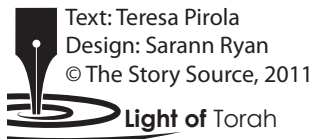


5 ways to stop the gossip

As noted over the page, where the Torah deals with purity laws concerning people with *tzara'at* ('scaly skin'/'leprosy'), midrashic preachers discovered an opportunity to preach against the evils of gossip! As 21st century Christians, we are not subject to the purity laws of the ancient Israelites, however in our human weakness we (and our communities) always stand in need of being purified from the defilement of gossip and negative speech habits. Five purifying tips follow:

- 1.** If it's hearsay, if you heard it 'on the grapevine,' then it may or may not be true. Check the source. Do not pass on false or 'half-true' information. And even if true, ask yourself: is sharing this news a constructive contribution?
- 2.** Reflect on your apparent 'need' or inclination for gossip. Is it fuelled by a need to belong? A sense of power in being a distributor of information? If we understand our own psychology we can do something to address its harmful expressions.
- 3.** If need be, call others to account in gentle, non-accusatory ways. E.g., *"Thanks for telling me, but perhaps it's best if this news stops with us."*
- 4.** Sometimes negative talk is a reaction to pain. We feel hurt by another so we lash out in return. Pray for the grace of compassion. Partake in rituals of forgiveness, such as the penitential prayers in the Mass and the sacrament of reconciliation
- 5.** One of the best ways to prevent negative speech is to consciously practice its opposite: positive words of affirmation. Spread *good news!*

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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Why reflect on Torah?

"First of all, it is evident that the New Testament itself acknowledges the Old Testament as the word of God and thus accepts the authority of the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people."

(Verbum Domini, n.40)

Although the Church formally rejected Marcionism (i.e., the heresy that views the New Testament as having done away with any need for the Old Testament), it may be fair to say that many Christians today are infected by at least a hint of Marcionist thinking. How many of us too readily pass over the greater portion of our bibles and head straight for the Gospels!

Arguably, even our terminology of 'Old' and 'New' Testament invites misunderstanding, implying that 'old' equals 'outdated' while 'new' equals 'best.' For this reason, some have proposed that we speak of 'First Testament' and 'Second Testament,' or refer to the Old Testament as 'the Hebrew Scriptures.'

Whatever our terminology, what is crucial is a correct understanding of the fundamental place the Hebrew Scriptures hold in the life of the Church.

Issue #28

9 April 2011

Leviticus 14:1—15:33

Metzora:

'a person with *Tzaraat*'



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 14:1—15:33

Continuing the theme of ritual purity, our Torah portion describes the stages of purification for a victim of *tzara'at*. In the Torah the term *tzara'at* can refer to a variety of skin ailments (translated in various ways, e.g., 'scaly skin', 'leprosy'). To the biblical authors it is not just a disease but associated with divine displeasure. It smites like a plague (Hebrew: *nega*) and causes ritual defilement that calls for a process of purification. Read Leviticus 14:33-53, then let's pay close attention to verse 35.

Tasting Torah

When you come into the land of Canaan, which I give you for a possession, and I put a leprous disease in a house in the land of your possession, the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, "There seems to me to be some sort of disease in my house." (Lev. 14:34-35, NRSV)

This passage gives rise to a good example of the detailed creativity of traditional Jewish approaches; of how the sages can draw moral lessons from a single letter of the sacred text.

Touching Torah

In our text above, one might expect the householder to simply announce 'there is a disease.' Yet one added Hebrew letter tells us that rather than *nega* ('plague'), he says *kanega* (*it seems to be a plague*). Says Rashi, "*Even if he is learned and has no doubt as to the nature of the plague, he must not utter a definitive judgement, but merely declare: 'it seems...'*" (1)

Of what significance is this apparent hesitation? Ponder this before reading on.

The Maharal of Prague (2) reminds us that in the Torah *tzara'at* is approached as a matter relating to ritual purity laws, not a biological phenomenon. Thus definitive pronouncement is the task of the priest, not of a physician or any other kind of expert.

Yet other sages provide quite different explanations, and to these we now turn.

Depthing Torah

R. Eliyahu Mizrahi (3) finds in this text a moral lesson about what we might describe as 'loose talk.' Much damage is done by presenting hearsay as established fact. As it says in the Mishnah:

"Teach your tongue to say, 'I do not know'" (Berakhot 4a).

The midrashic preachers often played with the similarity of the Hebrew words *m'tzora* ('leper') and *motzi ra* ('slanderer'), so this section of the Torah became an opportunity to preach against the evils of gossip.

Another explanation is offered by R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller (4):

"The Torah does not want the owner of the house to declare 'a plague' so as not to invite misfortune... Indeed, the tzara'at might recede before the priest's arrival."

In other words, we should not jump to pessimistic conclusions but rather exhibit patient hope and trust in God.

And to think that one single Hebrew letter could invite such a variety of reflections! Here we have a fascinating glimpse into Scripture as the divinely inspired Word in the hands of a living, faithful, interpreting community.

Doing Torah

With a friend or in a small group, continue the work of the interpreting community of faith... From your own prayerful reflections, how would you explain "*it seems...*" in verse 35?



Who's who

Our sages* this week are:

[1] **Rashi** (1040-1105). French scholar, regarded as the 'prince' of Jewish bible commentators.

[2] **Maharal of Prague** (1525-1609). His works on Jewish ethics, philosophy and rabbinic law are regarded as classics. He was highly esteemed by gentile scholars.

[3] **R. Eliyahu Mizrahi** (1440-1525). A renowned Talmud scholar. Chief Rabbi of Turkey at the time of the expulsion of Jews from Spain.

[4] **R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller** (1579-1654). Served as a rabbi in Vienna, Prague and Cracow. Best known for his commentary on the Mishna, *Tosefos Yom Tov*.

* Quoted in Leibowitz, 216-221.

Sources consulted: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, (Jerusalem, 1993); Plaut, *The Torah. A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006). Scripture: NRSV.