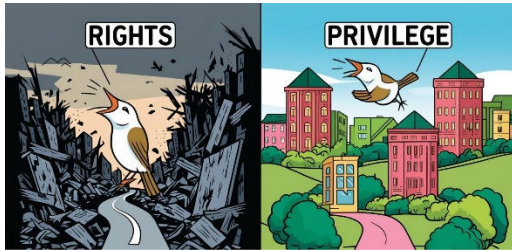




Speech: Rights, Responsibility, or Privilege



The Parshiyos of Tazria and Metzora provide a comprehensive overview of the laws and principles governing individuals who have contracted tzara'as. Often inaccurately referred to as leprosy, tzara'as represents a physical sign of a deeper spiritual malady. The Talmud in Arachin asserts that tzara'as arises from the sin of engaging in Lashon Hara. Some

of the laws concerning the Metzora hint at this relationship. Those suffering from this condition must temporarily distance themselves from the communal encampment and live in solitude. The act of speaking ill of others results in their separation from society. They must cover their mouths and declare to all who approach that they are impure. The offerings brought during their purification process include two birds, representing their propensity to chirp about others, akin to the chirping of birds.

Although the ailment of tzara'as does not plague people today, the messages the Torah wishes to convey are eternal. As such, we must analyze these messages and implement their insights into our social and interpersonal engagements.

Social Beings

The Torah can be divided into two main categories. Certain commandments focus on the relationship between individuals and G-d, such as Shabbos, Kosher, and Tefillin. On the other hand, some commandments relate to the interactions between individuals, including laws against stealing and the prohibition of Lashon Hara. Interestingly, the National Institute of Health points out that humans are inherently social beings, meant to exist within a societal framework rather than in isolation.

Research suggests that a person will have over 80,000 social interactions throughout their lifetime. Every time we shop, take a walk, or run an errand. We potentially have the opportunity for a social interaction. The impression we make during these brief interactions can define the type of person we present to the world.

Rights

Social interactions within Western society are consistently understood through the lens of 'rights'. Individuals have been trained to assert various rights without regard for the impact on others. Moreover, individuals assert their right to their own 'truth', even when it contradicts objective facts. This paradigm has resulted in significant intolerance, all in the name of tolerance. A prevailing cultural attitude exists that endorses opinions, contingent upon their alignment with one's beliefs.

Furthermore, the scope of these rights has transcended mere free speech and personal opinions, extending into diverse aspects of social interactions. Crimes like shoplifting and vandalism are increasingly excused if they resonate with a preferred narrative. The concept of free speech has been fundamentally distorted, now serving as a justification for endorsing and promoting reprehensible and anti-social conduct.



Responsibility

In his commentary on Koheles, the Vilna Gaon elucidates the four realms of creation by asserting that humans possess four faculties: 1) Domem (inanimate entities such as minerals and liquids), 2) Tzomeach (the realm of growth, including plants), 3) Chai (the domain of living beings, specifically animals), and 4) Medaber (the speaking human). The key differentiator between humans and animals is the faculty of speech. While animals can communicate, only humans can express intricate thoughts and feelings, granting them the unique power to elevate or diminish another individual through verbal expressions.

As the French thinker François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire, articulated, 'With great power comes great responsibility.' Given that individuals possess the profound ability to articulate their thoughts and ideas, it is reasonable to conclude that their speech carries a substantial responsibility to be exercised judiciously and for positive outcomes. The capacity for verbal expression is designed to facilitate a person's integration into society. This gift was bestowed upon humanity as a catalyst for creativity. With this ability, humans elevate themselves above the instinctual behaviors of the animal kingdom, which are inherently self-centered, and foster meaningful connections with others compassionately and selflessly.

Privilege

The capacity for verbal expression is appropriately viewed as a privilege. The Torah's delineation of the Metzora laws underscores the importance of managing one's words judiciously and appreciating their value. An individual who misuses their language to malign others, thereby employing this gift to undermine societal bonds instead of fostering them, forfeits their right to remain integrated within society and must be isolated. They are instructed to cover their mouths and declare to those approaching them that they are impure, indicating that they have sullied their voice and should be kept at a distance.

The Yerushalmi recounts that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai expressed that if he had been present at Mount Sinai during the Torah's revelation, he would have asked God to provide each person with two mouths—one dedicated to Torah and the other for mundane dialogue. He subsequently retracted this idea, recognizing the challenge of managing a single mouth, which underscores the challenge of upholding the sanctity of two. This again highlights the importance of using our speech wisely as a key goal in life.

Once the tzara'as affliction has been removed, the individual embarks on the purification journey. This process bears a striking resemblance to the purification rituals that individuals undergo after becoming impure through contact with a dead body. The former tendency to speak ill of others must be abandoned. The individual must now reintegrate into the social fabric and cultivate new relationships. They must recognize their capacity for speech as a privilege that brings significant responsibility.

Have a wonderful Shabbos,

Binyomin Stolov



In Loving Memory of Moshe Aharon & Perel Leah Stolov ob"m

