TAZRIA-METSORA: How to improve your quality of life

This Shabbat, we will read two sections of the Torah: Tazria and Metzora. One of the most discussed topics in these two sections is tzara'at, which is a disease or condition (neg'a) generally associated with leprosy. Once diagnosed with this disease, the individual was isolated and quarantined until their cure. The Sages learned from the case of Miriam, Moses' sister, who contracted tzara'at, that there is surely a relationship between tzara'at and speaking ill of others, which is known as Lashon Hara, i.e., speaking badly about others. Since those who engage in the addiction of gossip and destructive speech must be "isolated" so that their behavior does not "spread" and their example does not become "normalized" in Jewish society.

We present here a brief reflection on one of the ways to avoid Lashon Hara, according to the teachings of Pirkei Avot.

"And judge every person favorably." – "Yehoshua ben Perachyah used to say: Make yourself a mentor, acquire a friend, and judge every person favorably."

Judging others favorably is a commandment of the Torah. Where does this commandment appear? In the book of Leviticus 19:15 it says: "You shall judge your neighbor with righteousness." The Sages explained this important precept as follows:

There are three categories of people: the righteous person (tsadiq), the wicked person (resha'im), and the average person. The righteous person has an impeccable record of good deeds. These individuals, who are more like angels than humans, are not the majority. They will be between 1% and 5% of the total. At the other extreme, we have the true wicked people, the resha'im, those selfish individuals with bad

intentions and a record that condemns them. I estimate that this is also a maximum of 5% of the total population (the book "The Sociopath Next Door" claims that sociopaths are 4% of the population). And then we have the ordinary people: all of us, who generally have noble intentions, do good things, but also have our flaws – sometimes we behave altruistically and sometimes selfishly. People with average morality will make up 90% of the population.

The Torah says:

1. To the righteous person, you must judge them with indulgence. Even if you are not sure if they acted well or badly, or when you perceive a suspicious situation but do not have all the evidence in front of you: do not condemn them in your heart. Judge them generously. Positively. Give them the benefit of the doubt.
2. To the wicked person, who already has a record of deliberately acting with evil, you cannot give the benefit of the doubt until they repent because their behavior can affect you. You must be suspicious of a truly wicked person, even when it seems they want to do something noble (we will talk more about this later).
3. And what about the average person? With most of our friends, family, acquaintances, etc., the Torah indicates that with the average person, you should judge them as if they were a "righteous person" and give them the benefit of the doubt unless you have clear evidence to the contrary. In other words, this commandment, "You shall judge your neighbor with righteousness," should be read more or less as follows: "You shall judge your neighbor (the average person) just as you judge the righteous person (the tsadiq)." Thus, according to the Torah, we must give the benefit of the doubt to the vast majority of people!

Judging others in this way brings enormous benefits for society and individuals in material, spiritual, and emotional

terms.

Firstly, because “with the same measure that you measure, it will be measured to you.” How do we want to be judged by God after 120 years? Do we expect Him to judge us severely or indulgently? Surely we want the Supreme Judge always to find an extenuating circumstance, a justification for our mistakes… The Sages explain that God will judge us with the same measure we use to judge others. If we learn to judge others with the benefit of the doubt, that’s how we will be judged by Him. And something else: not only will God judge us as we judge others, but our gestures and attitudes are usually reflected and imitated by the people around us. If you want other people to judge you indulgently, not to rush to suspect you or condemn you before having all the information at hand, then learn to judge others with the benefit of the doubt. When you give others the benefit of the doubt, you also receive it from others.

Finally, judging with the benefit of the doubt is the best antidote to avoid Lashon Hara. When we speak badly of others, it’s because we think badly of those people. Often we hear a destructive comment about another individual, and we “believe it” and repeat it, even though we may not have evidence or know the complete story and all versions of the story. If we learn this great commandment of giving others the benefit of the doubt in our hearts, we will be much more careful not to listen, not to believe, and especially not to repeat negative comments about others. This way, we will avoid Lashon Hara, and our quality of life will improve immensely.