

MARCH 31, 2014

Parashat Metzora

Powerful Speech

This shall be the law of the leper (Leviticus 14:2)

זאת תהיה תורה המצורע (ויקרא יד:ב)

The Sages associated the malady of *tzara'at* with the sin of negative speech. To highlight this point, the Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 33) relates the following tale: “Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel said to Tevi his servant: ‘Go to the market and purchase for me good game [meat].’ He went and bought him a tongue. He said to him, ‘Go to the market and purchase for me bad game [meat].’ He went and bought him a tongue. [Rabban Gamliel] said to him, ‘How is this possible? I said to buy something good, and you bought me a tongue. I said to buy something bad, and you [also] bought me a tongue!’ [Tevi] said to him, ‘From [the tongue] comes good, and from it comes evil. When it is good, there is nothing better, and when it is bad, there is nothing worse.’”

The Midrash reminds us that speech carries great power. Recently, a significant majority of Congress utilized its power of speech to convey the wishes of the American people to the President on Iran’s nuclear program.

Speaking to his fellow members of Congress from the Senate floor about the ongoing negotiations with Iran, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—Democratic Senator Bob Menendez said that, “At the end of the day, we have an obligation to speak our minds in what we believe is in the best interest of this nation.” Speak their mind they did. Earlier this month, the House and Senate sent strong bipartisan letters signed by 83 senators and 394 House members to President Obama asserting what should be included in a final deal with Tehran. The Senate letter, led by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Sens. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Mark Kirk (R-IL), Chris Coons (D-DE), and Kelly Ayotte (R-NH), clearly states that Iran must not retain any nuclear weapons capability. “We believe any agreement must dismantle Iran’s nuclear weapons program and prevent it from ever having a uranium or plutonium path to a nuclear bomb,” the senators wrote. The House letter, spearheaded by Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) and Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer (D-MD), raised concerns that Iran is not being forthright regarding its nuclear activity during the negotiation period. “Iran’s history of delay, deception, and dissembling on its nuclear program raises serious concerns that Iran will use prolonged negotiations as a tool to secure an economic lifeline while it continues to make progress towards nuclear weapons,” the House letter stated. While Congress cannot itself negotiate with Iran, it can and must set clear boundaries—the basic elements of a sound agreement—and serve as guarantors of a sound outcome. That is the rightful role of the U.S. Congress—a role we must thank our legislative leaders for playing, and encourage them to continue.

The Midrash reminds us that when we use our voices for good, it is a powerful, potent force. Thankfully, our elected representatives used their voice to insist that Iran fully dismantle its nuclear weapons program. ■

Spreading Lies

This shall be the law of the leper (Leviticus 14:2)

זאת תהיה תורה המצורע (ויקרא יד:ב)

Commenting on the title of our parashah the Midrash (Tanchuma, Metzora 2) utilizes a clever literary device to associate *tzara'at* with a particularly malicious form of speech. “Don’t read [the word] *metzora* (the individual afflicted with *tzara'at*); rather read [the words] *motzi shem ra* (slandering speech).” What is the precise meaning of

this term? Rambam (Laws of Attitudes, 7:2) explains that while the sin of *lashon hara* consists of “relating deprecating facts about a colleague, even if they are true,” *motzi shem ra* refers to, “One who speaks falsehoods.” While telling true negative tales about others is bad, making up lies about them is even worse.

The afflicted *Metzora* contracted his malady for telling lies about others. Today, a growing movement in college campuses is spreading slanderous falsehoods about the Jewish State.

For years, Israel has acknowledged that a two-state solution – a Jewish state of Israel living in peace with a demilitarized Palestinian state – with an end to all claims, is the clear path to resolving this generations-old conflict. Despite this fact, a dedicated campaign has been spreading the lie that Israel is an illegal occupier that violates international law and pushing universities and colleges around the world back the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions campaign, which urges international companies to suspended economic cooperation with Israeli entities. While students [voted down](#) a BDS initiative at the University of Michigan, similar initiatives passed both at Loyola University in Chicago and at [King’s College](#) in London. Recently, in an open Knesset forum chaired by MK Robert Ilatov, Dr. Harel Arnon [explained that](#), “If you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes the truth. One of the biggest lies, which is feeding the wild incitement campaign that Israel has been dealing with over the last few years, is that Israel is unlawfully occupying Judea and Samaria.”

The *motzi shem ra* developed *tzara’at* for spreading slanderous lies about others. The BDS movement has gained traction not by telling the truth, but by spreading lies and falsehoods in the interest of harming the Jewish State. ■

Freedom of Speech and Speaking Freely

This shall be the law of the leper (Leviticus 14:2)

זאת תהיה תורה המצורה (ויקרא יד:ב)

The saintly Rabbi Israel Meir HaKohen Kagan of Radin, who wrote the book *Chafetz Chaim*, the definitive work on the laws of *lashon hara*, was once traveling by wagon and noticed that the wagon driver refused to say a single word. When Rabbi Kagan inquired about the silence, the driver, unaware of the identity of his famous passenger, explained that after having read the rabbi’s recently published book, rather than possibly transgress the laws of slander he would rather not speak at all. The rabbi told him, “You didn’t understand the goal of the book. Before one studies, one must indeed be silent to avoid sin. But, after one studies, one can speak freely, for he knows what can be said.”

Rather than discouraging speech, the laws of *lashon hara* encourage us to use our ability to speak in a proper manner. The President of Turkey recently reminded us of the importance of free speech when he tried to shut down Twitter.

Last week, the government of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan blocked access to Twitter, which “Turkish citizens have increasingly turned to...to voice opposition to the government and organize demonstrations as mainstream media have avoided criticism of Mr. Erdogan,” the [Wall Street Journal](#) reported. By banning the popular social media site, Turkey joined a small group of countries, including Syria, China and North Korea, that block access to Twitter. “Twitter and the rest, we will root out all of them. I don’t care what the international community says, they will see the power of the Republic of Turkey,” Mr. Erdogan said. The premier pushed through a law in February that gave the government the authority to shutter websites without a court order. According to the [Washington Post](#), the White House condemned the action and urged Turkish authorities to “respect the freedom of the press by permitting the independent and unfettered operation of media of all kinds.” The government effort seemed to backfire, as Turkish citizens found ways to circumvent the government action and a Turkish court [overturned the ban](#) and ordered the government to restore access to the service.

Chafetz Chaim taught that once we study the laws of how to speak, we can and must use the gift of speech freely. The efforts of despotic governments to stifle free speech around the world remind us just how precious that gift truly is. ■

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