person. In the book of Daniel, the word used means "eating the part of" (Dan 3:8). When we slander, it is as if we eat someone. Of course, we destroy not only that person, but also ourselves by the same process. When we speak evil, we often use hyperbolic language to exaggerate a bit, and a lie quickly emerges. We start with the truth but falsehood follows. Before long we are believing our own lies, and that's the punishment. We also harm the person to whom we speak because that person becomes part of the slander. In fact, if that person were not present, we would not slander. Very often the slanderer gets inspired by those wide ears he encounters. When receiving such attention, he becomes stimulated and suddenly elaborates. So, slandering is also shared by the one who is listening to the slanderer.

A number of principles have been conveyed to us through rabbinic tradition. The ancient rabbi says, "Anyone who slanders cannot reside in the same universe as God Himself" (Arakhin 15b). If you slander, God is not there. There is another saying of the same nature: "Anyone who slanders, denies the basic principles of Torah." Slandering has a cosmic impact, even if you thought you were just whispering a secret.

Slander has a profound powerful impact on the cosmos. One study was conducted by philosopher Ceresa Boch, once a president of Harvard University. She wrote a book on lying, demonstrating that even one little lie affects society, having a cosmic impact. This is why slander is related to worship in Jewish

tradition. In fact, the very reason the Temple has been destroyed, says one Jewish tradition, is because of slandering. "Greater is the sin of the evil tongue than the sin of idolatry." Thus we cannot worship when we slander. In recognizing how slander relates to worship, we can begin to recognize the essence of worship.

If we worship *with* people, then we cannot worship *against* them. Even in Christian tradition, there has been liturgical language used against the Jews or against others. We cannot worship the Creator and speak against the creature. Yet, ironically, worship as a topic has been one of speaking against each other. When we worship, we need to be together. We cannot worship alone. We experience worship together as a corporate entity. When we worship, we refer to "we" and "our Father in heaven." It is not "my Father." "Our Father in heaven" is cosmic language. When we worship the Creator, we suddenly are all equal. Worship is the great equalizer. We cannot think of ourselves as being superior to others. Worship is an encounter not only with God, but with each other. It is not just being together, but is communicating with each other. So when dialogue or confrontation are difficult, we often talk about each other. Worship is an encounter with each other. Thus worship and slander are very closely related.

When we are able to understand the harm of slander, then we are able to come to God. We begin to pray the right words, sing the right songs, and truly worship. If we are able to master our tongue in speaking against each other, then we are able to find the right words at the altar.

There is a remedy for slander. Committing slander brings on a punishment like leprosy. A leper is banished from the community, and that results in loneliness and total silence. That is punishment to the slanderer. After being diagnosed with leprosy, he is taken out of the community and is obliged to silence and loneliness. After this time of profound reflection and self-analysis, he returns to the community with a praise: "God, blessed be Your name. Bless the name of God, Baruch Ha-shem." Wouldn't it be healthy and redeeming for our society so busy slandering to pause in silence as a cure? To learn the value and the weight of words is to be healed from slandering.