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PENINIM ON THE TORAH

PARSHA BOOKLET

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PARASHAT TAZRIA

When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male. (12:2)

The first eight pesukim of the parsha introduce the laws pertaining to a woman after childbirth. She was not permitted to visit the Bais Hamikdash for a set period of time following childbirth, after which she was to bring a korban, sacrifice. Once she had done this, she could reclaim her rights to visit the Sanctuary and be reinstated to eat kodoshim, consecrated flesh of a sacrifice. Indeed, this is expressed by the pasuk, "The Kohen shall atone for her (by offering the relevant sacrifice), and she shall be purified" (Vayikra 12:8).

The taharah, purification process, after childbirth is divided into three phases. For the first seven days, if she bore a boy-- or fourteen days, if her child was a girl-- she was neither to come into physical contact with her husband nor to eat Maaser Sheni, the second tithe of produce, which the owner was to eat in Yerushalayim. Forty days after a male birth or eighty days after a female birth, the yoledes, mother who gave birth, was permitted to partake of the Terumah, the primary tithe given to the Kohen. After this period, she was to bring the appropriate korban, and she was now permitted to enter the Sanctuary and eat kodoshim.

The Arizal compares the exodus from Egypt to the process following childbirth. Just as the pangs of a woman during childbirth become more intense as the moment of birth draws near, so did the plagues that devastated Egypt become more intense as the moment of liberation was quickly approaching. The Shem MiShmuel adds that this concept can be compared to the three-stage process of a woman's purification following childbirth. Just as a new mother must undergo three steps until she cleanses herself entirely, so, too, did Klal Yisrael experience three similar steps in the process of severing themselves from the spiritual contamination which characterized life in Egypt.

The Torah describes the Exodus in the following manner: "And it was when Pharaoh sent out the people" (Shemos 13:17). The Midrash teaches us that Pharaoh's "sending out" the people is a reference to his accompanying them out of the land. The Avnei Nezer explains that Pharaoh's "accompaniment" refers to the notion that Klal Yisrael "took" Pharaoh with them. In other words, they were not free of their Egyptian oppressors. Although they had left the land and were no longer under the whip of the taskmasters, they were still subject to the spiritual pollution that reigned in Egypt. The centuries of Egyptian culture and immorality were still entrenched in their national frame of mind. The dangers of Egypt were not left behind. They were still a critical reality which had to be addressed. Thus, the Egyptians pursued the Jews all the way to the Red Sea, at which point Hashem split the sea, drowning the Egyptians and finally liberating Klal Yisrael from their defilement.

The Shem MiShmuel views the seven days between the actual Exodus and the splitting of the

Red Sea as parallel to the seven-day period during which a woman must wait for the purification process which allows her to eat Maaser Sheni and resume relations with her husband. During these seven days, for the woman-- and, by extension, for Klal Yisrael-- the tumah, ritual impurity, is in full force. Once the seven days have passed, similar to Klal Yisrael's passing through the Red Sea, the woman's tumah has decreased, and Klal Yisrael have shaken off much of their connection to Egypt, thereby improving their link to Hashem. Each member of Klal Yisrael became ready to develop his/her level of communion with Hashem as they all sang shirah, a song of praise, to the Almighty following the Egyptians demise. They also were now ready to eat the Heavenly bread, the Manna.

So ended the first stage in the process of the Jewish liberation from Egypt. They prepared themselves until Rosh Chodesh Sivan for the upcoming Revelation at Har Sinai, just like a woman following childbirth who waits out her forty days until she is permitted to eat Terumah. It was at this point that Klal Yisrael declared, "And all the things that G-d has said, we will do" (Shemos 24:3).

This declaration catapulted them into another realm, one of greater closeness to Hashem. Like the woman, who after forty days may now eat Terumah, Klal Yisrael had risen closer to their goal as they moved further away from the spiritual filth of Egypt.

The nation would have to experience yet another stage before it could achieve its final state of redemption. On the fifth of Sivan, the people brought offerings on the Altar, and they made a covenant with Hashem in which some of the animal's blood was sprinkled on them and some on the Altar. This paralleled the korban which the woman brought to conclude her purification process. Just as now she could partake of the holiest foods because her offering had been brought, so, too, was Klal Yisrael ready for the ultimate accord, the greatest communion with G-d in the history of mankind - Mattan Torah, the Giving of the Torah.

The Kohen shall look at it again on the seventh day...and the affliction has not spread on the skin, then the Kohen shall declare him pure, it is a mispachas. (13:6)

There are sins, and there are "almost sins." When one sins, Hashem punishes him. What about when one "almost sins"? Is he "almost punished"? We see from the parsha, claims Horav David Shneuer, Shlita, that kimaat chatah, "almost sin," is punishable behavior. A person develops what appears to be a skin disease of questionable origin. He is isolated, after which the Kohen views the disease in question. If it has dimmed in color and not spread, it is nothing more than a mispachas, which is some sort of skin disease, but not tzaraas. Now the individual who had been isolated must immerse his garments, and then he is considered ritually clean. Why? What did he do? He had never been tamei, ritually unclean.

This teaches us that nothing "just happens," nor does it occur in a vacuum. Plagues are a therapeutic punishment for one who sins inadvertently. This individual who had been isolated did something inappropriate. Perhaps, he is unaware of his deed or-- quite possibly--he did not really do anything wrong. He only "almost sinned." Even if he had repented, the mere fact that for a period of time he was in a state of spiritual flux, he is rendered tamei. The Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh writes that a plague which causes a person to have his clothes immersed is a plague that requires the Kohen to pronounce the word, tahor, clean, on him. The Ramban writes that plagues are Hashem's communication that something is not right. The person's behavior may not yet be sinful, but it is pointing in that direction. Do something about it now.

We have to take this to heart. We may act in a manner unbecoming a Torah Jew. It is not a sin, but it is an "almost" sin. It is not full-fledged lashon hora, but it is avak, the dust of lashon hora. It is a

semblance of the real sin, enough for which to be chastised, in order to keep him from fully transgressing. It certainly makes a difference what spiritual plane one occupies; sin is relative, as is the "dust." This gives us an entirely new perspective on sin and punishment. At times, we find it difficult to introspect in order to find out what we did wrong. Now we see that we are held accountable for those areas in which we have almost sinned, when we have acted inappropriately, but not sinfully. Hashem protects us by sending a little "reminder," a message that we are traveling in the wrong direction. Turn back before it is too late.

If a tzaraas affliction will be in a person, he shall be brought to the Kohen. (13:9)

Chazal teach us that tzaraas, commonly mistranslated as leprosy, is really the physical manifestation of a spiritual malady, a punishment designed to teach the perpetrator that he has sinned in a certain area which requires atonement. The primary cause of tzaraas is slanderous speech, lashon hora. The spiritual malaise of lashon hora has been with us since the serpent convinced Chavah to eat of the Eitz Hadaas, Tree of Knowledge. Furthermore, in the Talmud Bava Basra 164b, Chazal state: "Most people fall prey to the sin of theft, while a minority stumble in the sin of immoral behavior, but everyone sins with lashon hora." Clearly, this is not a problem that has recently surfaced. It has been around for quite some time, and its tentacles ensnare everyone in one way or another.

In the Talmud Shabbos 155b, Chazal comment: "There is no creature poorer than a dog and none as rich as a pig." Clearly, Chazal are not concerned about the animal's economic portfolio. The commentators explain that people revile a dog which is a stray, who has no owner. No one cares about its needs, and no one feeds it. A pig, however, eats out of the dung heap. It always finds a satisfying meal wherever it is. While this is understandable, why did Chazal have to search for a paradigm of poverty and wealth in the animal world? What are they trying to teach us?

The Gaon, zl, m'Vilna, explains that Hashem gave us all of the mitzvos at Har Sinai. All mitzvos originate from the same Heavenly Source - Hashem. Why is it then that some mitzvos have more "mazel," luck, are more fortunate than others? Certain prohibitions are accepted across the board by all observant Jews, while some prohibitions just do not "make it." For instance, in the area of maachalos asuros, forbidden foods, the archetype is pork. Everybody is meticulous in observance of this prohibition. No one even remotely thinks of eating pork in any way, shape, or form. It goes so far that if a Jew is suspected of eating chazir, pork, he is considered to be an anathema of the lowest order.

Nonetheless, we do not realize that the sin of speaking lashon hora is much more serious and its transgression is a much graver offense. Yet, people laugh at one who gives them mussar, rebukes them, for speaking lashon hora. In other words, chazir, which is a sin of lesser weight in comparison with lashon hora, is given much greater "respect" and viewed in a much more negative light than lashon hora, which is a much more serious breach of observance.

This, explains the Gaon, is what Chazal were lamenting. Although the Torah takes an extremely dim view of sins of the "tongue", to the point that Chazal in the Talmud Pesachim 118A say, "One who speaks lashon hora is worthy of being thrown to the dogs," since he is just like them., nonetheless, this prohibitive commandment is considered "poor" compared to the negative commandment concerning eating pork. People tend to ignore and humiliate the sin of lashon hora, while these same people take great care in observing the prohibition against eating pork. No, lashon hora is not something new. Even in the time of the Talmud, it was considered a formidable-unavoidable-transgression.

For some reason, the fear factor that once seemed to work as a deterrent no longer has the same effect. The inspirations and the shmuessen, ethical discourses, the stories of faith and episodes of

punishment, do not hinder this generation from refraining to engage in slanderous speech. There is always an excuse to speak. In addition, because we are living in a democracy, the very notion that there is something that we are not permitted to say just does not sit very well with contemporary society. Of course, the Torah is immutable and the laws that were given to us on Har Sinai are as effective today as they were then - regardless of contemporary society's failings or progressiveness. The problem still exists: people do not seem to take the prohibition against lashon hora seriously.

One who is concerned about the cleanliness of his mouth should first and foremost be aware of the causes of lashon hora, what catalyzes this spiritual deficiency that manifests itself in the way in which one speaks and what he expresses. For some reason, studying the halachos concerning lashon hora no longer seems to provide us with a strong enough deterrent. Acting passively by locking oneself in the house and never speaking to anybody might prove to be a temporary panacea, but it will not cure the disease. The ability to speak is what distinguishes man from animal. It is certainly not a skill which one wishes to defer. The Torah is not commanding that we be silent, only astute and proper in what we say. It all reverts back to an examination of the causes of our need to speak lashon hora.

Horav Moshe Reis, Shlita, suggests looking no further than oneself for one of the primary catalysts of lashon hora: personal deficiencies. Rather than correct our own shortcomings, we look for our neighbor's inadequacies. It does not remove our faults, but it makes us feel better to know that someone else also has imperfections. Rav Reis cites the Shalah HaKadosh, who interprets this idea in the pasuk: V'tameh, tamei yikra, "He is to call out: Contaminated, contaminated!" (Vayikra 13:45) Explained homiletically, this means that he who is himself contaminated tends to label others contaminated. The one who is tahor, ritually clean, does not have to be hypercritical of others. He does not have to look for another person's failings. Indeed, it is as Chazal posit, Kol ha'posel - b'mumo posel, "He who finds fault - finds fault in an area of his own shortcoming." It is usually the individual who is bothered by his own insufficiencies that finds fault in others. Therefore, if we work on ourselves and rectify our own faults, we will have no problem with others. This is especially true when the person who speaks lashon hora realizes that by slandering others, he is really issuing a public declaration that he manifests this same failing.

Rav Reis derives a powerful lesson from the first incident of slanderous speech in the Torah: the episode involving the serpent, the prime example of the holech rachil, tale-bearer. The serpent was very crafty, applying his acumen to ensnare, defame and destroy others. He had to be involved in everything. Therefore, it agitated him that-- according to his deduction-- the first couple was forbidden to eat of the Eitz Hadaas. This bothered him, because he did not know why Hashem had restricted the fruit of this tree from their diet. He was going to make them sin. Adam and Chavah ate from the tree and were subject to the consequences of their misdeed. Why was the serpent punished? He did not eat, nor had he ever been commanded not to eat. Hashem placed the restraint only on Adam and Chavah. Furthermore, it almost seems as if his punishment was the most stringent of all of them.

The serpent's punishment was twofold: He would always eat dirt; and he lost his legs. The serpent would no longer walk; he would slither on the ground, his face in the earth. How are we to understand all of this, and what is its lesson for us?

Man's position in the world is defined by his erect physical stance, standing on two feet, head up, face forward-- in contrast to the animal who walks on all fours and whose face points to the ground. In the scheme of the world, man certainly has a more honorable, eminent position than the animal. While man may stand "taller" because he faces up, the animal has its legs to give it "height," to give it stature. The serpent attempted to go beyond its G-d-given position, to elevate itself by putting man down. It was, therefore, punished with the loss of its legs, to decrease its stature, to lower its position to the ground. From then on, it has slithered across the ground.

Slithering across the ground, biting at man's heel, surreptitiously ensnaring man, all of this defines the nachash, serpent, and, by extension, the slanderer and talebearer. They have no legs to stand on. They creep across the ground and, at the very first opportunity; their heads are crushed into the ground. This is what ultimately happens to the talebearer. Sooner or later he is discovered, and when the proper time comes along, he is crushed to the ground. The slanderer has no real friends, only those who fear his evil tongue. At the first opportunity, they will desert him like a snake. When they see what the slanderer does to the people, they begin to wonder: "When will I be his next victim?" It is only through meticulous care concerning what comes out of our mouths that we will be able to maintain friendships and continue to exhibit respect of others.

*If flesh will have an inflammation on its skin, (13:18)
If a person will have a burn from fire on his skin (13:24)*

Rashi teaches us that the signs of impurity for shechin, inflammation of the skin, and michveh, burn of the skin, are identical. Why then did the Torah differentiate between them? He explains that it is to teach us that they do not combine with one another. For instance, if there developed half a gris, a type of large bean, which is considered the minimum size for an affliction to cause impurity of baheres, impure spot, in the shechin where it healed, and a half gris of baheres in the michveh, where it healed, they are not to be considered as one full gris of baheres. The combined afflictions do not cause impurity.

We wonder why these two measurements are not cumulative. After all, their signs are the same, and the rule is that objects which have the same shiurim, measurements, and characteristics do combine to complement one measurement. Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, renders a response that goes to the root of Heavenly response to our actions.

The popular contemporary belief is that some things "just happen." The Torah Jew does not believe in this misconception. We affirm in our belief in Hashem that there is no such thing as coincidence; everything occurs for a reason. "One does not stub his finger in this world unless it has been preordained in Heaven," is a Rabbinic maxim that bespeaks this notion. Therefore, we are acutely aware that the plague on this person's skin did not "just happen." It is a Heavenly message, conveying to the individual that something is not right. He has deviated and must alter his course before the plague begins to grow and ultimately claim much more than a small patch of skin. Furthermore, where the plague occurs, its size as well as its intensity, tells us something about the individual's behavior, pointing to the area that must be rectified. One area can focus on the evil tongue, while a fiery plague can allude to unbridled passion, with the list going on.

We firmly believe that Hashem is meticulous in His punishment. Therefore, He does not punish a person one iota more than he deserves. Likewise, His "message" to him will be succinct and to the point - no overkill. Thus, the size of the punishment is a tell-tale sign of the intensity of the misdemeanor. If there is a chatzi shiur, half-measure, it is a clear indication that the person's sin is one of a half-measure. In other words, he has not yet crossed the boundary of irreversible sin. He has deviated and acted inappropriately, warranting Hashem's warning, but he has not committed a full shiur of sin. If there are two half-measures, it indicates that this individual has doubly incurred Hashem's anger, but it does not mean that it went so far as a real sin. Since a complete transgression did not occur, this man should not be held liable for what he did not do. Hashem's ways are just, righteous and perfect. A person receives retribution only for what he has actually done. This is one situation in which

a half and a half do not add up to a whole.

When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male. (12:2)

Rashi cites the famous statement of Rabbi Simlai, "Just as the creation of man followed that of all of the animals, wild beasts, and fowl, so, too, do the laws concerning man follow the laws governing animals, wild beasts and fowl. The soul of man, however, was created on the first day of Creation. The Midrash responds to this by commenting, "If he is zocheh, deserving, he is told, 'You preceded everything in Creation'; if he does not merit, he is told, 'Even the yitosh, tiny gnat, preceded you in Creation.'" What are we to derive from the fact that the lowly gnat preceded man in Creation?

The Ksav Sofer explains that, in truth, man towers over the rest of creation. Who is like man, that is endowed with such abilities as wisdom, cognitive powers and abilities to communicate and articulate his thoughts, to create tools for living, to elevate and develop his potential? On the other hand, the other creatures of the world have an advantage over man. Their sustenance is waiting for them without an obligation to worry about earning a livelihood. Moreover, animals have been created with a natural instinct and ability for self-preservation and self-protection. Despite all of his cognitive skills, man must worry about earning a living and protecting himself from predators. In other words, the idea, "The gnat preceded you," is not simply a chronological concept, it is a perception regarding the quality of life.

There is one difference, one consideration, that must be taken into account: purpose. Man has purpose; he has a mission, while the animal does not. Regarding the quality of life, animals might have the advantage, that they are able to live without worry, without a care in the world, but man's advantage is that he has a purpose. We know that life on this world is only temporary. It is a stepping-stone, a vestibule for the real life of Olam Habah, the World to Come. This purpose, this opportunity, gives meaning to life, overshadowing whatever difficulties we might encounter.

We distinguish ourselves from the insignificant gnat and other creatures by the manner in which we demonstrate respect to the Torah. We are compensated by others for the respect which we accord the Torah. On the other hand, one who maintains a materialistic lifestyle, who shows a greater respect for money than he does for the Almighty, profanes himself and loses the respect of people. If he merits, it is considered a mark of distinction, granting him precedence before all creatures. If he is not deserving, then his position is behind that of the lowliest creature.

One who values life and lives it with purpose develops a sense of self-respect as well. He is revered and admired by other people. This is what Chazal mean when they say, "Who is considered mechubad, honorable? He who honors others." The Shevat Mussar explains that one who honors other people will, in turn, receive respect from honorable people.

The average person thinks that an honorable person is he who receives much honor from others. The Torah's attitude is quite the opposite. It considers the honorable person to be the one who gives honor, not the one who receives it. This attitude has been the hallmark of our gedolim. Horav Akiva Eiger, zl, writes in a letter to his son, who was preparing his fathers' responsa for publication, "You will see among the letters of correspondence from people who identify themselves as having learned in my yeshivah. Do not refer to any of them as students. I have never referred to anyone as my student, because how do I know that I did not learn more from him than he did from me?"

Another short vignette which demonstrates this characteristic occurred concerning Horav

Bentzion Halberstam, zl, the Bobover Rebbe, who resided for a while in the city of Tchebin where Horav Dov Berish Weidenfeld was rav. The Bobover made a comment and quoted a Tosfos to support his thesis, whereupon Rav Weidenfeld, himself a scholar of great distinction, replied, "There is no such Tosfos." Months later, while lecturing to his yeshivah, Rav Weidenfeld came across the Tosfos to which the Bobover had referred. He then exclaimed to his students, "Look at the incredible restraint the Bobover Rebbe exercised. He had the correct source which I had overlooked. He did not, however, want to embarrass me in public, so he remained silent."

Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl, cites the Talmud in Shanhedrin 102b which quotes a dialogue that Hashem had with Yoravam ben Nevat. Hashem "grabbed" him by the cloak and said, "Repent! Repent! And I, you and the son of Yishai (David Hamelech) will stroll together in Gan Eden." Yoravam replied, "Who will be at the head?" Hashem answered, "Ben Yishai." Yoravam countered, "Then I am not interested."

Rav Chaim notes: Yoravam was worthy of talking to Hashem. He was so obsessed with kavod, honor, that he threw it all away, because David would go first! Better he should be banished to the nadir of oblivion than to observe David at the helm. To someone like Yoravam, we say: "The gnat preceded you."

On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (12:3)

The Midrash Tanchuma makes a powerful distinction between Klal Yisrael and the nations of the world that conveys a powerful message to us. Regarding the mitzvah of Milah, the Navi says, "Ribono Shel Olam, You gave the nations peace and tranquility. Yet, they did not praise You. You grant an individual a son and he does not circumcise him, but raises him in accordance with his culture and lifestyle, disregarding Your ethical and moral imperatives. He later brings him to the house of idol worship, inculcating him with pagan belief. You grant him a home, and he fills it with idols. You give him a long, good life which he wastes on frivolous and immoral activity. Klal Yisrael, on the other hand, responds differently to Your favors. When you grant a member of Klal Yisrael a son, he circumcises him. If he is the firstborn, he redeems him when he is thirty days old. When he begins to mature, the father brings him to the bais ha'medrash and bais ha'knesses to study Torah and offer praise to You. When You grant him good life, he celebrates his well-being with praise and feasting, going to the bais ha'knesses to offer prayers of thanksgiving. See how Klal Yisrael value and appreciate mitzvos and repay Your favor." Hashem responds, "You celebrate joyfully in the performance of My mitzvos. I will, therefore, supplement your joy with increased joy."

The Midrash teaches us an all-important lesson: Hashem responds to the way in which we acknowledge His gifts. He constantly blesses us with His favor; yet, some of us make our own determination about how we will react to his blessing. Whether it is material blessing or the gift of children, He has conveyed to us in the Torah how we are to relate to these gifts. It is now up to us to respond appropriately.

And it will become a tzaraas affliction on the skin of his flesh. (13:2)

We find throughout rabbinic literature that the word v'hayah, "and it will be," alludes to a joyful experience. What joy is there in discovering that one has tzaraas? Horav Daniel Goldstein, zl, gives a practical explanation. He cites the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh who explains the pasuk of V'haya b'or

besaro, "And it will become a tzaraas affliction on the skin of his flesh," as being to the advantage of a Jew. When a Jew has a failing, it is manifest in his skin - not in his neshamah. An indiscretion on the part of a Jew does not penetrate into his inner being. It is an external shortcoming that can be corrected, an extraneous taint that can be removed. This is the reason the Torah uses the word v'haya, implying joy, upon introducing the laws of tzaraas. Upon noticing the plague on his skin, the Jew is certainly distraught in the awareness that Hashem is conveying a compelling message to him. The fact, however, that this plague is only "skin-deep" and susceptible to cleansing after he undergoes the process of teshuvah, repentance, is a source of joy to him.

After reading an article in one of the Torah-oriented newspapers, I feel that there is another approach we can take. The article was a plea from a ben Torah who had tragically become addicted to the filth that is to be found on the Internet. This was a model student, who for all intents and purposes had externally been the paradigm of Torah and avodah until his parents brought the Internet into their home. He fell prey to his curiosity, which raged the more he was exposed to the filth that he saw. He could not control his lust and fell deeper and deeper into the nadir of sin. This was, of course, always behind closed doors. Outwardly maintaining the sham of being the consummate ben Torah, this tormented soul suffered greatly in that he could not go for help, because he did not want anyone to discover his affliction. Acutely aware that it was getting progressively worse, he came out of the closet in the sense that he conveyed his private plea with the hope of warning others of the dangers that lurked on the Internet.

We see from here that it is difficult to repent from sinful behavior which remains covert. Moreover, the sinner is often tormented by his own inability to cope with his problem. When the tzaraas is manifest on the skin, the individual has no recourse but to approach the Kohen to seek spiritual help. The first step toward healing is to seek therapy. One does not seek therapy until after he has acknowledged his error. We know that this is a difficult first step for anyone, especially one whose sins are carried out under the most clandestine situation. At times, Hashem gives us a subtle nudge in the guise of a punishment to awaken us from our pitiful slumber, to remind us that we cannot get away with it forever, to assist us in returning to Him and correcting our error. When we think about it, that form of motivation is a favor, since it forces us to confront the reality of our misconduct. Yes, the tzaraas is to our benefit, because we no longer have to live in secrecy.

The Kohen shall look... the Kohen shall declare him tamei, contaminated; it is tzaraas. (13:8)

The Ramban, as well as the other commentators, explains that tzaraas is not a physical condition. It is a physical manifestation of a spiritual affliction. It is a punishment for a number of sins, the most predominant of which is lashon hora. A person officially becomes a metzora only when, after viewing the plague and determining its authenticity, the Kohen proclaims him to be tamei, contaminated. If the afflicted person were to surgically remove the plague, he could not become a metzora. Removing the plague, however tempting, is categorically forbidden by the Torah. Why?

The Sefer Hachinuch explains that a person should learn to accept pain and suffering with which Hashem afflicts him. By nullifying the tzaraas, he has not solved his problem. He has sinned and, as such, he must expiate his sin. He should accept his punishment and pray to Hashem for forgiveness and that He remove his pain and suffering.

This is a very powerful statement. No one wants to suffer, but then, when we do wrong we invariably forget about the consequences of our actions. Suffering is regrettably a part of life which cannot be completely avoided. Hashem has His cheshbonos, calculations, for determining the amount

of pain a person will endure. Man's function is to entreat Hashem to remove the afflictions and suffering, so that all will be reckoned positively for him. Indeed, a maxim of Jewish belief is that suffering in this world is an "altar of atonement" which can wipe away the stain of sin, in order to free the person from the pain that would be his in Olam Habah, the World to Come.

In Rabbi Sholom Smith's latest anthology from Horav Avraham Pam, zl, on Chumash, the venerable rosh yeshivah addresses suffering and the proper attitude we must manifest toward it. He explains that while suffering comes in different forms, the form which is packaged in disease, the terrible physical pain that some people must endure, is indeed very difficult for the average person to accept. Yet, there is a type of suffering with which people can learn to live, one that provides us with great spiritual benefit: this is the ability to be ne'elavim v'einam olvim, to accept the insults, mockery and derision of others. When someone directs verbal abuse at us personally, it is very difficult to respond appropriately. Immediately, there awakens within us a desire to retaliate with much of the same, to stoop to the level of the individual who is disparaging us. This eventually leads to the long list of sins associated with verbal response; lashon hora, machlokes, contention, revenge and anger. A person can be happy in suffering if he accepts the verbal abuse without responding. Accepting the abuse will hopefully take the place of some other form of suffering he was to endure either in this world or in Olam Habah.

At the conclusion of the Shemoneh Esrai, we say v'limkalelai nafshi sidom, "to those that curse me, let my soul be silent." Why does it say nafshi, my soul? It could have simply said, "I" should be silent. Why bring in the soul? I think we may note from here that to keep quiet in the face of verbal abuse and embarrassment is an overwhelming ability - one that needs the support of the soul, the spiritual dimension of a person. The soul is acutely aware that the individual who is abusing us is Hashem's agent, sent to cause us pain. It is the will of Hashem that we suffer, and the soul inspires us to accept this reality. In other words, one whose spiritual dimension plays a positive role in his life will be able to control his physical response to someone who insults him. The Chafetz Chaim, zl, explains that David Hamelech is called "the fourth leg of Hashem's Chariot," because he ignored the curse and insult of Shimi ben Geira, a privilege not granted even to Moshe Rabbeinu.

We ask Hashem to protect us from suffering because we realize that we are not on the level to request the yesurim shel ahavah, "afflictions of love," which the great Jews of earlier generations have requested. We understand that our capacity for studying Torah and performing Hashem's mitzvos properly will be hampered by suffering and illness. Yet, we acknowledge the great value of accepting this suffering with faith and conviction if it is decreed upon us.

Rav Pam relates that when Horav Shmuel Rozovsky, zl, was ill with the devastating disease to which he eventually succumbed, he received a letter of encouragement from the Steipler Gaon, Horav Yaakov Kanievsky, zl. In the letter, he wished Rav Shmuel a refuah sheleimah, offering a prayer that Hashem would relieve him of the agony he was enduring. He added that he was sending this wish in regard to any future pain that he might endure, but the suffering that he had already braved was an immense treasure and a source of great merit in the World to Come.

One individual, the Piascesner Rebbe, zl, who was the subject of much affliction, addressed the meaning of suffering as he attempted to provide hope, consolation and a message of inner joy to the many Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto during the bitter years of the Holocaust. He did not focus on suffering from the point of theological justification vis-?-vis the doctrine of reward and punishment, but rather on the concept of "afflictions of love." Drawing upon a number of citations in Chazal which speak of accepting suffering in love, he invoked the analogy of korbanos, the sacrifices that were offered in the Bais Hamikdash. He goes as far as to suggest that one may offer up his suffering as a gift to the Almighty. He views suffering as an occasion for the sufferer to give others the opportunity to demonstrate compassion and empathy. The empathizer, in turn, reciprocates with prayers and

expressions of concern on behalf of the sufferer. This reciprocal interaction has great cosmic significance.

He explains that on a fast day, we pray, "May the diminution of my fat and blood be considered a sacrifice offering." Indeed, all afflictions purge the individual of his sins, because they diminish his strength, fat and blood. All the suffering that Klal Yisrael endures is a form of sacrificial offering. These are rendered with love to the Almighty.

Undoubtedly, the notion of nobility in suffering is a concept that is above the reach of the average person. If one could, however, transcend the pain and deprivation to sense a feeling of contentment in the knowledge that what he is enduring is G-d-given, purposeful and purifying, he might then be able to experience nobility that comes with spiritual ascendancy which will enable him to dedicate his moments of pain to Hashem as a sacrifice that Hashem will hold dear.

We hope for the day when Hashem will remove illness and affliction from our midst and that we will merit joy and blessing for ourselves and for our families.

Upon the completion of the days of her purity for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring a sheep within its first year for an elevation - offering, and a young dove or a turtledove for a sin-offering. (12:6)

A yoledes, woman who has given birth, brings two korbanos: a sheep, as a Korban olah; and a fowl, as a Korban Chatas. Chazal explain that the Chatas, Sin-Offering, is brought because a woman who goes through childbirth suffers so much pain that she vows not to have more children. Such a vow is sinful. Breaking it, which is likely to occur, is more sinful. The reason for the Korban Olah, however, eludes us. The usual reasons that catalyze a Korban Olah do not apply to the yoledes.

Abarbanel explains that the Korban Olah is a form of gratitude to Hashem for granting her a child and for sparing her life through the ordeal of childbirth. This reasoning is supported by a number of Midrashim that obligate the woman to acknowledge Hashem's beneficence during her involvement in the motherhood process. While all this is true, a Korban Todah, Thanksgiving-Offering, seems more appropriate than an Olah. Horav Avigdor HaLevi Nebentzhal, Shlita, addresses this question and suggests two approaches. He explains that; either the criteria for bringing a Korban Todah do not apply to a yoledes; or the demands of halachah which apply to the Jewish woman do not correspond with the halachic application of a Korban Todah.

The first approach is based upon the halachah that one must consume a Korban Todah in one day and one night, while one has two days and one night to consume the usual Korban Shelamim, Peace-Offering. The reason for this is that gratitude must be spontaneous. One must express gratitude amidst joy and enthusiasm with a heart filled with song. Once one waits and allows his obligation to fester, a significant component of the appreciation is diminished. Thus, as the time for consuming the Todah passes, the level of simchah, joy, is decreased. Therefore, the Torah shortened the time span allotted for its consumption, so that it would be eaten at the time of heightened joy.

This halachah concerning the Korban Todah creates a problem for the yoledes, who cannot bring a korban for forty days for a male birth and eighty days for a female birth. After such a lengthy time passes, the emotion that permeated the yoledes at the time the miracle of birth took place might have waned. Without a doubt, if she desires to bring a Todah, she may, but to say that every yoledes should be obligated to bring a todah does not seem consistent with the halachos that apply to that korban.

Second, another halachah which pertains to the Korban Todah does not coincide with the manner in which a bas Yisrael, Jewish woman, should act publicly. Together with the korban Todah,

one must bring forty loaves, of which four are given to the Kohen. The Netziv, zl, explains why this korban necessitates so many breads. He says that since everything must be eaten in a short period of time, it behooves him to invite friends and relatives to share in the celebration of his good fortune. The greater number of participants involved in the celebration, the more magnified is the Kiddush Hashem, sanctification of Hashem's Name, which is the underlying purpose of Todah - thanking Hashem.

This halachah, however, does not concur with the halachos of tznius, modesty, that are the hallmark of the Jewish woman. It is inappropriate for a woman to call attention to herself in front of a crowd. The impropriety becomes more grievous when it is a married woman, which is the case by a yoledes. Kol kevudah bas melech penimah, "The entire glory of the daughter of the king lies on the inside." (Tehillim 45:14) This pasuk, which underscores much of the Torah's attitude toward the role of a woman, has been used by Chazal as a statement describing the private nature of the female role as well as a panegyric on the private nature of the religious experience in general. Indeed, the private sphere should be the dominant area of a woman's life. Implicit in the woman's creation was the idea that she focus on a specific trait of the human personality - tznius.

While a woman may certainly offer a Korban Todah, to oblige her to do so after childbirth would not be consistent with the parameters of hilchos tznius. This statement will surely be cause for considerable discussion, especially in light of the influence of western civilization on contemporary Jewish society. Rav Nebentzhal cites two mitzvos that women do not usually perform, specifically because of constraints on them made by the laws of tznius.

Women do not light the Chanukah lights unless there is no man in the house. Why? The Chasam Sofer explains that because of the criteria of pirsumei nissa, publicizing the miracle, one should light the candles outside, in public. It is not the manner of a woman to stand outside of her house and publicly light the candles. It is not tznius. How far we are removed from the Chasam Sofer's perspective on Jewish life!

Kiddush Levanah, sanctifying and blessing the New Moon, is a time-bound mitzvah. Yet, while women do recite a brachah upon performing a mitzvah asei she'hazman grama, time-bound mitzvah, they do not recite the Kiddush Levanah service. A number of reasons are cited. The Rama says that since this mitzvah should be performed publicly beneath the sky, preferably on the street, it is not consistent with the laws of tznius.

We have only to return to the sources to realize that to reverse a G-d-given role is to invite censure, both Divine and human. Regrettably, the effect of the society in which we live has somewhat distorted our perspective on what really is the G-d-given role of woman. Adam Harishon gave Chavah a name which he saw b'ruach Hakodesh, with Divine Inspiration, was to reflect her fundamental - though not necessarily exclusive - role in life: eim kol chai, mother of all life. Perhaps, if more people would accept this truth, there would be many fewer issues concerning our children's educational development.

He is to call out: "Contaminated, contaminated!" (13:45)

Rashi explains that the metzora must warn people to distance themselves from him lest his tumah, spiritual defilement, contaminate them. The following narrative indicates how far we are removed from reality and the definition of sin. Horav Elazar M. Shach, zl, related that his uncle Horav Issur Zalman Meltzer, zl, the venerable Rosh Hayeshivah of Eitz Chaim, would give a shmues, ethical discourse, on Motzoei Shabbos, during the month of Elul. The words that came from his heart entered the hearts of his students and deeply inspired them. The emotion that was felt in that room was

overwhelming.

One time, the Rosh Hayeshivah stood at the lectern. He looked at the crowd, declaring, "When a Sefer Torah is found to be pasul, invalid, we take a gartel, sash, and wrap and tie it around the outside of the Sefer. This way people will be aware that it is pasul, and they will not use it."

Suddenly, the Rosh Hayeshivah burst out in heartrending tears and screamed, "If so, how many gartlech, sashes, should we be wrapped with, so that people will realize how pasul we are? Yet, we still do not learn from our actions!" As soon as these words left Rav Issur Zalman's mouth, the entire assemblage broke down in bitter weeping. Rav Issur Zalman was a tzaddik. His students were talmidim of their revered rebbe. He was their religious role model. Yet, they all wept sincerely. What should we say?

On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (12:3)

One day the Sefas Emes asked one of his close chassidim to take his two young sons, (Rav) Avraham Mordechai and (Rav) Moshe Betzalel, to a certain Jew in Warsaw for a brachah, blessing. The person left the next day in search of this Jew whom he assumed must certainly be a famous tzaddik, righteous man. He arrived in Warsaw and, after some inquiry, he discovered that the individual he sought was actually a simple, common Jew.

The man, indeed, had no idea why the famous Rebbe of Gur would send his two sons to him for a blessing. Yet, at the behest of the messenger, he took the two boys and blessed them profusely. The chassid returned to Gur, thinking that this man must be one of the lamed-vav tzaddikim, thirty-six righteous Jews who live common lives and keep their piety secret.

When he returned to the Sefas Emes, he gathered up his courage to ask the Rebbe why he had sent his sons to this seemingly simple Jew. "True," answered the Sefas Emes, "he gives the impression of being a simple Jew which, indeed, he is. However, he once demonstrated such unparalleled devotion to a mitzvah that in Heaven he was granted tzaddik status. It happened that when his son was born, this Jew did not have penny to his name. He was so destitute that he could not afford to pay for the bare necessities to perform a Bris Milah. What did he do? He sold his bed and slept on the floor, so that he could have enough funds to pay for a Bris. He was left with nothing. Yet, he did not care. He was able to perform the mitzvah of bringing his son into the covenant of Avraham Avinu. This action caused such a stir in Heaven that he was granted a unique reward - every blessing that issues forth from his mouth will be fulfilled. In fact, he himself is unaware of his great power. Do you now understand why I sent my sons to him?"

We should now have an inkling of the significance of the mitzvah of Bris Milah and the reward for adhering to its precepts. If a person will have on the skin of his flesh a s'eis, or a sapachas, or a baheres. (13:2)

In the Pleasant Way, a collection of some of the shmuessen, ethical discourses, of Horav Avraham Pam, zl, a meaningful shmuess focuses on the root of lashon hora, evil speech. In his inimitable manner, Rav Pam lovingly explains and guides us concerning how to distance ourselves from the harmful effects of this dreadful sin. He explains the juxtaposition of Parashas Tazria, which

discusses the laws of tzaraas, upon Parashas Shemini, which addresses the laws of kashrus. Just as we should be meticulous in what we ingest, we should likewise take great care in what emerges from our mouths. The consumption of forbidden foods causes *timtum halev*, a spiritual malady that severely hampers one from serving Hashem. Forbidden speech does the same. We just do not realize its harmful effects, because we are so oblivious to our participation.

While in recent years there has been a strong movement to raise public awareness in regard to *lashon hora*, its effects and consequences, to a certain extent the focus is on the mouth, when actually it should be on a person's eyes and heart. The mouth only speaks the faults that the eyes have seen and the bad feelings which the heart has felt. The mouth expresses the jealousy and insensitivity of the heart, and the overall malignancy in our eyes, when we view another Jew in the wrong light.

When one cares about another Jew, he overlooks his deficiencies; he glosses over his shortcomings. We must train ourselves to react to another person's failings as if they were those of our own children. We overlook and defend our children from their critics. Why should not all Jews be granted a similar dispensation?

By focusing on the positive attitudes of every person, we curtail the urge to speak *lashon hora*. Looking for opportunities to speak well of another person - seeing the good side of that individual, finding a reason to justify his seemingly inappropriate behavior - is a sure way to prevent *lashon hora* from occurring.

Rav Pam comments that guarding one's tongue is not limited exclusively to avoiding *lashon hora*. Avoiding *onoas devarim*, verbal abuse, is equally important. The *Sefer Hachinuch* writes that one should not say words that cause pain and shame to another Jew from which he cannot defend himself. Included is making another person the subject of a joke or a sharp retort. This form of harmful speech is not necessarily intended to hurt. It is only the careless, thoughtless expression of a person who, if he would think twice, would never have said it. Yet, he did not think, he did not care, and, therefore, he hurt someone's feelings to such a point that he has no idea how deeply and how painfully. This is forbidden speech, thoughtless speech, harmful speech.

Rav Pam cites the following incident to illustrate the damage of words spoken inconsiderately: A young girl, Malke'le, saved a portion of her weekly allowance, so that she could buy her mother a small gift. Finally, she had amassed enough money to buy her mother a small, inexpensive trinket. This gift meant so much to Malke'le.

Malke'le brought the gift home all wrapped in colorful wrapping paper. Her mother was in the kitchen preparing dinner, so Malke'le placed the gift prominently in the middle of the dining room table. When her mother walked in she noticed the gift. "Where did this come from, Malke'le?" her mother asked. Malke'le was very excited when she answered, "I bought you a present, Mommy. Please open it up. You will love it."

The mother opened the package and noticed that it was a simple trinket. Not realizing her lack of self-control, the mother blurted out, "Malke'le, why did you waste your money on this? It is worthless junk. Who needs it?"

One can only imagine what went through the young girl's mind. She was devastated. She wanted so much to please her mother, to demonstrate her love and appreciation. So, she did not know the value of the trinket. Is that a sin? She meant well, and her actions should have been encouraged and lauded. What possessed her mother to act so heartlessly, so cruelly? Is this the action of a mean mother - or a thoughtless mother? Surely, no mother wants to hurt her child, but we often forget - or we are under pressure, and we act and speak thoughtlessly.

Rav Pam extends this thought to all relationships, especially the delicate relationship of

marriage. Consider the following situation: A spouse "remembers" a birthday or an anniversary and buys a present. It just so happens that it was a poor choice. Let us play the Malke'le scenario at home between husband and wife. We can imagine the disappointment and hurt that an inconsiderate comment or even a sour face can create. The individual who takes a positive outlook on life will only see good and will not "lose it." He will give credit for good intentions, even if the result was not that perfect. He understands what goes on in the mind of the giver. His intentions were noble, and that is all that matters.

Last, little things make a world of difference in someone's life: a compliment, a "thank you." It is so easy to do; yet, for some individuals, it is almost impossible to give a compliment. It is almost as if complimenting another person takes away from his own stature. "Thank you" are two words that cost nothing, but mean so much. While it is important that we are meticulous in eradicating any form of forbidden speech, we should not lose focus of our obligation towards positive speech.

If a tzaraas affliction will be in a person. (13:9)

The laws of tzaraas, a spiritual malady which manifests itself in a physical illness which mimics leprosy, is the result of "speech problems." People who do not use their G-d-given tongues appropriately, such that they disparage and slander, are visited with tzaraas. Volumes have been written addressing the sin of lashon hora, evil speech. What about lashon tov, good speech, positive speech, words that heal and soothe? The power of speech is a special gift that we must learn to appreciate. A good word can lift a spirit and save a life. How often do we regret not saying the right thing? A kind word at the right moment can make a world of difference in someone's life. A secular author once wrote, "The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone." What a powerful statement! How often do we regret not saying something nice - to our mate, our child, our friend, our student, our parent? While it is necessary to focus on the effects and consequences of lashon hora, it is equally important not to ignore the positive effects of lashon tov. In this country, referring to an individual by his first name is commonplace. The prefix "Mr." and "Reb" have long disappeared from a society where respect, etiquette and refinement are considered archaic. We do not realize that by referring to someone with the prefix "Reb," we are adding a sense of respect and dignity to his name - and, for some people, this is very important.

Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, the Kamenitzer Mashgiach of Eretz Yisrael, left a legacy of respect for every human being. The paragon of humility, he made every person feel that he was great. I write this as a personal testimony to the few times he came to my home. He did not enter as an esteemed Rosh Yeshivah, which he certainly was. He spoke meekly, with refinement and modesty, inquiring about my work. He always made it a point to speak to my wife. He was an individual who embodied everything Chazal teach us about the qualities and attributes of a Torah leader.

During the shivah, seven-day mourning period, after his sudden passing, the common man, the "regular Jew," came forth to articulate his praise. One such individual who came emphasized Rav Stern's ability to use the right word at the right time. He said, "You think that he was only your father. Well, he was also my father. The only one in my entire life who called me "Reb" Yaakov was your father. No one ever addressed me with the respectable title of "Reb" except him. He would listen to my chiddushim, novellae, and then tell me, Ihr zogt gut, "You are saying a good thought." Indeed, one Shabbos someone came over to me and said, "Rav Moshe Aharon told me a chiddush in your name."

This is the definition of real humility: accepting all people, listening to all people and speaking

respectfully to all people. The one simple title of "Reb," added to this person's name, changed his life! It gave him stature, knowing that a gadol, Torah giant, appreciated him. It is incredible how easy it is to help another person and equally shocking how few of us act upon it. In the Talmud Bava Basra 9:2, Chazal teach us that one who gives a pruta, penny, to a poor man receives six blessings, while one who cheers him up receives eleven blessings. Rav Moshe Aharon derived from here that encouraging another person is greater than giving him money. A beggar will regrettably not become wealthy from the few pennies he receives, but a few well-chosen words of encouragement have the power to elevate him from a life of poverty and dejection. Very often I hear the excuse, "But I do not know what to say." Knowing the right words to say to the sick, bereaved, the downtrodden, is difficult. Even seasoned professionals are at times at a loss for the right words. In truth, I think it is just being there, a smile, a reassurance, an offer of assistance that is all that is needed. People who are ill want to know that they are not alone. People who are bereaved need reassurance. People that are broken need to be encouraged. Long visits do more for the visitor than the visited. It is just being there that counts.

I recently read about Horav Yitzchak Yeruchem Diskin, zl, the avi yesomim, father of orphans, who founded the famous Diskin Orphanage in Yerushalayim. He had a special way of dealing with his unfortunate charges. It is related that just before he moved into the orphanage's new building, he began to weep uncontrollably. He explained, "A shoemaker tends to be careless with shoes, and a book-binder frequently is careless with holy books. Who knows if I, too, will treat orphans with less feeling if I have to deal with them all day long?"

Once, a couple of young orphan girls were staying with him, since the orphanage was filled to capacity. His wife personally cared for the young girls. Once Rav Yitzchak Yeruchem noticed that one of the girls began to sob after his wife bathed her. Concerned, he asked his wife, "Perhaps you were careless and allowed some soap to get into her eyes?" His wife looked at him with shock, "I am so careful to make sure this would never happen." Finally, he went over to the little girl and asked, "Why do you cry after your bath? Is my wife not taking proper care of you?"

"No, no Rebbe!" the child cried. "The Rebbetzin is so kind and gentle. My mother, alehah ha'shalom, may she rest in peace, did not watch over me with such care as the Rebbetzin. It is just that my mother used to kiss my head after my bath, and each time I remember this, I begin to cry." All the child needed was a kiss - not a speech, a pat on the shoulder - not a lecture, a smile - not a harangue.

Lashon hora can destroy a life. Yet, words, if used correctly, can also create happiness and sustain life. We have only to look around, extend ourselves to those around us, and we will see the difference a good word can make.

He is a person with tzaraas, he is contaminated, the Kohen shall declare him contaminated, his affliction is upon his head. (13:44)

In the various forms of tzaraas mentioned previously in the parsha, the Torah has either written *tamei hu*, he is ritually impure, or *v'timo ha'Kohen*, the Kohen shall declare him *tamei*. Regarding *nigei ha'rosh*, the plague that sets itself upon one's head, the Torah emphasizes *ish tzarua hu*, he is a person with tzaraas, and then reiterates the status of impurity with the words, "The Kohen shall declare him contaminated." Why such emphasis upon tzaraas ha'rosh?

The Netziv, zl, explains that unlike the other forms of tzaraas, which are a punishment for *lashon hora*, evil speech, tzaraas ha'rosh is visited upon one who is deficient in his thoughts, reflecting a lack of *emunah*, faith in the Almighty. One whose faith in Hashem is questionable is a person from whom we should distance ourselves even more than from he who speaks *lashon hora*. The slanderer

who disparages with his mouth - whose mouth is a fountain of evil, spewing forth venom, invectives and defamation of people's character - hurts. He hurts himself. He hurts others, but he does not establish disciples that follow in his ways.

The individual who has a serious problem in his emunah, whose mind is perverted with heretical thoughts, who questions the Almighty, is not satisfied with his own apostasy. He has to develop followers, to increase his tainted ideas, to inspire others with his crippled mind. The Torah is concerned with such a person. His effect is far-reaching. We are admonished to stay clear of him and his ideas. He is an ish tzarua, a person with tzaraas.

When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male. (12:2)

Presenting various perspectives on the human condition, the Midrash cites the pasuk in Tehillim (139:5), "Back and front You have fashioned me," as referring to human life. "Back" refers to the last day of Creation, while "front" refers to the beginning of Creation. If man is worthy and leads a life of virtue, he is told, "You preceded creation," since it was all created for him. If he sins and is, consequently, found to be unworthy, he is told, "Even a gnat preceded you; even an earthworm preceded you." Why really was man created last - after all other creatures? His neshamah was created on the first day. His body, however, was last in the order of creation. The Midrash implies that man is to reflect upon the fact that even the lowest creation preceded him.

Man thinks that he is everything. His brilliance, his knowledge, his ability: they all join together to produce the crown of creation. All of this is imaginary, because no one is as weak and as dependent as the human being. Even the gnat preceded him. Man must search and work for his food. It is not ready-made and prepared for him, as it is for all other creatures. The Kesav Sofer compares this to a gravely ill patient in a hospital. The nurses and doctors minister to his every need. He is connected to many machines, each performing a vital function that keeps him alive. A young, innocent child who confronts this scene might envy the special care that the patient is receiving. He would also like to get such attention! That is the folly of our lives. We think that with all the inventions and gadgets that modern science has made available for us, we are better off than the simple animal who must fend for himself. We forget, however, that the animal world really has everything ready-made and accessible. We need all of the help that we can get. Yes, at times the most insignificant creature takes precedence over man.

How, then, are we to understand the other side of the coin, that if man is worthy, he takes precedence over the creatures of creation? The answer, explains the Kesav Sofer, lies in one word: purpose. True, other creatures have a soft, easy life. Everything is prepared for them. They do not have to go out and labor to eke out a living. But, is there any significance to their lives? Do they have goals or objectives to their lives, or do they merely exist without purpose, without reason for living?

Man has a matarah, a raison d'etre, a purpose for his existence. It is to serve Hashem, to study His Torah, to gain access to Olam Habah, the World to Come. One thing is true, however: He who lives for the wrong reasons, whose values, goals and objectives are somehow confused; he who thinks life revolves around the almighty dollar and the temporary power it generates, who is obsessed with fleeting honor which is as artificial as the people who grant it, he really is on a lower plateau than the lowliest creature.

On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (12:2)

The mitzvah of Milah, circumcision, leaves an indelible mark on a Jew, one that is with him throughout his life. It is a mitzvah which connects generations, since one's father is obligated to make sure that his son is circumcised. It is a rite of passage for a Jew, a mitzvah for which Jews throughout the millennia have died. Many stories demonstrate the Jew's commitment to this special mitzvah. The following is a very poignant story, which demonstrates not only Jewish resolve, but Jewish commitment under the most trying circumstances.

Horav Arye Levin, zl, was accustomed to go to shul early on Erev Shabbos, so that he could recite Shir Hashirim in a relaxed atmosphere with great joy. Once, he sat next to his rebbe Horav Chaim Berlin, zl, the rav of Yerushalayim, and together they recited the Shir Hashirim.. They came to the pasuk, "Behold, you are beautiful My beloved; behold, you are beautiful, your eyes are doves" (1:15). This pasuk extols Klal Yisrael for their deeds and resolve and liken its leadership, the "eyes" of the nation, to doves, who remain faithful to their mates, Rav Chaim's eyes began to tear. "Why are you crying?" Rav Arye asked his rebbe. "These pesukim praise Klal Yisrael's faithfulness. It is no reason to cry." Rav Chaim explained his display of emotion with the following story:

"When I was rav in Moscow, a distinguished gentleman once came over to me and asked to speak to me in private. He related that his wife had just given birth to a boy, and would I honor him by being the Mohel, ritual circumciser. Since this request was not uncommon, I was somewhat taken aback by his desire for secrecy. He soon explained that his business was in the wholesale vending of crucifixes. It would certainly not serve his business well to acknowledge publicly that he was Jewish. A public affair was definitely out of the question.

"I agreed to perform the Bris in secrecy. The man's servants were given a day off and the father and I attended to the ceremony. Afterwards, I asked the father to notify me on the third day as to the child's welfare. On the third day, the father arrived with the good news that the baby was well. He also brought an envelope of cash to pay for my services. I refused his money, stating that I do not take remuneration for this mitzvah. The father thought I was really waiting for more money, which he immediately gave me. I said, "No - I do not take money for the mitzvah of Milah." Before the father left, I asked him to explain his behavior to me: "I visited your home and did not notice even the slightest testament to your Jewish heritage. Why would you risk everything for the mitzvah of Milah? Why chance exposure after so many years of hiding your true faith?" He responded, 'Rebbe, I know that I have distanced myself from the faith of my ancestors. I do not know if I personally can ever go back to my roots. One thing I do know for certain: my son will never know his Jewish heritage. I was, at least, raised among Jews. He has nothing of the sort. If one day in the future, when he grows up and meets other Jews who will inspire him to come back, I do not want to be the one that precluded his return. He was born a Jew, and I will raise him as such. I cannot deprive my son of his legacy.' "Now you know," said Rav Chaim, "why I cry when I recite these pesukim. As the dove remains faithful to its dovecote, never flying farther than its eyes can still see the dovecote, so, too, do our People retain their inner commitment to Hashem, regardless of how far they have strayed."

He must dwell in solitude, his camp shall be outside of the camp. (13:46)

One would think that enough has been said and written about lashon hora, slanderous speech. Everyone knows what it is, the seriousness of this sin and the tragic effect it has on those involved in it. Yet, this does not seem to prevent the baal lashon hora, slanderer, from plying his trade. Is there anything left to be said that might have an effect on the baal lashon hora? There might be.

As punishment for the baal lashon hora's evil words, he is sent away from the community to live in solitude until that day that his tzaraas, spiritually inflicted leprosy, is gone. He may now prepare for re-entry. What does living alone do for the metzora and how does it change his outlook on slanderous speech?

When we ponder the mindset of one who speaks lashon hora, we discover a characteristic of his personality that for some is probably the primary factor that motivates them to disparage others. They think they endear themselves to people when they are the primary source of information. They feel that people want to engage them in conversation because they will provide them with something interesting to talk about. Who is not curious to hear juicy gossip about others? He wants to be the medium for disseminating this information, thereby providing for himself a constant following of "friends."

To a certain extent and for a short term, he is probably correct. People enjoy, and some even thrive on gossip about others. Does a relationship, however, based upon smut, gossip and disparaging others really endure? Does anybody with a drop of intelligence in his head want such a person for a friend? True, we might choose to listen because that is a human shortcoming; but who really wants to call such a person a friend? He is dangerous. He is destructive. He is sick. He may be the delight of the evening, but he is never someone we choose to invite to our home or with whom we associate on a regular basis.

People with a modicum of refinement would fare well to distance themselves from the slanderer. Indeed, anyone who keeps company with a baal lashon hora is probably as degenerate as he. In the end, the slanderer will be left alone, without friends. No one wants to be a friend with someone who will stab him in the back the next day. The metzora's excommunication from the community is an appropriate and fitting punishment. Maybe, by being alone, he will come to realize the true effect of his evil tongue.

In the Midrash, Chazal cite the pasuk in Tehillim 139, "Back and front You have fashioned me." They explain that "back" refers to the first day of Creation. If a person so merits, he is told "You came before the entire Creation." If he is not worthy, however, he is told "Even a gnat preceded you; even a snail/worm preceded you." The Midrash is addressing the placement of the laws of tumah, ritual impurity. It is referring to the laws of the tumah which emanates from human contact with dead animals. Just as humans followed animals in the order of creation, so too, the laws relating to humans follow those of animals. Man must always remember his direction in life: from where he has originated and to where he will one day go. The commentators explain that Hashem intentionally created the animals prior to man, so that everything would be prepared for his arrival. If he makes use of his spiritual dimension to rise above his animal instincts, he is lauded. If he defers to his base tendencies, he is reminded that even the lowly animals preceded him. His arrogance in sin is unfounded, because even the lowest creation preceded him. We must, however, endeavor to understand why Chazal chose these two insignificant creatures for their analogy. What is the purpose of this seemingly redundant text?

Horav Baruch Shimon Schneerson, Shlita, Rosh Yeshivas Tshebin, explains that these two creatures distinguish themselves from all others. In the Talmud Gittin, 56b, Chazal refer to the gnat as a "briaiah kalah," tiny creature, because it has an orifice for taking in, but no orifice for excreting. It cannot relieve itself of its waste material. Thus, it is comprised completely of waste! This is in contrast to all of the other creatures that have the ability to separate their nourishment from their waste and to discharge their excrement. The snail has another interesting characteristic. When it relieves itself, it disintegrates. In other words, both of these creatures lack the ability to distinguish the good from the bad, the nourishment from the waste.

Man's purpose on this earth is just that: to delineate between good and evil and to bring about a

tikun, improvement, for the good that is expunged from the bad. Chazal are conveying to us man's focus in life. If he has not been able to purify himself, to purge the good of the evil, to improve his G-d given qualities, then he is worse than the gnat and the snail who are also unable to rid themselves of waste. They, at least, have one attribute over man: they preceded him in the order of creation.

Speak to Bnei Yisrael, saying: when a woman conceives and gives birth to a male. (12:2)

In the Talmud Niddah 30b, Chazal relate that a child is taught the entire Torah while it is in its mother's womb. As a baby is about to be born, an angel slaps him on the mouth, causing him to forget all the Torah it has learned. Upon studying this Chazal, we are confronted with two questions. First, why does the child study Torah as a fetus? Would it not be more appropriate to study Torah in the Olam Ha'neshamos, world of the souls, before the soul is separated from its Heavenly abode and placed into the body of the unborn child? Second, why does the angel cause the child to lose its Torah knowledge?

If he is not going to retain the knowledge, why should he study it at all?

Horav Eliyahu Meir Bloch, zl, explains that while the neshamah is "situated" in the eternal world it is indeed exposed to immense spiritual knowledge. It is certainly privy to the greatest reservoir of spiritual wisdom. Yet, it lacks the "perception" regarding those mitzvos that relate to the body, to the material aspect of human life. This lack of perception prevents the neshamah from fully grasping the meaning of mitzvos involving the physical dimension. When the soul is already within the body of a fetus, although it is not yet born and exposed to the reality of human existence, it is more capable of comprehending this aspect of mitzvah performance. While he immediately forgets this "lesson" when he enters the world, it has already been engraved in his soul. When this infant grows up and studies Torah with great toil and dedication, the knowledge that he has absorbed before birth will be activated. The "klipos", outer spiritual "shells," that have concealed this knowledge will disintegrate. In other words, a person's essence is Torah; his neshamah has assimilated the pre-birth lessons into his essential character. As he studies Torah with greater depth and passion, he discovers the innate Torah within himself.

We now understand Chazal's comment in the Talmud Moed Katan 25b, regarding the pasuk in Bereishis 5:1, "This is the account of the descendants of Adam." The Torah seems to compare man to a sefer, book. This leads Chazal to remark, "Man is a living Sefer Torah. Thus, one who is present during yetzias neshamah, as a person takes his last living breath, must tear kria, rend his garment." This is to be compared to a Sefer Torah that has been burned. Are Chazal comparing every person to a Sefer Torah? Perhaps this appellation applies to the few, unique Torah scholars of each generation. To make such a broad statement demands an explanation. Accepting the above thesis, we can understand the Sefer Torah aspect of each individual. His neshamah is so suffused with Torah, it literally becomes a Sefer Torah. Each individual must attempt to remove the outer layer that conceals his true essence. For some it might be simple, while for others it may be more difficult. We all, however, hold the Torah within our spiritual psyche.

On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (12:3)

The mitzvah of milah takes precedence over other mitzvos. The child is circumcised on Shabbos if that is the eighth day. This infant's induction into the Covenant of Avraham Avinu adds one more Jew to champion the dominant role that Shabbos plays in our lives. Chazal go so far as to say that

if a tzaraas, plague, is found at the foreskin, the mitzvah takes place, even if it means removing the tzaraas - which is ordinarily prohibited. Chazal feel that the therapeutic effect of milah will even eliminate negaim from our bodies. How are we to understand this? What really is milah's significance, and what message does it convey?

Hashem appeared to Avraham in the Plains of Mamre, because it was Mamre, one of Avraham's three friends, who advised him to follow Hashem's command and undergo milah. When Avraham took counsel with his three friends, Anar, Eshkol, and Mamre, Anar said, "You are one hundred years old. Why would you want to cause unnecessary pain for yourself?" Eshkol said, "Why would you want to call unnecessary attention to yourself in the presence of all your enemies?" Mamre said, "The G-d who saved you from the fiery oven, who sustained you in time of hunger, who rescued you in battle with the kings, instructs you to perform this commandment. How can you refuse Him?"

Avraham Avinu became a Jew through the act of milah. One should not think that he needed the support of his friends before he would listen to Hashem. Avraham was simply sensing for public reaction. The act of milah was the greatest act of Kiddush Hashem, sanctifying Hashem's Name. He did what was demanded of him, because to be a Jew means: to muster the courage to sanctify Hashem's Name; to realize the demands of Jewish living in public; to forego public approval. To paraphrase Horav Shlomo Breuer, zl: "To invite the scorn and curse which are the frequent lot of the Jew in public life is an important aspect of being a Jew."

Avraham disregarded Anar's advice, "Why change when you are so old, having established habits and a way of life?" Avraham could not live in the past; he needed to go forward and grow, even if there was limited time left. He was also very unimpressed with Eshkol's fear, "What will everybody say?" This cowardly attitude has plagued so many of our co-religionists who are afraid of public observance, because of what "others" might think. Only Mamre approved of Avraham's plan to dedicate himself and his household to Hashem, oblivious to the criticism caused by his public statement.

This is the essence of Bris Milah. It accompanies the Jew at every juncture of his life, demanding that every thought, every move, every decision, be guided and governed by Divine Will. Thus, he realizes his constant proximity to the Almighty. This intimate bond dedicates its bearer to Shabbos, to a profound understanding of the creation of the world by the Almighty and to its implications. It also develops his social life in the framework of love and justice towards his fellowman. Hatred, evil talk, slander, social abuse are foreign to one who functions in such close proximity with the Creator. The evil that spawns negaim are social ills that are truly neutralized by the message of bris milah.

On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (12:3) In the specific Bircas Ha'mazon, grace after meals, which one recites following the festive meal accompanying a Bris Milah, there is a prayer consisting of six "Ho Rachamans," "the Compassionate One." The first Ho Rachaman is a prayer on behalf of the parents, "The Compassionate One! May He bless the father and mother of the child, and may they merit to raise him, to educate him, and to make him wise, from the eighth day onward may his blood be pleasing; and may Hashem, his G-d, be with him." This prayer is directed primarily towards the father of the child. Why then do we recite the phrase at the end, "from the eighth day onward may his blood be pleasing"? This applies to the "rach ha'nimol," infant who was circumcised, not the father. Why is this inserted in the prayer for the father?

The Belzer Rebbe, Rav Yehoshua, zl, responds, citing an exposition from his father the Sar Shalom of Belz. He explains the pesukim in Bereishis 17:7, in which Hashem says to Avraham Avinu, "And as for you, you shall keep My covenant - you and your offspring throughout their generations" in the following manner: The mitzvah of milah is unique in that it is the only mitzvah that a Jew performs on his own body while he has as yet no cognitive ability to have the proper intentions for Hashem.

Hence, at the time it is being performed, the mitzvah of milah is not really executed b'shleimus, with perfection. Something is missing: the infant's acquiescence, his cognizance and agreement to fulfill this mitzvah with all his heart. When this infant grows up and himself ushers his own child into the covenant of Avraham Avinu, he clearly indicates that the Bris Milah that happened to him many years before was carried out b'tachlis ha'sheleimus, with ultimate perfection.

This is the meaning of Hashem's comment to Avraham, "And as for you, you shall keep My covenant:" Since you are an adult in complete control of your faculties, you have the knowledge and intention to perform the mitzvah of milah with sheleimus. "You and your offspring:" If you want to be certain that your offspring will fulfill this mitzvah with the same degree of perfection on the eighth day -- when they as yet have no ability to think and comprehend what is occurring -- then it must be performed "l'dorosom," throughout the generations. They must be sure to perform the mitzvah of milah on their offspring, thereby indicating their own accord with this mitzvah. When a father performs the mitzvah on his son, he completes and perfects the mitzvah that was performed on him when he was an infant.

We now understand the text of the "Ho Rachaman." "From the eighth day onward, may his blood be pleasing" is a reference to the father's blood that flowed during his Bris Milah many years previously. Now, as he circumcises his son of his own freewill, he completes and perfects his own Bris Milah.

If a person will have in the skin of his flesh a s'eis, or a sapachas, or a baheres, and it will become a tzaraas affliction on the skin of his flesh. (13:2)

Our Chazal view negaim, plagues, as Hashem's punishment primarily for the sins of the tongue, lashon hora, and generally for seven cardinal sins which pertain to our social life. The very organs of the human body which Hashem has given to us in order to serve Him: to practice modesty and truth; to perform good deeds and justice; to spread kindness, truth and peace, have become the bearer of the opposite of these virtues. Hashem indicates His displeasure with this person, dismissing him from participation in the Mikdash until the individual has realized the folly of his deeds, until he has achieved a sense of true self-judgement. Anyone on whose person or clothing appears a plague, is receiving a Heavenly sign that his social behavior has invoked Hashem's indignation. No longer is he accepted in Hashem's spiritual social circle. He has engendered strife and discord among people. He does not belong in a community which he is trying to undermine.

The negaim convey a message - one that should be heeded - immediately. One law, however, seems to be inconsistent with our thesis. According to halachah, even a tinok ben yom echad, child from the first day of his life, can be affected by a plague with all of its consequences. Certainly the concept of negaim -- with their early warning system -- does not apply to an infant. What could an infant have done that would incur such grave punishment? Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, explains that children who have not reached an age of sufficient maturity to be called to account for their social shortcomings are certainly not punished on their own accord. Children, however, as a result of their immature dependence, are most likely to mimic their parents' character. These youngsters are the tender shoots that would and should grow upon the foundation of their parents' actions. In other words, what occurs to the children should serve as a warning to the parents. It is a more piercing and poignant admonition. A nega on the forehead of an innocent child is the most terrifying warning to parents. It glares at them, silently screaming, "Look at what you have done to me!"

Parents are compelled to examine their lifestyle, to consider what picture of life their social

behavior will refer to their child. People might ignore the warning signs that strike them, their homes, their clothes. They cannot turn away, however, from the pain and disfigurement of their child. To paraphrase Horav Hirsch, "For your child's sake, better yourself; for the sake of your children, become good!" We are accountable for the social imperfections that cling to our children. There is no more effective warning than a terrible nega that disfigures an innocent child. How can we awaken parents to realize and accept the responsibilities of parenthood?

While these words are stated in regard to tzaraas, they are equally true in regard to all parental behavior. We have a moral responsibility to organize our behavior in the realization that we do not live in a vacuum. We do not live only for ourselves. Our actions plant seeds in the minds and psyches of our closest and most intimate students - our children. Yes, they are the young shoots that grow into the vibrant leaders of tomorrow - if we give them the opportunity. The way we act will be reflected in the lives of our children. Let us see to it that we follow Hashem's script.

When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, she shall be contaminated for a period of seven days. (12:2)

The laws regarding the human being are consistent with those dealing with all other creatures. Rashi quotes the Midrash that notes that the creation of man mirrored the creation of animals and birds. In connection with this, the Midrash cites the pasuk in Tehillim (139:5), "Achor vokedem tzartani," "Behind and before You have fortified me." This pasuk can be read, "You have formed me," employing the root word "yatzar", creation, rather than "tzar" which means to fortify. The latter term is a reference to human creation, which took place both before and after that of other creatures. Man's neshamah predated Creation, whereas Hashem created his body on the sixth day. The laws that address man's spirit take precedence over the laws concerning animals which, in turn, precede the laws that address man's physical being. Man's laws bracket the works of Creation, alluding to an important lesson. Man's level of morality could distinguish him so that he stands above all the other creations. He can dominate the entire world from his exalted pedestal. He can also slip and fall backward. Indeed, a lowly gnat is considered more important than a man who has fallen - backwards.

Let us attempt to grasp the words of Chazal. Is a gnat - or any creature for that matter - more important than man, even when man is at the nadir of depravity? Man is the crown of Creation! The world was created for him. Can a lowly insect have more distinction than a human being? Horav Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, Shlita, explains that Hashem's value system is "somewhat" different than ours. Hashem views the fulfillment of one's purpose as the yardstick for measuring success. Thus, even if the difference between two creatures is vast, it is insignificant. The determining factor for achievement in life is the fruition of one's objective. The gnat has a purpose - to exist on this world - not to do anything - just merely to exist. That is its purpose - and it has achieved its objective in life. The human being who does not maintain a moral life, who does not live by a code of justice and decency; the Jew who does not fulfill his G-d-given purpose, is not as good as the gnat. The gnat made it - it has fulfilled its aim in life - man did not. We should view ourselves through the prism of the Torah, a perspective that looks at where we are in the context of where we should be.

On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (12:3)

The mitzvah of Bris Milah, ritual circumcision, is unique in that it has been accepted throughout the generations with joy. Our people have responded to the call of Bris Milah with mesiras nefesh - self sacrifice. The imprint of the Bris Milah is a permanent imprimatur on the child, identifying him as a partner in the Covenant and a member of the Jewish Nation. It is a sign that stays with the child throughout his entire life. The circumcision is an event marked with pride and joy - regardless of the circumstances surrounding the event. It is one mitzvah that all Jews, even those who have otherwise become alienated from Jewish observance, have continued to embrace.

While we are proud to execute this mitzvah, it is regrettable that the actual circumcision - which has always been performed by a G-d-fearing, scholarly Jew - has been relegated to individuals who do not fit any of these criteria. It is not the purpose of this paper to be a sounding board, reacting to Klal Yisrael's ills. It is painful, however, to observe a mitzvah that for thousands of years has meant so much to us, a mitzvah for which so many Jews have risked their lives, carried out by professionals who are either not Jewish or who have no respect for the Torah. Our People have been persecuted throughout the millenia, but we have remained faithful throughout to this unique mitzvah. We should not destroy the halachic and moral essence of this mitzvah by having it performed by one who denigrates - or at best does not represent - the message of the covenant of Bris Milah.

Many stories relate the overwhelming mesiras nefesh our People have demonstrated for Bris Milah. There is one very poignant narrative that took place during the Holocaust that was told over many times by the Bluzhover Rebbe,zl. It is the hope of this writer that as a result of the world-wide dissemination of this paper to members of the entire Jewish spectrum of belief, someone who might otherwise not have chosen to have his son's ritual circumcision performed "ritually" by a G-d fearing mohel, will be moved to do so.

Rabbi Yisrael Spira,zl, the Bluzhover Rebbe, was sawing wood as a member of a slave-labor contingent in the notorious Janowska Road camp. One morning, on Hoshanah Rabah, the forest was filled with terrible, heartrending cries. It soon became known that a children's "aktion", selection, was occurring. The Nazi beasts were grabbing little children away from their mothers to be slaughtered like cattle in a nearby field. One can imagine the heartbroken mothers as their children were torn from them. The mothers knew it would only be a little while before they, too, would follow the tragic path of their children. As the procession of weeping, distraught mothers and children came closer to the Bluzhover's labor group, one mother broke ranks. Clutching her infant in her arms, she cried out, "Yidden! Have mercy, give me a knife!"

Assuming the woman sought to commit suicide, the Rebbe attempted to dissuade her. A Nazi officer, infamous for his sadistic behavior, approached the woman and handed her his penknife, hoping to enjoy the last moments of this hapless woman's life.

They did not know the Jewish spirit. Clutching the knife in her hand, the woman carefully placed her child on the ground and circumcised her baby son. In a clear, loud, emotion-filled voice she recited the Bircas Ha'milah, to the loud response of Amen by all those assembled.

This is the way one Jewish mother inducted her son into the covenant of our People. We should learn from the mesiras nefesh of our forbears to perform this most precious mitzvah according to Jewish law - not to our convenience.

And he shall call, "Unclean, unclean." (13:45)

The metzora is spiritually contaminated. He is to remain secluded from society, calling out to

others not to come close to him. "Tamei, tamei," he calls out, notifying people of his present state. The Shelah Ha'Kadosh extends the interpretation of this pasuk by placing a "comma" between the first and second "tamei." The pasuk would now read, "V'tamei - tamei yikra." One who disparages others, who calls others tamei is generally projecting his own blemished character. In other words, the model behind most lashon hora is none other than oneself. He who has a character flaw will knowingly and unknowingly project this deficiency on to others. He will look for it, and if he does not find it, he will fabricate it.

An individual sees himself reflected in his friends' behavior. The Baal Shem Tov says that one who is inherently good perceives good wherever he goes. One who is flawed sees flaws in everyone. Moreover, whatever we see is essentially a message for us regarding our own behavior. Nothing is coincidental. Indeed, we should look for Hashem's message throughout our every endeavor.

When a woman who conceives and gives birth to a male...on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (12:2,3)

The commentators, each in his own unique manner, offer various reasons that one is required to perform the *bris milah* on the eighth day. One of the fundamental reasons is to make sure that the child has lived through a *Shabbos*. The *kedushah*, sanctity, of the seventh day/*Shabbos* infuses a holiness into the child which prepares him for entrance into *Klal Yisrael*. **Horav Mordechai Gifter, Shlita**, notes that while on the one hand we infer the remarkable *kedushah* of *Shabbos*, we also note that *milah bizmanah*, a circumcision performed at the designated time, the eighth day, overrides *Shabbos*. One may desecrate *Shabbos* in order to perform a *bris milah*. This indicates the awesome significance of *bris milah*. Even the fundamental *mitzvah* of *Shabbos*, which proclaims and attests that Hashem is the Creator and Ruler of the universe, is secondary to *bris milah*.

Because *bris milah* has long been considered the seminal rite of passage for a Jewish child, Jews --regardless of their commitment to religious observance-- have upheld this *mitzvah*, even under the most challenging circumstances. A number of stories of faith and courage demonstrate *Klal Yisrael's* singular devotion to this particular *mitzvah*. There is one story that took place during the Holocaust that characterizes the Jew's commitment to *bris milah* and to the affirmation of Judaism that accompanies it.

While a Jew is often confronted with challenges to his faith, during times of persecution and pain his conviction is tested to a greater degree. The period of the Holocaust, in whose specter we all live, was a time during which the conventional challenge to our belief was magnified to great proportion. Indeed, the victims of the Holocaust exhibited a tenacious dedication to the eternal bond between Hashem and *Klal Yisrael*. Their spirits rose to such heights that they gave new meaning to the term, *kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying Hashem's Name.

The Blushover Rebbe, zl, who was a witness, related this story. The *Rebbe* was sawing wood, a member of a slave-labor contingent of the infamous Janowska Road Camp. It was the morning of *Hoshanah Rabbah*, when suddenly terrible screams filled the forest. The workers soon found out that the Nazi's had declared an Aktion, wholesale slaughter of infants and young children. Heartrending cries emanated from the mothers and their little children, as the Nazis cruelly tore them away to be massacred like sheep in a nearby clearing. The procession of weeping, heartbroken mothers and their doomed children was passing by the *Rebbe's* contingent. Suddenly, one woman, desperately holding on

to her infant, abruptly cried out, "Jews, have mercy, give me a knife!"

The *Rebbe*, assuming she wanted to commit suicide, attempted to discourage the woman from killing herself. One of the Nazi beasts observed this interchange and came over, extending his penknife to the distraught woman. The fiend thought he would he would have some fun watching the Jewish woman take her life.

That is not what happened, however. Holding the knife in her hand, the woman placed her child on the ground and quickly circumcised her son. In an emotion-filled voice, she loudly recited *birkas ha'millah*. The murderer looked on in complete shock at what had taken place before his eyes. He turned to the woman and asked her to explain her strange action. "Today my son turned eight days old, the time at which a Jewish boy is to be circumcised and brought in as a member of our people. Soon he will be murdered, but he will die as a Jew." Only a couple of hours later, the woman's words rang true as the mother and her infant were led to slaughter.

Every time the **Blushever Rebbe, zl**, served as a *sandek* at a *bris* he would relate this story with tears streaming down his face, filled with pride at the superhuman strength of a simple Jewish mother on the way to her death. The spiritual heroism which our people exhibited during those tragic times should serve as inspiration to us, as well as a declaration to the world of a nation that did not go to their death as "sheep to the slaughter."

When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male. (12:2)

The *Midrash* comments concerning this *pasuk*. *Chazal* cite the *pasuk* in *Tehillim 139:5*, ""*Back and front, You fashioned me.*" *Resh Lakish* says "back and front" refers to the first day of Creation. If a person maintains his commitment to *Torah* and *mitzvos*, he is told, "You came before the entire work of Creation." If, in contrast, he lives a life alienated from *Torah*, he is told, "Even a gnat preceded you; even an earthworm preceded you." While man was created chronologically last, he is first in importance--if he has earned this honor. If, however, he falls from his position, if he does not live up to his charge, the chronological order of his creation has greater significance.

We must endeavor to understand the underlying meaning of *Chazal's* statement. Does it make sense to suggest that a lowly worm has greater significance than a human being--even one who has erred by alienating himself from the traditions of his people? **Horav Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, Shlita**, offers a profound explanation of *Chazal's* words. Hashem created every creation with a purpose. Ostensibly, the more significant the creation, the more compelling and demanding is its purpose. Man serves as the crown of Creation, the epitome of Hashem's handiwork. His goal in life is commensurate with his ability and opportunity. Hashem created the earthworm for a reason, obviously one which is distinct from the purpose of a human being. The earthworm, however has one advantage over a human--it succeeds in attaining its goal on this world, while the person who did not "make it," falls short of his potential. The lowly earthworm has attained its goal, while man, the crown of Creation, the purpose of all Creation, did not realize his potential.

How compelling is this idea! Success is measured by what a person could and should achieve--not by what an individual thinks he has achieved. We are placed on this world by design. The *raison d'etre* of our lives is to serve Hashem. Everything that we do exclusive of that objective has little significance in the scheme of the world. It is unfortunate when an individual trades his place as representative of the crown of Creation for an achievement level lower than the potential of an earthworm.

He shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (13:46)

The *metzora* receives retribution commensurate with his nefarious deeds. He has spread rumors, slandered people, broken up friendships, and caused the destruction of families. It is, therefore, appropriate that he have the "opportunity" to feel some of the pain of solitude himself. Let him see how it feels to be alone, away from friends and family, a pariah whose seclusion is self-inflicted. He is being compensated for what he has done to others. Sometimes it is necessary for an individual to experience the hurt that he has caused others before he is motivated to expiate his sin.

We can infer another message from the *metzora's* imposed seclusion. One who speaks *lashon hora* foolishly thinks that he endears himself to others. After all, every time he is able to come up with a choice piece of gossip, he attracts a crowd of avid listeners. What he does not realize is that after all has been said and done, no one really wants the slanderer as a friend. Can he be trusted? No! He lives for attention, regardless of the expense to others. Who knows when they will be on his list? The slanderer does not really have friends; on the contrary, he has followers who listen to his "*shmutz*." Indeed, the *metzora's* friends are as simple-minded as he. When the *metzora* is sent into seclusion, he has the opportunity to think. We hope that the stark realization of isolation will awaken him to the fact that his slanderous tongue has actually caused his seclusion from society.

The *Yalkut Shimoni* cites a dispute between Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish concerning the distance one must maintain from the *metzora*. Rabbi Yochanan says that four *amos*, cubits, on the eastern side is sufficient, while Resh Lakish contends that one must stay away up to one hundred *amos*. *Chazal* explain that in truth they are not disagreeing. The difference lies in whether or not the wind is blowing. If there is no wind, then four *amos* is sufficient. If there is a wind, one hundred *amos* is required. *Chazal* add that Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi would not even enter the street on which the *metzoraim* lived. At first we may conclude that *Chazal* were concerned with the contagious nature of this disease. If so, what is the meaning of distancing oneself from the *mizrach*, eastern side, of the *metzora*? Does one side have a greater proclivity for spreading the disease than the other? Also, why were Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi wary of entering the street on which the *metzoraim* lived? Were they more concerned than their *rebbeim*, who only distanced themselves a few *amos*?

Horav A. Y. Kilav, Shlita, remarks that the dispute between the *Tannaim* is not simply in reference to geographical distance. A relationship with a *metzora* can have an adverse spiritual effect upon a person. Certainly the *metzora* is bitter and full of criticism against the Al-mighty. If he had accepted his punishment and repented, his disease would have disappeared. One should stay away from a person whose sin has so permeated his character that it is reflected in leprous lesions throughout his body. He espouses venom and slander, spewing hatred and contention wherever he goes. We must distance ourselves from his *mizrach*, eastern side. This is a metaphor for the essential source of sin--the mouth and the mind.

The blowing wind is an analogy for the *metzora's* mouth. If he is finally still, if he has "shut-down" the destructive force that issues forth *lashon hora*--his mouth, if the wind is not blowing, then one must only distance himself four *amos*. If the *metzora* has, regrettably, not learned his lesson, if he continues to disparage others, spreading his criticism and complaints, then one must distance himself up to one hundred *amos*. Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi represented the next generation. They did not have the self-confidence to withstand the harmful influence of the slanderers. Consequently, they prohibited entering the neighborhood in which the *metzoraim* lived. Indeed, who can assess the pernicious influence of *lashon hora* better than its victim?

The Kohen shall look at the affliction on the skin of his flesh....and declare him contaminated. (13:3)

The *Kohen* is the only individual which the *Torah* authorizes to render a decision regarding a person's *tzaraas*. This is consistent with the *pasuk* in *Devarim 21:5*, "And according to his word, shall be every grievance and every plague." Indeed, if for some reason the *Kohen* is not proficient in the area of *negaim*, plagues, Chazal state in *Toras Kohanim*, that a *talmid chacham*, *Torah* scholar, should be asked to observe the plague and instruct the *Kohen* "*shoteh*" in the decision to be rendered. The *Kesef Mishneh* notes the use of the word "*shoteh*," fool, to describe a *Kohen* who is not schooled in *hilchos negaim*. He should be referred to as an *am haaretz*, illiterate. Why is he called a *shoteh*? He explains that he is a *shoteh* only in relation to the *Yisrael talmid chacham*. Yet, the term seems hardly appropriate, especially in light of the fact that throughout *halachic* literature one who is unschooled or illiterate is called an *am haaretz*.

Horav Zalman Sorotzkin, zl, offers an insightful response. Many people use the excuse of *parnassah*, the need to earn a living, as the reason for not designating time for *Torah* study. They are busy, involved, hard at work, under constant pressure. If they would only demonstrate the same resourcefulness for study as they do for making excuses, they would have sufficient time for *Torah* study. They, do, however, have a rationale, if not an excuse. What about the *Kohen* who has no worry about *parnassah*, who is to be involved in spiritual endeavor throughout the day? Why is he not involved in learning? How can he excuse himself from doing what he is assigned to do? He obviously has wasted his time, doing everything except what he was supposed to do. Such a person is a *shoteh*! Only a fool wastes his time. We are on this world for a purpose. If we take the precious time allotted to us and waste it, are we not being foolish?

While we do find the concept of a *Kohen am ha'aretz* in regard to one who is not meticulous in following the laws of *tumah* and *taharah*, the basic notion of an illiterate *Kohen* is described as a *Kohen shoteh*. This idea can be applied to all those who have time to study, but seek excuses to defer their obligation. They are not simply doing the wrong thing; they are actually foolish!

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