Tazria: Vayikra (Leviticus)

What's it all about?

Moses continues to instruct the Israelites in the laws of ritual purity and impurity, covering everything from what a mother must do after giving birth to the celebrated mitzvah of brit milah, or circumcision, on the eighth day of each baby boy's life. **The parsha also discusses Tzaraat, a supernatural plague** often mistranslated as leprosy, which afflicts not only people but also clothes and buildings. A person afflicted with Tzaraat, the parsha tells us, must dwell alone outside the camp until he or she are healed.



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"He will remain ritually defiled as long as the lesion remains upon him. Since he is defiled, he must dwell isolated from other people. His dwelling must be outside the camp."

Take a deeper dive

No sooner does our parsha conclude blessing us with the joyous mitzvah of circumcision, than it jumps right into a discussion of Tzaraat, the supernatural plague that makes the afflicted person's skin snow-white.

Even for a book like the Torah, thick with wild and mysterious transitions, this one is a bit hard to understand: why go from the happy moment of welcoming a baby boy into HaShem's covenant to discussing an ominous disease?

To answer the question, it helps to know a bit of Hebrew. Circumcision in Hebrew is known as brit mila, the first word meaning "covenant" and the second "circumcision." It is a magical event that binds us all together—sons to fathers and one Jew to the next. But mila has another meaning in Hebrew: Mila means "a word."

And Tzaraat, the rabbis teach us, was an affliction closely connected to speech. A person afflicted with Tzaraat, also called a metzora, the Talmud tells us, is thus named because he is motzi shem ra, or guilty of slander. The affliction is caused exclusively by evil speech.

But just what is "evil speech"? Rabbi Yitzhak Arame, who lived in Spain 600 years ago, answered this question beautifully. "Man," he said, "differs from the beasts in one notable way: he can talk. And if he uses this ability to talk to pursue things that aren't specific to him [namely, his God-given right to pursue truth and beauty], it's as if a person received royal garbs from a king and chose instead to put them on his donkey."

In other words, this divine gift, the ability to reason, should not be wasted on frivolities, and certainly not on lashon harah, or slanderous gossip.

What's so bad about gossip? Gossip, the Talmud teaches us, "kills three people: The one who says it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is said."

Riffing on this theme, the Ba'al Shem Tov had this to say: "When you hear something bad about another Jew, even if it's a person you don't know, you should feel deeply sorry. Why? Because one of two things must be true: If the gossip you hear is true, than the person about whom it is told isn't a good person. And if it's not true, than the person sharing the gossip isn't a good person."

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Now, the connection couldn't be clearer. **Circumcision binds us together, making the newborn son part of a covenant that stretches back millennia. Speaking ill of others tears us apart, loosening the shared bonds of our community.** And this week, the parsha warns us to avoid such a sin like the plague.