HEDGING FOR HUMILITY

PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAS METZORA

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Embedded in the complex and esoteric laws of tzara'as is a simple, yet powerful message related to the power of speech. Although the verses themselves do not explicitly state what spawns tzara'as, Chazal associate it with seven sins, perhaps most famously with lashon hara. The detrimental effects evil speech has on others is obvious. While we may have difficulty being mindful or controlling what we say, few people would deny the unethicality of hurtful speech. Yet lashon hara is not just problematic for its interpersonal effects. It is also sourced in a deficiency of character. One of the other seven sins responsible for tzara'as is that of arrogance. These two sins may be linked. Speaking ill of others may reflect an arrogant personality.

Dr. James W. Pennebaker is a leading psychologist in the field of language and personality. Using complex computer programs, he analyzes people's word usage to mine an individual's thoughts, feelings, motivations, and relationships with other people. Pennebaker demonstrates in several studies that the words we use not only affect others but reflect our selves.

The use of hedges in our sentences is one example of this idea. When asked "what's the weather like outside?", we could respond "it's cold" or we could respond "I think it's cold." In his book *The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us*, Pennebaker argues that when we say "I think it's cold" instead of "it's cold," we are implicitly acknowledging that "Although there are different views on this – and you may indeed come to a different conclusion – my own personal belief is that it might be cold outside. I could be wrong, of course, and if you have a different sense of the weather, I won't be offended" (p. 44). "I think" implies nuance. It leaves room for multiple perspectives and different opinions. In short, it reflects humility.

When describing the laws of tzara'as as it relates to houses, the verse tells us that when a person sees something that looks like tzara'as, he approaches the Kohen and says "כְּנֶגַע נִרְאָה לִי בַּבָּיִת" - "Something like a plague has appeared upon my house" (Vayikra 14:35). The Midrash (quoted by Rashi) is sensitive to the fact that the verse should have just stated "a plague has appeared upon my house." The fact that the qualifier "something like" a plague is used must be teaching something of significance. Even if the person approaching the Kohen is a scholar who knows conclusively that it is a plague, says the Midrash, he should still hedge his statement. He shouldn't say I saw a plague. Rather, he should say, I saw something like a plague.

Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi (15th century, Constantinople), in his super-commentary on Rashi finds a moral message within the Midrash. The Torah is teaching us proper behavior (*derech eretz*): we should speak using hesitant language. He connects it to another comment of the Sages, namely, that we should train ourselves to say, "I don't know" (Berachos 4a). Hedging our statements and admitting when we aren't sure of something, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains further, reflects a humble character.

In what is becoming an increasingly toxic social and political climate, the suggestion of the Sages rooted in the Biblical text provides us a framework for proper character and effective communication. While there may be a place for indisputable facts and speaking with conviction, if we find that everything we think and say is a definitive truth in our own eyes, it may be time to take a step back and reflect. Is it a plague or something like a plague? Am I so sure of everything or maybe I can admit that I really don't know? If we can hedge our communication with a hint of humility, we will be well on our way to cultivating our own character and improving our relationships with others.

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