

Parashat Tazria-Metzora & Yom Ha'atzmaut

Destructive Misappropriation

I have seen what seems to be a plague in the house (Leviticus 10:1) כנגע נראה לי בבית (ויקרא יד:לה)

When the New York Times published an op-ed piece by Marwan Barghouti and neglected to inform its readers that in addition to being a “Palestinian leader and parliamentarian,” Barghouti was given [five consecutive life terms](#) after being convicted in an Israeli criminal court of premeditated murder for his role in terrorist attacks that killed five people, the reaction was both swift and appropriate. From [Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid](#) to [Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu](#), the “paper of record” was widely and roundly criticized for omitting that rather than being a peace-loving prisoner of conscience, Barghouti repeatedly personally ordered and participated in the murder of civilians in numerous terror attacks. Lapid writes, “Barghouti doesn’t only believe in violence, he also believes that it’s permissible to lie. He believes in the approach, which typifies terror organizations, that the West is weak and naïve and so our media and good intentions should be cynically abused to attack us from within.” What makes the Times’ omission (later partially corrected by an [Editors’ note](#)) so egregious is that by failing to properly and accurately identify a known terrorist, the newspaper—which is dedicated to the ideals of freedom, peace and democracy—allowed itself to become a tool for the justification of murder, violence and terror, all in the supposed name of peace.

It is precisely this type of cynical misuse that the Torah directly addresses in our parashah. Both Tazria and Metzora deal primarily with the affliction of *tzara’at*, which we normally translate as “leprosy,” but which the Sages in the Talmud and Midrash universally describe not as a physical ailment, but as a spiritual one. According to the Midrash, when an Israelite approaches a priest saying, “I have seen what seems to be a plague in the house” (Leviticus 14:35), the priest must respond by explaining that, “My son! Plagues come only as a result of slander.” (*Torat Hakohanim Midrash Hagadol*) While there is no direct biblical connection between *lashon hara* (slander) and leprosy, Dr. Meir Gruzman of Bar Ilan University [describes the rabbinic correlation](#) between *tzara’at* and *lashon hara* as an “undisputed unanimity of opinion.”

Yet, this correlation begs the question: Of the numerous possible sins that one could commit, why do the Sages single out *lashon hara* as a sin so heinous that it merits the direct and immediate reaction of a debilitating physical ailment? In his translation of the verse “and man became a living soul,” (Genesis 2:7) Targum Onkelos writes, “And man became a spirit [capable] of speaking.” Based on this idea, Rabbi Jay Kelman [explains](#) that *lashon hara* is so destructive precisely because it represents the defilements of our most human quality—our speech. “Speech, in many ways, is the link between the spiritual and the physical. Unlike the other physical features of man, eating and procreation, for example, speech is unique to human beings. It is this quality that some explain is the meaning of the idea that we are created in the image of God.” The immediate reaction to slander of *tzara’at* reflects the fact that slanderous speech defiles our most powerful facility. The slanderer is afflicted precisely because she defiled a power that should be used to unite, teach and promote peace to instead divide, slander and cause harm to others.

Sadly, this is also an accurate description of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Although [established in 2006](#) “for the promotion and protection of all human rights around the globe,” the Human Rights Council has gained prominence for its singular focus and criticism of Israel, and especially its well-known “Agenda Item Seven,” which the U.S. State Department [describes](#) as evidence of the body’s “long-standing bias against Israel.”

Tragically, a council which was established to protect and promote human rights is now the cynical tool used to attack and delegitimize Israel, the only democratic and free country in the Middle East.

Our elected representatives are now taking action to curb the UNHRC's ability to damage Israel. Late last month, U.S. Senators Ben Cardin (D-MD.) and Rob Portman (R-OH) and U.S. Representatives Peter Roskam (R-IL) and Juan Vargas (D-CA.) announced the introduction of the of the [Israel Anti-Boycott Act](#), which demands that the U.N. cease its anti-Israel bias and outlines concrete steps to counter the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. To date, a bipartisan group of over 100 members of the House of Representatives and nearly 20 Senators have agreed to cosponsor the bill, sending a strong message to the world that the United States will not stand-by while cynical countries appropriate what should be an instrument for peace and human rights as a tool to demonize and delegitimize the Jewish state. ■

The Blessing of Effective Speech – Yom Ha'atzmaut

The answer of the tongue is from the Lord (Proverbs 16:1)

מה' מענה לשון (משלי טז:א)

Over the last fifty years, we have come a long, long way. Exactly fifty years ago today, on the eve of the Six-Day War, as many in Israel truly feared the possibility of Israel's destruction and her enemies were indeed predicting that very calamity in the media, Levi Eshkol, then Prime Minister of Israel described his request to the United States for military assistance for the coming conflict. [He said that](#), "I told an interviewer for U.S. News and World Report recently that, whenever we ask for American arms, we are told we cannot spend money for this purpose because the American Sixth Fleet is there (in the Mediterranean). My reply is that the Sixth Fleet might be too late, for some reason or other, when it is needed. Therefore, Israel must rely on her own strength." This comment came after Israeli jets downed six Syrian MIGs in fighting that erupted after Syrian forces shelled Israeli settlements in the north. Contrast that frightening reality with today, when the United States annually provides billions of dollars in critical military support to Israel while American presidents from both parties wholeheartedly embrace and support the American policy of ensuring Israel's Qualitative Military Edge. What brought about this change? How did we go, in fifty short years, from little tangible assistance, to the United States' place as Israel's strongest and closest ally? The answer lies in the blessing of speech.

In his introduction to Parashat Tazria, Rabbeinu Bachayay (in his commentary on the Torah) notes King Solomon's maxim that, "A man has joy in the answer of his mouth; and a word in due season, how good is it!" (Proverbs 15:23) Why should having a proper answer bring joy? He explains that the ability to articulate an idea in the proper manner at the proper time is nothing less than a divine blessing. "When a person intends to say right and proper things and he organizes them with the wisdom of the intellect, he should be happy about this, for he did not express the words with his lips until he ordered them in his heart. It is known that the ordering of matters in a person's thoughts is in his own hands. This is not true about speech, for speech comes from God, as it is written, 'The preparations of the heart are man's but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.' (Proverbs 16:1) When a person concentrates through the preparation of the heart and expresses his words appropriately, this is a clear indication that [his success] was brought about through divine assistance—and this will bring that person joy." Many intelligent people are not blessed with the gift of speech, and those that have this gift understand that while there are certainly techniques to effective speech, having the right words at the right time represents a divine blessing.

We, as a Jewish community in the United States, have truly been blessed, in many ways. On this, the Shabbat before Yom Ha'atzmaut when Israel will celebrate its 68th birthday, let us take stock of the blessing of speech. We in the U.S. are blessed not only to live in a country where we have the right to free speech, but also a country where we have the right, and responsibility, to petition our government. We have used these blessing powerfully, properly and in a timely manner, to ensure that those sitting in the halls of power have made a critical difference for the Jewish state, safeguarding that, with America's help, Israel can defend itself by itself. This Monday evening, as we join with Israel in celebrating her independence, let us pray that God grant each of us continued blessing not in Israel, but here in America in the form of effective and powerful speech. ■