

Lev 13:11 it is a chronic tza'arat in the skin of his flesh, and the kohen is to pronounce him unclean. He is to isolate him, for he is unclean.

Lev 13:12 "Suppose the tza'arat breaks out above the flesh, and so far as it all appears in the eyes of the kohen, covers all the skin of the infected person from his head to his feet.

Lev 13:13 Then the kohen will see, and behold, if the tza'arat has covered all of his body, he is to pronounce him clean of the plague. Since it has all turned white, he is clean.

Lev 13:14 But whenever raw flesh appears upon him, he will be unclean.

Lev 13:15 The kohen is to examine the raw flesh, and pronounce him unclean. The raw flesh is unclean—it is tza'arat.

Lev 13:16 Or, if the raw flesh changes and turns white, then he must come to the kohen.

Lev 13:17 The kohen is to examine him, and behold, if the plague has turned white, then the kohen should pronounce him clean of the plague. He is clean.

Lev 13:18 "When the body has a boil on its skin and it has healed,

Lev 13:19 but in the place of the boil there is a white swelling or a bright reddish-white spot, then it should be shown to the kohen.

Lev 13:20 The kohen is to examine it, and behold, if its appearance is lower than the skin and its hair has turned white, then the kohen is to pronounce him unclean. It is a plague of tza'arat that has broken out within the boil.

Lev 13:21 But if the kohen examines it and sees there are no white hairs within, and if it is not deeper than the skin but is faded, then the kohen is to isolate him seven days.

Lev 13:22 If it spreads in the skin, then the kohen is to pronounce him unclean. It is a plague.

Lev 13:23 But if the bright spot stays in its place and has not spread, it is merely the scar from the boil—the kohen is to pronounce him clean.

Lev 13:24 "Or suppose the body has a burn from fire on its skin, and the raw flesh of the burn becomes a bright spot, reddish-white, or white.

Lev 13:25 Then the kohen is to examine it, and behold, if the hair in the bright spot has turned white and its appearance is deeper than the skin, it is tza'arat. It has broken out in the burning, and the kohen is to pronounce him unclean—it is the plague of tza'arat.

Lev 13:26 But if the kohen examines it and sees there is no white hair in the bright spot, and it is not lower than the skin but is faded, then the kohen is to isolate him seven days.

Lev 13:27 The kohen is to examine him on the seventh day. If it has spread in the skin, then the kohen is to pronounce him unclean. It is the plague of tza'arat.

Lev 13:28 If the bright spot stays in its place, and has not spread in the skin but is faded, it is the swelling from the burn, and the kohen should pronounce him clean, for it is merely a scar from the burn.

Lev 13:29 "When a man or woman has a plague on the head or on the chin,

Lev 13:30 then the kohen is to examine the plague, and behold, if its appearance is deeper than the skin, and the hair in it is yellow and thin, then the kohen is to pronounce him unclean. It is a scab—tza'arat of the head or the chin.

Lev 13:31 If the kohen examines the plague of the scab, and behold its appearance is no deeper than the skin and there is no black hair within, then the kohen is to isolate the person infected with the scab for seven days.

Lev 13:32 On the seventh day the kohen is to examine the plague, and behold, if the scab has not spread and there is no yellow hair in it, and the appearance of the scab is no deeper than the skin,

Lev 13:33 then he should be shaved, but he is not to shave the scab. The kohen is then to isolate the one who has the scab for seven more days.

Lev 13:34 On the seventh day, the kohen is to examine the scab, and behold, if the scab has not spread in the skin and its appearance is no deeper than the skin, then the kohen should pronounce him clean. He is to wash his clothes, and be clean.

Lev 13:35 But if the scab spreads in the skin after his cleansing,

Lev 13:36 then the kohen is to examine him, and behold, if the scab has spread in the skin, the kohen may not look for the yellow hair, he is unclean.

Lev 13:37 But if he sees the scab is stopped and black hair has grown in it, the scab is healed, and he is clean. The kohen should pronounce him clean.

Lev 13:38 Suppose a man or a woman has bright spots on the skin of the body—bright white spots.

Lev 13:39 Then the kohen is to examine them, and behold, if the bright spots on the skin of their body are a dull white, it is a harmless rash broken out in the skin. He is clean.

Lev 13:40 “If a man’s hair has fallen from his head, he is bald. He is clean.

Lev 13:41 Or if the borders of his face become bald, his forehead is bald. He is clean.

Lev 13:42 But if on the baldhead or bald forehead, there is a reddish-white plague, it is tza’arat breaking out in his baldhead or bald forehead.

Lev 13:43 Then the kohen is to examine him, and behold, if the rising of the plague is reddish-white on his bald head or bald forehead, like the appearance of tza’arat in the skin of the flesh,

Lev 13:44 he is a man with tza’arat. He is unclean. The kohen should definitely pronounce him unclean—his plague-mark is on his head.

Lev 13:45 “The one with tza’arat who has the plague-mark should wear torn clothes, the hair of his head is to hang loose, he is to cover his upper lip and cry, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’

Lev 13:46 All the days during which the plague is on him he will be unclean. He is unclean. He is to dwell alone. Outside of the camp will be his dwelling.

Lev 13:47 “Also when a garment has a mark of tza’arat on it—whether it is a woolen or a linen garment,

Lev 13:48 whether it is woven or textured, linen or wool, leather, or anything made from leather—

Lev 13:49 or if the mark is greenish or reddish within the garment or in the leather, or in the weaving or the texture, or in anything made from leather, it is the plague of tza’arat, and should be shown to the kohen.

Lev 13:50 The kohen is to examine the plague and isolate it for seven days.

Lev 13:51 Then he is to reexamine the plague on the seventh day. If the plague has spread in the garment, either in the weaving, the texture or the leather, whatever the use for the leather may be, the plague is a destructive mildew. It is unclean.

Lev 13:52 He is to burn the garment or the weaving, or the texture, wool or linen, or anything of leather, in which the plague resides, for it is a destructive mildew. It is to be burned in the fire.

Lev 13:53 “If the kohen examines it, and behold, the plague has not spread in the garment, either in the weaving, the texture, or in anything made of leather,

Lev 13:54 the kohen should command that they wash the thing which has the mark, and he is to isolate it seven more days.

Lev 13:55 “Then the kohen is to reexamine it, after the mark has been washed, and behold, if the mark has not changed its color and has not spread, it is unclean. You are to burn it in the fire, whether the rot is inside or outside.

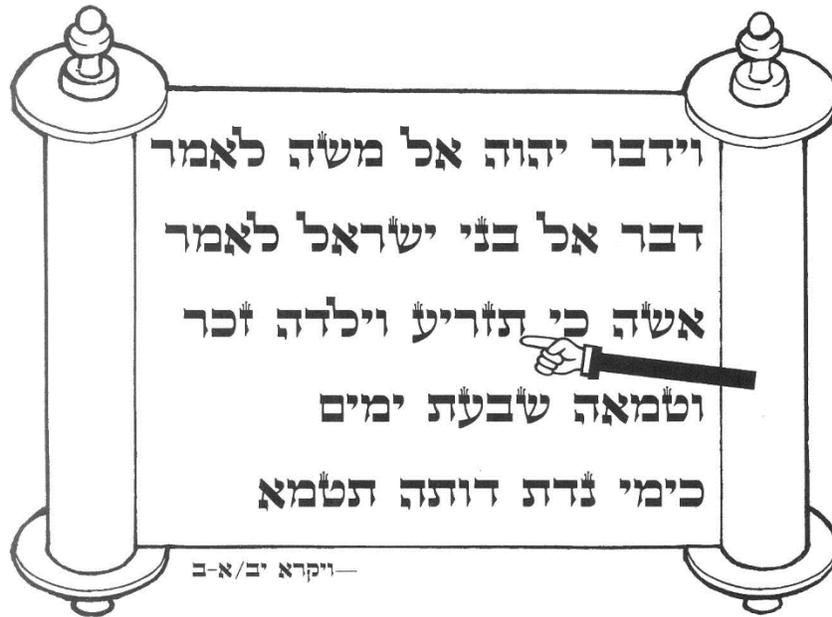
Lev 13:56 If the kohen looks, and sees the mark has faded after it has been washed, then he is to tear it out of the garment, or the leather, or weaving, or texture.

Lev 13:57 But if it appears again in the garment, either in the weaving, the texture, or in anything made of leather, it is spreading. You are to burn with fire whatever has the mark.

Lev 13:58 The garment, or weaving, or texture, or whatever leather item it is that you have washed, if the mark has departed from it, is to be washed a second time, and will become clean.”

Lev 13:59 This is the Torah for a mark of tza’arat in a garment of wool or linen, either in the weaving, the texture, or in anything of leather, to pronounce it clean or to pronounce it unclean.

Orientation and Word Study



ע י ר ז ת

letter:	ayin	reish	reish	zayin	tav
sound:	(silent)-ah	EE	Ree	Z	Tah

she bears seed = **TAZRIA** = תזריע

The Legend

and spoke the LORD	<i>va-y'daber</i> ADONAI	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה
to Moses to say	<i>el-Moshe lemor</i>	אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
speak	<i>daber</i>	דַּבֵּר
to the sons of Israel	<i>el-b'nei Yisra'el</i>	אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
to say	<i>lemor</i>	לֵאמֹר
a woman who bears seed	<i>ishah ki tazria</i>	אִשָּׁה כִּי תִזְרִיעַ
and births a male	<i>v'yaldah zachar</i>	וַיֵּלֶדָה זָכָר
is unclean	<i>v'tam'ah</i>	וְטָמְאָה
seven days	<i>shiv'at yamim</i>	שִׁבְעַת יָמִים
like the days of her period	<i>kimei nidat</i>	כִּימֵי נִדַת
she will remain unclean	<i>dotah tit'ma</i>	דֹּתָה תִּטְמָא:

—[Leviticus 12:1-2](#)

Related Words

seed, offspring	<i>zehra</i>	זֶרַע
Jew (seed of Jacob)	<i>zehra Ya'akov</i>	זֶרַע יַעֲקֹב
of the royal family	<i>zehra m'loocha</i>	זֶרַע מְלוּכָה
Jezreel (God sows)	<i>Yizr'eil</i>	יִזְרְעֵאל
arm, forearm, strength, power, shankbone	<i>z'roa</i>	זְרוּעַ
starry sky (sky sown with stars)	<i>shamayim z'ru'im kochavim</i>	שָׁמַיִם זְרוּעִים כּוֹכָבִים

Key Words

Unclean H2930

טמא

ṭâmê'

BDB Definition:

1) to be unclean, become unclean, become impure

1a) (Qal) to be or become unclean

1a1) sexually

1a2) religiously

1a3) ceremonially

1b) (Niphal)

1b1) to defile oneself, be defiled

1b1a) sexually

1b1b) by idolatry

1b1c) ceremonially

1b2) to be regarded as unclean

1c) (Piel)

1c1) to defile

1c1a) sexually

1c1b) religiously

1c1c) ceremonially

1c2) to pronounce unclean, declare unclean (ceremonially)

1c3) to profane (God's name)

1d) (Pual) to be defiled

1e) (Hithpael) to be unclean

1f) (Hothpael) to be defiled

Part of Speech: verb

A Related Word by BDB/Strong's Number: a primitive root

Same Word by TWOT Number: 809

Separation H5079

נִדְּחָה

niddâh

BDB Definition:

- 1) impurity, filthiness, menstruous, set apart
 - 1a) impurity
 - 1a1) of ceremonial impurity
 - 1a2) of menstruation
 - 1b) impure thing (figuratively)
 - 1b1) of idolatry, immorality

Part of Speech: noun feminine

A Related Word by BDB/Strong's Number: from [H5074](#)

Same Word by TWOT Number: 1302a

Purifying H2892

טָהַר

ṭôhar

BDB Definition:

- 1) purity, purification, purifying
 - 1a) purity
 - 1b) purifying
- 2) clearness, lustre

Part of Speech: noun masculine

A Related Word by BDB/Strong's Number: from [H2891](#)

Same Word by TWOT Number: 792a

Cleansed H2891

טָהַר

ṭâhêr

BDB Definition:

- 1) to be clean, be pure
 - 1a) (Qal)
 - 1a1) to be clean (physically - of disease)
 - 1a2) to be clean ceremonially
 - 1a3) to purify, be clean morally, made clean
 - 1b) (Piel)
 - 1b1) to cleanse, purify
 - 1b1a) physically

- 1b1b) ceremonially
- 1b1c) morally
- 1b2) to pronounce clean
- 1b3) to perform the ceremony of cleansing
- 1c) (Pual) to be cleansed, be pronounced clean
- 1d) (Hithpael)
 - 1d1) to purify oneself
 - 1d1a) ceremonially
 - 1d1b) morally
 - 1d2) to present oneself for purification

Part of Speech: verb

A Related Word by BDB/Strong's Number: a primitive root

Same Word by TWOT Number: 792

Spot H934

[בִּהְרֵת](#)

bôhereth

BDB Definition:

- 1) white patch of skin, brightness, bright spot (on skin)
- 2) (CLBL) bright spot, scar, blister, boil
 - 2a) resulting from fire
 - 2b) resulting from inflammation of the skin
 - 2c) possible sign of leprosy

Part of Speech: noun feminine

A Related Word by BDB/Strong's Number: active participle of the same as [H925](#)

Same Word by TWOT Number: 211a

Leprosy H6883

[צִרְעָת](#)

tsâra'ath

BDB Definition:

- 1) leprosy
 - 1a) in people, malignant skin disease (Lev. 13-14)
 - 1b) in clothing, a mildew or mould ([Lev 13:47-52](#))
 - 1c) in buildings, a mildew or mould (Lev. 14:34-53)

Part of Speech: noun feminine

A Related Word by BDB/Strong's Number: from [H6879](#)

Same Word by TWOT Number: 1971a

While usually rendered leper or leprous, the term “leper” is not correct medically, since *šāra'at* refers to a wider range of skin diseases (cf. “malignant skin disease,” NEB). For convenience, however, the term “leper” can be retained.

A person with leprosy, apart from the telltale malignant raw flesh and white hair, was to be otherwise identified by torn clothes, announcement of “unclean” when in the streets and was to live isolated from the community. Four persons are named in the OT as becoming leprous. Not counting Moses (Ex 4:6; cf. also II Kgs 7:3), there were Miriam (Num 12:10), Uzziah (II Kgs 15:5), Gehazi (II Kgs 5:27) and Naaman, the Syrian (II Kgs 5:1).

God may inflict the disease of *šāra'at* as punishment for sins such as jealousy (cf. Miriam), anger, and lack of full compliance with God’s commands (cf. Uzziah), and covetousness (cf. Gehazi). One must not conclude, however, that all sickness is a result of an individual’s sin (cf. Job; Lk 13:1–5; Jn 9:1–7).

šāra'at was not necessarily incurable (cf. II Kgs 5:7). Leprosy by contrast, was likely incurable (Lev 13). In any event, healing of *šāra'at* could serve as a sign of divine power (Ex 4:6; II Kgs 5:8).

The isolation of a leprous person was doubtless a sanitary measure in order to avoid further contagion. That a priest in Israel’s theocracy was to diagnose the illness does not mean that today’s clergy should become health officers. But the principle of God’s concern for the health of bodies is not only self-evident but remains an enduring principle (cf. Jesus, Mt 8:2–3).

Diseases with eruptions affecting the skin are sometimes mild, sometimes, as in smallpox, scarlet fever, etc., both dangerous and highly contagious. The only effective control in antiquity would have been isolation. Only the Hebrew laws had this very valuable provision.

šāra'at is found primarily (twenty times) in the two chapters that govern the diagnoses and the cleaning measures for one who had become unclean (*tāmē'*, Lev 13, 14). In the nature of a contagion, *šāra'at* refers not only to eruptions on the skin but to mildew or mold in clothing (Lev 13) or in houses (Lev 14:34–53); therefore obviously the word is not specific for leprosy. The determination by the priest of an individual as unclean meant separation from the community, and ceremonial unfitness to enter the temple (cf. II Chr 26:21). The cleansing measures to be performed upon recovery involved a ritual with two birds, which ritual according to KD was necessary for restoration to the community (Lev 14:2–9). An additional set of offerings followed, notably the guilt offering, perhaps because disease is ultimately to be linked with sin (Lev 14:10–20).

Tazria in a Nutshell

Leviticus 12:1–13:59

The Parshah of Tazria continues the discussion of the laws of *tumah v'taharah*, [ritual impurity](#) and purity.

A [woman](#) giving [birth](#) should undergo a process of purification, which includes immersing in a *mikvah* (a naturally gathered [pool of water](#)) and bringing offerings to the Holy Temple. All male infants are to be circumcised on the [eighth day of life](#).



Tzaraat (often mistranslated as “leprosy”) is a supra-natural plague, which also can afflict [garments](#). If white or pink patches appear on a person’s skin (dark red or green in garments), a *kohen* is summoned. Judging by various signs, such as an increase in size of the afflicted area after a seven-day quarantine, the *kohen* [pronounces](#) it *tamei* (impure) or *tahor* (pure).

A person afflicted with *tzaraat* must dwell [alone](#) outside of the camp (or city) until he is healed. The afflicted area in a garment is removed; if the *tzaraat* spreads or recurs, the entire garment must be burned.

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Parshat Tazria In-Depth

Leviticus 12:1-13:59

The Parshah of Tazria [continues](#) the discussion (begun in the previous Parshah of Shemini) of the laws of *Tumah v'Taharah*, ritual impurity and purity.

*A [woman](#) who shall [seed](#) and give [birth](#) to a male child, shall be *tameh* seven days; as in the days of her menstrual period shall she be "impure."*

On the [eighth](#) day the [flesh](#) of his foreskin shall be [circumcised](#).

She shall then continue in the blood of her purifying for thirty-three days: she shall touch no holy thing, nor come into the Sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are fulfilled.

The birth of a daughter renders her mother ritually impure for fourteen days, followed by sixty-six days of "pure blood" (ordinarily, a discharge of blood renders a woman ritually impure, but in these days it does not).

At the conclusion of these periods--a total of forty days for the birth of a boy and eighty days for the birth of a girl--the mother brings two offerings: a lamb for an ascent offering and a pigeon or turtle dove for a [sin offering](#). If she is poor and cannot afford a lamb, she brings a bird instead.

The Laws of [Tzaraat](#)

A person to whom shall occur in the skin of his flesh a se'ait, or sapachat, or baheret (patches of varying [degrees of whiteness](#)), and it be in the skin of his flesh the plague of tzaraat ("leprosy")--he shall be brought to Aaron the priest, or to one of his sons the priests.

And the priest shall see the plague in [the skin of his flesh](#): if the hair in the plague has turned white, and the plague be deeper in appearance than the skin of his flesh, it is a plague of tzaraat, and the priest shall see it, and pronounce him tameh.

If, however, the white patch "is not deeper in appearance than the skin, and the hair did not turn white," the priest should order the afflicted person to be quarantined for seven days. If at the end of the seven days the white patch has spread, the person is pronounced ritually impure; if it has not, the afflicted person is sequestered for an additional seven days.

And [the priest shall see](#) him again on the seventh day. And, behold, if the plague be somewhat dimmer, and the plague did not spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him pure: it is but a scab; and he shall wash his clothes, and be clean.

But if the scab spread in the skin... then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is tzaraat.

However,

If the tzaraat sprouts in the skin, and the tzaraat covers all the skin of him that has the plague from his head to his foot, as far as the priest can see... it is all turned white: he is clean.

A third sign of *tzaraat* (in addition to hairs on the afflicted area having turned white, or the white patch spreading following the quarantine) is the appearance of "live" (i.e., healthy) flesh inside the afflicted area.

Patches appearing on the hair-covered parts of the head or face are rendered impure by yellow, rather than white, hairs. Different rules apply to patches appearing on healed wounds or burns.

The Leper

And the tzaraat in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and the hair of his head shall grow long, and he shall put [a covering upon his upper lip](#), and call out: "Unclean! Unclean!"

All the days during which the plague shall be in him he shall be unclean; he is tameh. He shall dwell [alone](#); outside the camp shall his habitation be.

Such is his condition until he is healed of his affliction and undergoes the purification process to be described in the next Parshah, Metzora.

The Contaminated Garment

Garments, too, can be afflicted with *tzaraat*:

And the garment in which there is the plague of tzaraat, whether it be a woolen garment, or a linen garment; whether it be in the warp, or woof... whether in a leather garment or in anything made of leather...

If the plague be greenish or reddish in the garment... it is a plague of tzaraat, and shall be shown to the priest.

And the priest shall look at the plague, and shut up that which has the plague seven days... If the plague be spread.. he shall burn that garment... For it is a malignant tzaraat; it shall be burnt in the fire...

And if the priest look, and, behold, the plague be somewhat dimmer after the washing of it; then he shall tear it out of the garment... [if it does not return and] the plague be departed from them, then it shall be washed the second time, and shall be ritually pure.

This is the law of the plague of tzaraat in a garment of wool or linen, either in the warp, or woof, or anything of leather, [to pronounce it tahor](#) (ritually pure), or to pronounce it tameh (ritually impure).

Outline of Study

Haftorah Reading 2Kings 4:42–5:19

Outline of This Week's Parashah (Torah Portion)

- 12:1 The Laws of Human Contamination
- 12:2 Childbirth and Purification
- 13:1 The Basics of Tzaraas (skin disorder, e.g. swelling, scab or a bright spot) and the Procedure to Verification
- 13:4 Bahaares (white spots on the skin)
- 13:9 S'eis (skin that appears to be white like wool and sunken)
- 13:18 Inflammation
- 13:24 Burns
- 13:29 Tzaraas of the Head or Face
- 13:40 Baldness at the Front and Back of the Head
- 13:45 The Metzora (i.e., the individual with the skin disorder) Isolation
- 13:47 Afflictions of the Garments Overview of Parashat Tazria

Some Hebrew Terms Relating to This Passage:

- tzaraas: skin disease (improperly translated as “leprosy” in some Bibles)
- niddah: someone who is separated or menstruous
- tumah: spiritual impurity
- metzora: one with a skin disease; a contraction of the Hebrew word motzi and ra meaning “one who speaks slander”



Commentary of the Sages – Regarding Tzaraat and Lashon Hara

A person to whom shall occur in the skin of his flesh... the plague of tzaraat(13:2)

The plague of *tzaraat* comes only as punishment for *lashon harah* (evil talk). (Midrash Rabbah; Talmud; Rashi)

Why is the *metzora* different from all other ritually impure persons in that the Torah said, "He shall dwell alone; outside the camp shall his habitation be"? With his gossip and slander, he separated a husband from his wife, a man from his neighbor; therefore said the Torah: "He shall dwell alone." (Talmud, Erachin 16b)

The Psalmist compares slanderous talk to "Sharp arrows of the warrior, coals of broom" ([Psalms 120:4](#)). All other weapons smite from close quarters, while the arrow smites from the distance. So is it with slander: it is spoken in Rome and kills in Syria. All other coals, when extinguished, are extinguished without and within; but coals of broom are still burning within when they are extinguished without. So is it with words of slander: even after it seems that their effects have been put out, they continue to smolder within those who heard them. It once happened that a broom tree was set on fire and it burned eighteen months--winter, summer and winter. (Midrash Rabbah)

Evil talk is like an arrow. A person who unsheathes a sword can regret his intention and return it to its sheath. But the arrow cannot be retrieved. (Midrash Tehillim)

To what may the tongue be compared? To a dog tied with an iron chain and locked in a room within a room within a room, yet when he barks the entire populace is terrified of him. Imagine if he were loose outside! So the tongue: it is secured behind the teeth and behind the lips, yet it does no end of damage. Imagine if it were outside! (Yalkut Shimoni)

Evil talk kills three people: the speaker, the listener, and the one who is spoken of. (Talmud, Erachin 15a)

The speaker obviously commits a grave sin by speaking negatively of his fellow. The listener, too, is a partner to this evil. But why is the one who is spoken of affected by their deed? Are his negative traits worsened by the fact that they are spoken of?

Indeed they are. A person may possess an evil trait or tendency, but his quintessential goodness, intrinsic to every soul, strives to control it, conquer it, and ultimately eradicate its negative expressions and redirect it as a positive force. But when this evil is spoken of, it is made that much more manifest and real. By speaking negatively of the person's trait or deed, the evil speakers are, in effect, defining it as such; with their words, they grant substance and validity to its negative potential.

But the same applies in the reverse: speaking favorably of another, accentuating his or her positive side, will aid him to realize himself in the manner that you have defined him. (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

A man once came to see Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch and proceeded to portray himself as a villain of the worst sort. After describing at length his moral and spiritual deficiencies, he begged the Rebbe to help him overcome his evil character.

"Surely," said the Rebbe, "you know how grave is the sin of *lashon harah*, speaking evilly of a human being. Nowhere, to my knowledge, does it say that it is permissible to speak *lashon harah* about oneself."

Here is a brief overview of some of the laws, mostly gleaned from *Chafetz Chaim*:ⁱ

1. *Lashon hara* literally means "bad talk." This means that it is forbidden to speak negatively about someone else, even if it is true.¹¹
 2. It is also forbidden to repeat anything about another, even if it is not a negative thing. This is called *rechilus*.¹²
 3. It is also forbidden to listen to *lashon hara*. One should either reprimand the speaker, or, if that is not possible, one should extricate oneself from that situation.¹³
 4. Even if one has already heard the *lashon hara*, it is forbidden to believe it. On the contrary, one should always judge one's fellow favorably.¹⁴
 5. **If one has already heard the *lashon hara*, he is forbidden to believe it** Nevertheless, one may suspect that the *lashon hara* is true, and take the necessary precautions to protect oneself.¹⁵
 6. It is forbidden to even make a motion that is derogatory towards someone.¹⁶
 7. One may not even retell a negative event without using names, if the listeners might be able to figure out who is being spoken of.¹⁷
 8. In certain circumstances, such as to protect someone from harm, it is permissible or even obligatory to share negative information. As there are many details to this law, one should consult a competent rabbi to learn what may be shared in any particular situation.¹⁸
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Testimony of Yeshua

- Mary fulfills the laws of purification after Yeshua's birth: Luke 2:22–24
- Yeshua heals the “lepers”: Matthew 8:1–4; 11:2–6; Mark 1:40–45
- Yeshua on the misuse of the mouth: Matthew 15:11,17–20; Mark 7:18–23
- On the defilement of sin: Romans 6:19–23
- The apostles on the evil use of the tongue: Ephesians 4:31; James 3:1–12; 4:11–12; 1Peter 2:1

Speak No Evil

By [Chaya Shuchat](#)

The Gemara says that *lashon hara*—spreading true, derogatory information about someone else—harms three people: the speaker, the listener and the subject of the gossip.¹ During biblical times, the punishment for evil speech was swift: the speaker would be stricken with *tzaraat*, a disease that required one to be isolated from the camp.

Ever since the Holy Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people were dispersed, *tzaraat* no longer afflicts those who speak evil speech. No longer do spiritual phenomena immediately manifest themselves in physical form. But it is clear that those who engage in gossip, constant criticism and negativity also suffer a host of physical ills. The Torah’s message—to avoid speaking ill of others, and to bring out their strengths through positive speech—is, unsurprisingly, also a recipe for a physically and psychologically healthy life.

What is true of *tzaraat* is true of all punishments mentioned in the Torah—they are not meant as retribution, but as opportunities for healing and recovery. The most extreme form of isolation found in the Torah is *galut*, exile—banishment from our land and from G-d’s presence. We may wonder what severe sins we could have committed to justify our lengthy exile and persecution.



Gossip and slanderⁱⁱ

Because of our depravity, we tend to enjoy gossip. ‘The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body’ (18:8). We like to be ‘in the know’. We are guilty of gossip when what we pass on to others is not fitting to repeat, even if it is true. ‘He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy conceals a matter’ (11:13; see also 17:9). Slander destroys people and relationships: ‘A perverse man spreads strife, and a slanderer separates intimate friends’ (16:28). Shakespeare wrote in *Othello*, ‘He who steals my purses steals trash, but he that filches my good name ... makes me poor indeed.’²¹ Some use gossip to get revenge on an enemy. Gossip is like a contagious disease. The wise avoid those who gossip and refuse to spread the disease by repeating gossip (20:19; 26:20).

Angry speech

‘Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools’ (Eccles. 7:9). Anger stems from pride and selfishness (James 4:1–2a). Angry people wrongfully play God, pouring out their vengeance on those who have offended them (but see Rom. 12:19). Their anger is not a righteous zeal for the glory of God but a passion to vindicate themselves. Their angry words and acts express the murder that resides in their hearts (Matt. 5:21–22). The angry person is out of control and vulnerable to many other transgressions: ‘Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit’ (25:28; see also Eph. 4:26–27). Anger impairs judgement: ‘A quick-tempered man acts foolishly’ (14:17a). Angry words wound deeply: ‘There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword’ (12:18a). Hateful speech can escalate into violent acts: ‘A hot-tempered man abounds in transgression’ (29:22b). Those who are angry often stir up strife (15:18). The wise avoid people given to anger (22:24).

Quarrelsome speech

Closely related to angry speech are words which stir up strife: ‘A fool’s lips bring strife’ (18:6a; see also 28:25; 13:10; 10:12). Some people seem to enjoy argumentation: ‘He who loves transgression loves strife’ (17:19a); ‘like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife’ (26:21). Some homes are miserable because of constant bickering: ‘Better is a dry morsel and quietness with it than a house full of feasting with strife’ (17:1). Those who are wise avoid conflict and refuse to add fuel to the fire of strife: ‘The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so abandon the quarrel before it breaks out’ (17:14). There are several warnings against a quarrelsome woman who nags her husband: ‘It is better to live in a desert land than with a contentious and vexing woman’ (21:19; see also 19:13; 21:9; 25:24; 27:15–17). It is often wise to drop certain issues, even among friends and family, when an impasse is reached. It is unwise to argue with fools or to dispute with those whose mind is already made up (26:4).

²¹ William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Chicago: HA Sumner and Company, 1882), p. 866.

Perverse speech

The wise don't use filthy or inappropriate speech: 'He who is perverted in his language falls into evil' (17:20*b*).

Proud speech

Because they humbly recognize God's sovereignty, the wise do not boast about what they will do or have done: 'Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth. Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips' (27:1–2). This text might be appropriate to review before one writes a Christmas letter.

Excessive speech

'The one who guards his mouth preserves his life; the one who opens wide his lips comes to ruin' (13:3). We are far more likely to get into trouble for saying too much than for not speaking enough: 'When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise' (10:19); 'even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is considered prudent' (17:28). The advent of e-mail also brings new risks. People sitting alone with their computers tend to be more careless with their words than they would be in the presence of others. We should hesitate and think before speaking or writing. 'Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him' (29:20; James 1:19).

God judges foolish speech

Because God is sovereign and just, those who misuse their tongues suffer the consequences both now and in the final judgement: 'The eyes of the LORD preserve knowledge, but He overthrows the words of the treacherous man' (22:12); 'the perverted tongue will be cut out' (10:31*b*); 'a babbling fool will be ruined' (10:10*b*); 'a fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are the snare of his soul' (18:7); 'his mouth calls for blows' (18:6*b*); 'an evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips' (12:13); 'in the mouth of the foolish is a rod for his back' (14:3*a*; see also 19:5, 9, 19). Jesus also taught that we will be judged for what we say: 'Every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgement. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned' (Matt. 12:36–37).

Learn to speak with wisdom

The tongue, which can destroy, can also build up when used wisely.

Exercise self-control

While the fool blurts out whatever he or she thinks or feels, the wise person controls his or her words: 'He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles' (21:23). The wise person listens to others before he or she speaks: 'A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind' (18:2); 'He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him' (18:13; see also James 1:19). The one who is wise doesn't jump to conclusions: 'The first to plead his case seems right, until another comes and examines him' (18:17). He doesn't have to have the last word (10:19). He is slow to anger and avoids disputes: 'A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back' (29:11); 'the slow to anger calms a dispute' (15:18*b*); 'he who is slow to anger has great understanding' (14:29*a*); 'like one who takes a dog by the ears is he who passes by and

meddles with strife not belonging to him' (26:17). When wronged, the wise either overlook the sin (19:11*b*) or seek to restore those in the wrong by confronting them privately (Gal. 6:1; Matt. 18:15). Because they trust God to bring about justice, they refuse to seek revenge (20:22; Rom. 12:19). Because they have been freely forgiven by God in Christ, they are ready to forgive others (Eph. 4:32).

Speak with integrity

'Truthful lips will be established forever' (12:19*a*). The wise man is characterized by integrity. When called upon to give testimony, he tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth: 'A truthful witness saves lives' (14:25*a*). When he makes a promise, he keeps his word, even if it costs him dearly: 'He swears to his own hurt and does not change' (Ps. 15:4*c*). Even when he might be able to fool men and thus benefit in the short run, he is honest because he knows that God hears every word he speaks.

Build others up with your words

Everything we say should edify others and honour God (Eph. 4:29). By words we teach wisdom to others: 'The lips of the wise spread knowledge' (Prov. 15:7*a*); 'the teaching of the wise is a fountain of life' (13:14*a*). Of the godly wife it is said: 'She opens her mouth in wisdom and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue' (31:26). Words can be used to give wise counsel: 'Oil and perfume make the heart glad, so a man's counsel is sweet to his friend' (27:9). By speech we can evangelize the lost: 'The fruit of righteousness is a tree of life, and he who is wise wins souls' (11:30; see also Matt. 28:18–20). By words of rebuke we can deliver others from sin: 'He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue' (Prov. 28:23). 'Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy' (27:6). We can offer encouragement to the downcast: 'Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad' (12:25). By speech we can deliver the oppressed: 'Open your mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy' (31:8–9). Sometimes it is sinful to remain silent: 'Better is open rebuke than love that is concealed' (27:5). The wise speak their love to their spouses, their children, and their friends.

Develop excellence in the manner of your speech

Wisdom is concerned not merely about what is said, but also about the way in which it is said. The world may say, 'Fight fire with fire.' Wisdom says, 'Usually it is best to fight fire with water.' 'A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger' (15:1); 'sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness' (16:21*b*). The timing of what we say can greatly enhance our message: 'Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances' (25:11). A wise wife may wait to bring the troubles of the day to her tired husband until after he has had time to enjoy his dinner and relax for a few minutes. But 'He who blesses his friend with a loud voice early in the morning, it will be reckoned as a curse to him' (27:14; see also 25:20). We are not only to be excellent speakers, but also wise listeners: 'A plan in the heart of a man is like deep water, but a man of understanding draws it out' (20:5). Those who speak well are persuasive: 'By forbearance a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue breaks the bone' (25:15).

God values and rewards wise speech

‘The tongue of the righteous is as choice silver’ (10:20a). Wise words bless those who hear: ‘Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones’ (16:24); ‘the lips of the righteous feed many’ (10:21a); ‘a soothing tongue is a tree of life’ (15:4). By speaking well we do God’s work of spreading wisdom. God blesses those who speak well: ‘With the fruit of a man’s mouth his stomach will be satisfied. He will be satisfied with the product of his lips’ (18:20). Wise speech pays off in relationships, in your vocation, and in eternity (12:14; 13:2).

Conclusion

How can you change your speech?

The reason our speech gets us into trouble has little to do with the tongue. We sin in our speech because we are sinners by nature who don’t properly fear God. Before your speech patterns can be changed, your heart must be transformed (4:23; Matt. 12:34–35).

FOOTNOTES

[1.](#)

See Numbers, ch. 12. The commentaries to vv. 1–2 discuss what it was that she said.

[2.](#)

See Rashi to verse 9, and Rabbeinu Bechayei to verse 1.

[3.](#)

See Bereishit Rabbah 19:4 for the snake’s slanderous claim.

[4.](#)

See Genesis, ch. 37, and Bereishit Rabbah 84:7.

[5.](#)

See [Exodus 2:14](#) and Rashi on this verse.

[6.](#)

See [I Samuel 22:9ff.](#)

[7.](#)

Midrash Shochoer Tov 7:8.

[8.](#)

Ibid.

[9.](#)

Talmud, Gittin 55b–56a.

[10.](#)

[Psalms 34:12–13.](#)

[11.](#)

See Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 156:10.

[12.](#)

See [Leviticus 19:16](#), and Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot, chapter 7.

[13.](#)

Chafetz Chaim 6:2, based on Talmud, Ketubot 5a and other sources.

[14.](#)

ibid. based on Talmud, Pesachim 118a, and commentary of Rashbam ibid. s.v. *Hamekabel*.

[15.](#)

Talmud, Niddah 61a. See Jeremiah, ch. 41, where the story is told of how Gedaliah did not believe *lashon hara* at all, and thus allowed his adversaries into his palace. They eventually killed him, as well as most of his men.

[16.](#)

In the words of King Solomon: “An unscrupulous man, a man of violence, he walks with a crooked mouth; he winks with his eyes, shuffles with his feet, points with his fingers. Contrariness is in his heart; he plots evil at all times; he incites quarrels” ([Proverbs 6:12–15](#)).

[17.](#)

Chafetz Chaim 3:4.

[18.](#)

See Chafetz Chaim, ch. 10.

ⁱⁱ Newheiser, J. (2008). *Opening up Proverbs*. Opening Up Commentary. Leominster: Day One Publications.

Page 18. Exported from [Logos Bible Software 4](#), 2:03 PM April 6, 2016.