



Parashat Tazria-Metzora

Parshiyot Tazria-Metzora deal mainly with the laws of *tzara'at*, a supernatural phenomenon whereby a discoloration would appear on a person's body, garments or home, and this mark would confer upon the affected individual or object a formal halakhic status of *tum'a* (ritual impurity). Rabbinic tradition famously views this manifestation as a punishment for the transgression of *lashon ha-ra*, negative speech about others.

The laws governing *tzara'at* are quite severe. A garment affected by *tzara'at* must be burned, and a house determined to be stricken with *tzara'at* is entirely dismantled. Most severe of all, perhaps, a person afflicted with this "disease" is banished from society and required to live in complete isolation until his skin regains its natural color.

These grave provisions beg the question of why *lashon ha-ra* was singled out from all other prohibitions of the Torah for such direct and drastic retribution. For no other violation do we find that God would intervene in such supernatural fashion to visit punishment upon the transgressor. Why does the sin of *lashon ha-ra* warrant such extreme measures? Intuitively, we would likely point to the harmful effects on society at large as the underlying basis for this response to *lashon ha-ra*. People deserve the security of knowing that they have not become the subject of other people's curiosity and conversation. The harsh and immediate response to wanton chitchat perhaps serves to deter potential gossips, thereby guaranteeing people their privacy and helping to ensure that their personal affairs do not make their way onto the dinner tables of their fellow citizens.

Maimonides, however, explains the gravity of *lashon ha-ra* much differently, emphasizing the harmful and degenerative effects of gossip not on society, but rather on the speaker himself. In his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides concludes the section dealing with the laws of *tzara'at* (Hilkhot Tum'at Tzara'at) with a discussion concerning the dangers of *lashon ha-ra*. He adds the following exhortation:

It is therefore advisable for anyone who wishes to [properly] direct his ways to distance himself from their [fools'] company and from speaking with them, so that the person is not caught in the web of the wicked people and their foolishness. This is the style of the company of the wicked scoffers: They first indulge in matters of nonsense...and as a result they come to speak derisively of the righteous... And as a result they become accustomed to speak against the prophets and cast aspersions on their words... And as a result they come to speak against God and become heretics... This is the talk of the wicked, which is brought upon them by sitting on the street corners and the gatherings of ignoramuses and the company of alcohol-drinkers in taverns... But the talk of the proper ones of Israel is only in words of Torah and wisdom.

For Maimonides, the principal danger of *lashon ha-ra* is the attitude of cynicism it engenders. Those who allow themselves the right to speak negatively about others grow accustomed to scoffing, mocking and ridiculing. It is only a matter of time that this ridicule will be directed towards that which ought to be the most dear and sacred to a Jew – the Torah and the teachings of the Prophets and the Sages. Maimonides therefore pleads with his readership to keep a distance from the cynics, and to spend one's time engaged in serious and meaningful pursuits, rather than listening to the mindless chatter of the cynics.