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How to Praise

The Sages were eloquent on the subject of *lashon hara*, evil speech, the sin they took to be the cause of *tsara'at*. But there is a meta-halachic principle: "From the negative you can infer the positive"¹ So, for example, from the seriousness of the prohibition against *Chillul Hashem*, desecrating God's name, one can infer the importance of the opposite, *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying God's name.

It therefore follows that alongside the grave sin of *lashon hara*, there must in principle be a concept of *lashon hatov*, good speech, and it must be more than a mere negation of its opposite. The way to avoid *lashon hara* is to practise silence, and indeed the Sages were eloquent on the important of silence.² Silence saves us from evil speech but in and of itself it achieves nothing positive. What then is *lashon hatov*?

One of the most important tasks of a leader, a parent or a friend is focused praise. We first discussed this idea in parshat Vayeshev, where we examined the classic text on this - a Mishnah in Tractate Avot (2:11) in which

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai enumerates the praises of his five beloved students:

Eliezer ben Hyrcanus: a plastered well that never loses a drop. Joshua ben Chananya: happy the one who gave him birth. Yose the Priest: a pious man. Shimon ben Netanel: a man who fears sin. Elazar ben Arach: an ever-flowing spring.

Every Rabbi had disciples. The imperative, "Raise up many disciples"³ is one of the oldest rabbinic teachings on record. What the Mishnah is telling us here is *how* to create disciples. It is not difficult to create followers. Often a good teacher will, over time, notice that they have developed a large following, students who are uncritical devotees - but how to encourage these followers to become creative intellects in their own right? It is far harder to create leaders than to create followers.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was a great teacher because five of his students became giants in their own right. The Mishnah is telling us how he did it: with focussed praise. He showed each of his pupils where their particular strength lay. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, the "plastered well that never loses a drop," was gifted with a superb memory - an important ability in an age in which manuscripts were rare and the Oral Law was not yet committed to writing. Shimon ben Netanel, the "man who fears sin," may not have had the intellectual brilliance of the others but his reverential nature was a reminder to others that they were not merely scholars but also holy men engaged in a sacred task. Elazar ben Arach, the "ever-flowing spring," had a creative mind constantly giving rise to new interpretations of ancient texts.

I discovered the transformative power of focused praise from one of the more

remarkable people I ever met, the late Lena Rustin. Lena was a speech therapist, specialising in helping children who struggled with stammers. I came to know her through a television documentary I was making for the BBC about the state of the family in Britain. Lena believed that the young children she was treating – they were, on average, around five years old – had to be understood in the context of their families. Families tend to develop an equilibrium. If a child stammers, everyone in the family adjusts to it. Therefore if the child is to lose their stammer, all the relationships within the family will have to be renegotiated. Not only must the child change. So must everyone else.

By and large, we tend to resist change. We settle into patterns of behaviour as they become more and more comfortable, like a well-used armchair or a well-worn pair of shoes. How do you create an atmosphere within a family that encourages change and makes it unthreatening? The answer Lena discovered was praise. She told the families with whom she was working that every day they must notice each member of the family doing something right, and say so – specifically, positively and thankfully.

She did not go into deep explanations, but watching her at work I began to realise what she was doing. She was creating, within each home, an atmosphere of mutual regard and continuous positive reinforcement. She wanted the parents to shape an environment of self-respect and self-confidence, not just for the stammering child but for every member of the family, so that the entire atmosphere of the home was one in which people felt safe to change and help others to do so.

I suddenly realised that Lena had discovered a solution not just for stammering but for group dynamics as a whole. My intuition was soon confirmed in a surprising way. There had been tensions among the television crew with which I had been working. Various things had gone

wrong and there was an atmosphere of mutual recrimination. After filming a session of Lena Rustin teaching parents how to give and receive praise, the crew likewise began praising one another. Instantly the atmosphere was transformed. The tension dissolved, and filming became fun again. Praise gives people the confidence to let go of the negative aspects of their character and reach their full potential.

There is in praise a deep spiritual message too. We think religion is about faith in God. What I had not fully understood before was that faith in God should lead us to have faith in people, for God’s image is in each of us, and we have to learn how to discern it. I then understood that the repeated phrase in Genesis 1, “And God saw that it was good,” was there to teach us to see the good in people and events, and by so doing, help to strengthen that goodness. I also understood why God briefly punished Moses by turning his hand to *tsara’at* – because he had said about the Israelites, “They will not believe in me.” (Ex. 4:1) Moses was being taught a fundamental lesson of leadership: *It does not matter whether they believe in you. What matters is that you believe in them.*

It was from another wise woman that I learned another important lesson about praise. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, in her book *Mindset*⁴, argues that it makes a decisive difference whether we believe that our abilities are innate and determined once and for all (the “fixed” mindset), or whether we may assume that talent is something we achieve through time by effort, practice and persistence (the “growth” mindset). People who take the former approach tend to be risk-averse, afraid that if they fail this will show that they are not as good as they were thought to be. The latter group embrace risk because they take failure as a learning experience from which they can grow. It follows that there is good praise and bad praise. Parents and teachers should not praise children in absolute

terms: “You are gifted, brilliant, a star!” They should praise effort: “You tried hard, you gave of your best, and I can see the improvement!” They should encourage a growth mindset, not a fixed one.

Perhaps this explains a sad aftermath in the life of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai’s two most gifted pupils. The Mishnah immediately following the one quoted above states:

He [Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai] used to say: If all the Sages of Israel were in one scale of a balance and Eliezer ben Hyrcanus in the other, he would outweigh them all. However, Abba Saul said in his name: If all the Sages of Israel, including Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, were in one scale of a balance, and Elazar ben Arach in the other, he would outweigh them all. (Avot 2:12)

Tragically, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was eventually excommunicated by his colleagues for failing to accept the majority view on a matter of Jewish law.⁵ As for Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, he became separated from his colleagues. When they went to the academy at Yavneh, he went to Emmaus, a pleasant place to live but lacking in other Torah scholars. Eventually he forgot his learning and became a pale shadow of his former self.⁶ It may be that praising his students for their innate abilities rather than their effort, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai inadvertently encouraged his two most talented students to develop a fixed mindset rather than engage with colleagues and stay open to intellectual growth.

Praise, and how we administer it, is a fundamental element in leadership of any kind. Recognising the good in people and saying so, we help bring people’s potential to fruition. Praising their efforts rather than their innate gifts helps encourage growth, about which Hillel used to say: “He who does not increase

his knowledge, loses it” (Mishnah Avot 1:13). **The right kind of praise changes lives. That is the power of *lashon hatov*. Bad speech diminishes us; good speech can lift us to great heights.** Or as W. H. Auden said in one of his beautiful poems:

*In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.⁷*

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is the problem with praising a person’s innate abilities?
2. How could Rabban Yochanan have used praise to encourage a growth mindset in his students?
3. Does targeted praise and encouragement of your efforts motivate you?

NOTES

1. Nedarim 11a.
2. See for example Mishnah Avot 1:17; 3:13.
3. Mishnah Avot 1:1.
4. Carol Dweck, *Mindset*, Ballantine Books, 2007.
5. Bava Metzia 59b.
6. Shabbat 147b.
7. W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” *Another Time* (New York: Random House, 1940).



Ignoring the Signs

Perhaps it's human nature: You see something

on your skin you hadn't noticed before. Has it always been there? Did it suddenly appear? You could have it checked by the doctor, but why make a fuss? You can just wait for your next regularly-scheduled visit - if there is one...

Modern man grapples with many fears. Whereas our ancestors worried about obtaining life's basic necessities, we fear disease. They feared upheaval and calamity; we fear the disastrous results of years of excess. Some of us think we have it figured out: If you never have yourself examined, you are never sick. After all, they reason, illness is not real; it is the subjective determination of a physician. The problem with this thesis, of course, is that it is false.

The Torah speaks of a similar phenomenon, albeit in the metaphysical sphere: A lesion appears on the skin. It was not there yesterday; it should be examined. Here, though, the person who must perform the examination is not trained as a physician, he is born a *kohen*, because this ailment is not physical; it is a spiritual malady, or, to be more accurate, a physical expression of a spiritual condition.

The Torah describes the condition afflicting body, clothing or home in great detail: This is *tzara'at*. Although often translated as "leprosy," most commentaries insist that the condition otherwise known as Hansen's disease has nothing in common with *tzara'at* aside from the English translation it has been assigned. Rambam (laws of *Tum'at Tzara'at* chapter 16), for one, insists that the presentation of *tzara'at* is so different in its varied manifestations that it has nothing to do with the physical malady known as leprosy.

Tradition has generally associated the appearance of *tzara'at* with misspeech, be it divisive, hateful speech, slander, character assassination or even non-constructive, frivolous chatter. Thus, the *kohen's* diagnosis of *tzara'at* is the first step along a long path of

spiritual rehabilitation - but it is a step that cannot be skipped: Treatment cannot begin until the *kohen* has made his declaration -- unlike the physical ailment of leprosy which, if left untreated, whether a doctor pronounces a diagnosis or not, can result in death. *Tzara'at* is not *tzara'at* until it is declared so by a *kohen*, and is not treated until the *kohen's* diagnosis is pronounced. (Rashi 14:36)

This crucial first step creates a distinct possibility for avoidance: Theoretically, a person can live in denial, hide the symptoms, and avoid altogether the "ordeal" of facing the *kohen* and the "treatment" that will ensue. Unfortunately, the underlying cause of the *tzara'at*, left untreated, can and will take its toll. Just as a person who ignores the warning signs of a physical ailment and avoids treatment will eventually face the physical consequences of neglect, so, too, the person afflicted with *tzara'at* who chooses to ignore the warning signs does damage to his or her soul. Ignoring the symptoms of *tzara'at* will not lead to physical demise, yet left unchecked, the malady festers and metastasizes, and causes pain to those around us.

The Torah teaches us to be sensitive - to minor changes in our person, our clothing, our homes, as well as to the feelings of those around us. Just as we should be sensitive to the physical health of our bodies and take note of changes, so, too, we are commanded to be sensitive to our spiritual health and to the wellbeing of our personal space, and to ask the *kohen* to pay a house call if any suspicious spots appear. If the *kohen* identifies the problem as *tzara'at*, the stricken individual must follow the instructions for containment and quarantine with precision, but equally importantly, he or she must correct the underlying cause of the ailment: A new diet of words and modes of conversation must take the place of the destructive, hurtful speech that brought *tzara'at* in its wake. The sufferer must take advantage of the period of isolation to learn to use the gift of speech to comfort

and uplift those around him, to recognize the spark of the divine within others, and to allow that same spark of divinity within himself to shine.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2016/04/audio-and-essays-parashat-metzora.html>



Changing the Eye

When a *tzaraas* lesion remains on a garment after all the instructions of the *Kohein* have been followed, he examines it one last time. If it “has not changed appearance,” the garment is burned. The exact Hebrew language is “*lo hafach hanega es eino*,” which translates literally as “the lesion has not changed its eye.” Although the meaning is clear, we cannot help but wonder why the Torah chose such an unusual form of expression.

The affliction of *tzaraas* is spiritual rather than medical in nature. The Talmud discerns (*Arachin* 16a) seven different causes for *tzaraas*, the most famous of which is *lashon hara*, improper speech. The other six are not as well known. One of them is *tzarus ayin*, which translates literally as “narrowness of the eye.” It refers to mean-spiritedness, a tendency to see the negative and overlook the positive in everything. It is a singular lack of generosity in all things, a constricted view of the world and everything in it.

If this affliction of the spirit caused the lesion

on the garment, then the therapy is to transform the trait of *tzar ayin* into *tov ayin*, literally “a person with a good eye.” Instead of being a sour-faced, mean-spirited curmudgeon, he must become a smiling, generous, expansive, optimistic, warm and friendly person. Then the lesion will fade away. If he does not change, the lesion remains on the garment, and it must be incinerated.

This is what the Torah means, explains the Chiddushei Harim, by the words “*lo hafach hanega es eino*, the lesion has not changed its eye.” The owner of the garment has not changed his narrowness of the eye into goodness of the eye; he has not transformed himself from a mean-spirited person into a kind and generous man. Therefore, the garment is burned.

The Chiddushei Harim concludes with a classic *chassidische vort*, an interpretation in the Chassidic style. The Hebrew word for lesion or affliction is *nega*. The opposite of affliction is pleasure, which is *oneg* in Hebrew. Both words are constructed of the same three letters. *Nega* is spelled *nun, gimmel, ayin*. *Oneg* is spelled *ayin, nun, gimmel*. The only difference is in the placement of the *ayin*. Move it from the back to the front, and affliction is transformed into pleasure. The Torah is telling us that “the lesion has not changed its eye (*ayin*).” He is the same narrowed-eyed person he was before. Therefore, the *nega* was not transformed into *oneg*.



The Twofold Shabbat

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's Torah portion primarily deals with the phenomenon of a "*negah*" - a physical skin disease that expresses a spiritual ailment. The Sefer Yetzirah (2:7) states that there is nothing greater than "*oneg*" (delight) and nothing lower than "*negah*." How are we to understand this enigmatic remark?

The Midrash Socher Tov (citing Rebbe Yitzchak on Psalm 92) notes that all aspects of Shabbat are doubled. In the Holy Temple, the meal offering consisted of a double portion (Exodus 16:22); the animal offerings consisted of two lambs (Numbers 29:9); the punishment for desecrating Shabbat is described with double wording (Exodus 31:14); the reward for observing Shabbat contains double wording (Isaiah 58:13); the commandment to observe Shabbat appears in two forms, "*zachor*" (Exodus 20:8) and "*shamor*" (Deut. 5:12); and the Psalm that was sung on Shabbat has two names, "*mizmor*" and "*shir*" (Psalms 92:1).

According to the Shem MiShmuel, the Midrash is not merely mentioning that Shabbat is associated with double expressions. Rather, we learn from here that the very essence of Shabbat is twofold. On one hand, Shabbat is called the "secret of oneness" (Zohar), through which all Jews are equated. On the other hand, Shabbat is likened to the Coming World, where every righteous person receives reward based on his individual merit (see Shmot Rabba 52:3 and Shabbat 152a). The Shem MiShmuel explains these two aspects as follows:

All Jewish people are equal when it comes to refraining from transgressions. In passivity, we are all alike. This is the first aspect of Shabbat - the oneness in which all Jews are equated. The other aspect of Shabbat, as we mentioned, is where each person receives reward based on individual merit. This refers to the mitzvot

that require action to fulfill. Far from being equated in this realm, we each grow differently depending on how much energy, sincerity, and pure intention we put into our performance of mitzvot.

We can broaden this discussion and suggest that the Jewish people have a dual mission. We have a unified, national mission, in which we are all equated. However, each individual has a unique, specific mission as well - a mission that is different from everyone else's.

Typically, the idea of a personal mission is understood to mean using our individual talents to bring something unique into the world. Based on the Shem MiShmuel, we now see that we can also fulfill our individual mission through our performance of mitzvot. Although everyone's actions might appear to be identical, in reality, each person performs mitzvot with a different degree of enthusiasm and care.

The "*metzora*" - the one smitten with a spiritual skin disease - is disqualified from both his national and his individual mission. The Torah tells us (Leviticus 13:46) that the *metzora* dwells alone, which the Talmud (Arachin 16b) understands to mean "outside the Jewish camp." This enforced solitude symbolizes the *metzora's* disqualification from the Jewish people's national purpose.

Furthermore, we learn that the *metzora* is locked away for a week (Leviticus 13:4) or sometimes two weeks (Leviticus 13:5). This shows us that different people require different amounts of time to extricate themselves from their spiritual degradation. The amount of time necessary for each *metzora* to heal is based on the unique way he developed his corrupt behavior. This demonstrates the ruination of the *metzora's* individual mission, since the time it takes him to heal is directly based on how much effort he put into performing transgressions.

Now we can finally understand the comment from the Sefer Yetzira that there is nothing greater than *oneg* and nothing lower than *negah*. (This is a play on words: both are composed of the three letters *ayin, nun, gimmel*.) The word *oneg* is frequently used in association with Shabbat. Nothing is greater than the *oneg* of Shabbat because, as we stated, the essence of Shabbat is twofold. Shabbat fully expresses both the national and the individual purpose of the Jewish people, thus symbolizing serving God in totality and completion. *Negah*, on the other hand, symbolizes the utter degradation of the *metzora*, who is disqualified from both his national and individual mission. Nothing could be lower than this inability to fulfill one's purpose on any level.

May we all be doubly blessed to live up to our national and individual missions, thereby enabling us to serve God in totality and completion.