

Dear Chavraya,

We have all felt the sting of hurtful words and, alas, we have all spoken words that we wish we could take back. Words, like arrows once released, find their way to the mark. Hurtful speech, gossip, the negative and destructive use of language is broadly referred to as *lashon ha'ra/evil speech*, literally an *evil tongue*. This is one phrase that is probably more commonly said with Ashkenazic/Yiddish pronunciation, *loshon hora*.

In a fascinating word play on the name of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Metzora*, largely concerned with leprosy, the rabbis find what would appear to be an unlikely context in which to discuss *loshon hora*. They see the word *metzora*, which means *leper*, as an acronym for *motzi shem ra/one who brings forth a bad name*. One's own reputation is damaged through speaking ill of others. Like the leper, the one who speaks *loshon hora* is in need of healing, along with the victim of his or her words. Seeing the blanched face of one harmed by another's words, the rabbis compared *loshon hora* to murder, speaking of it as *sh'fichut damim/the spilling of blood*.

Language is invested with deep power and meaning in Jewish tradition. Words are sacred. Instruments of creation or destruction, words can join people together or sunder the delicate thread of relationship. In Hebrew, the word for *word* and *thing* are one and the same, *davar*. Words are real, substance to be shaped for good or ill. As a caution to consider one's words before speaking, the rabbis taught, *mavet v'chayim b'yad lashon/death and life are in the power of the tongue*. As their proof-text of such "wordly" power, they look to Psalm 34, *Mi ha'ish hechafetz chayim.../Who is the one who desires life, who loves length of days in which to see goodness? (Then) Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it*.

The words of the psalm are prescriptive, offering a way to live that affirms the meaning of each life and its relationship to the world. Gently speaking to human fear and longing, the psalmist reminds us that we cannot determine the length of our days, but we can determine their quality. That is what it means to be one who loves "length of days," it is to be one who fills the gift of each day with meaning. It is about the nature of our being in the world. Live gently and peacefully, for life is short and harshness makes it shorter.

Speech is the most constant way of our interacting with others. In the way of our speaking we affect the quality of the world most immediately around us. The psalm that teaches the power of the tongue to affirm or destroy ends with exhortation to move beyond our selves, *bakesh shalom v'rodfeihu/seek peace and pursue it*; explained by the rabbis, "Seek it in your own place, and pursue it in another."

In the way of our speaking with each other in our own place, so through word and deed we shall send more peace out into the world, the place of all.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor