

Nature in the Parasha

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Parashat Tazria/Metzora – Plants of Purification

Let My Tongue Remain *Chametz* Free!

“So what are you taking with you from Pesach?” asked my sister. I hesitated, it was not so much what I was taking with me, but more what I was not taking with me, things that I hope to have left behind with the puffed up *chametz* (leaven). Everything had been cleaned and excess shed, and I wish it to stay that way. How amazing to manage without all the extras such as supplements, vitamins, perfume and excess words, how humbling. While Facebook was lined with photos of pizza eaten only three hours after Pesach, we were in no *chametz* rush. The simplicity of matzo and quinoa was enough for now. Yes, let the taste of purifying Pesach linger. Let it linger into our lingo influencing body and soul. Pesach means, “The mouth speaks.” The entire month of Nissan is about rectification of speech (*Sefer Yetzirah*, Chapter 5). It is no wonder that the last *parasha* of the month of Nissan is about purity of speech. So, that is what I want to take with me from Pesach, no extras, no more unnecessary words. If we let out a phrase or even a word we shouldn’t have said, then what happens? It’s not like we sprout a long nose like when Pinocchio lies. However, in Biblical times evil speech caused immediate retribution through the skin breaking out in a spiritual disease called *tzara’at*. The remedy for this impure disease was a purification ritual consisting of plants and birds:

ספר ויקרא פרק יד
 (ב) זאת תהיה תורת המצרע ביום טהרתו והוכא אל הכהן:
 (ג) ויצא הכהן אל מחוץ למחנה וראה הכהן והנה נרפא נגע הצרעת מן הצרוע:
 (ד) וצוה הכהן ולקח למטהר שתי צפרים חיות טהרות ועץ ארז ושני תולעת ואזב:

“This shall be the law of the *metzora* (person afflicted with *tzara’at*) in the day of his purification: he shall be brought to the kohen. The kohen shall go outside the camp; if the kohen sees that the *metzora* has been healed from his scaly plague; then the kohen shall order two live pure birds, cedar wood, scarlet worm, and hyssop” (*Vayikra* 14:2-4).

What is the connection between these plants and birds and the purification of the *metzora*?

A Worm for the Gossiper

We all know that the spiritual disease of *tzara’at* is caused by evil speech, which consist of three categories: *Lashon Hara* (true derogatory speech), *Rechilus* (gossip), *Motzi Shem Ra* (false derogatory speech). *Lashon hara* is the expression of looking for the weaknesses and negative in others, like the fly, which is attracted to open sores and infections. The need to overcome the negative impulse to put others down is symbolized by slaughtering one of the birds. The second bird corresponds to *Motzi Shem Ra*, as evil spirits will eat the souls of those engaging in false derogatory speech. Therefore, this live bird is sent out to the open field to these spirits that fly in the field (*Torat Kohanim* 2:5). The scarlet producing worm corresponds to the gossiper, as his sins

are like red stains, which are transformed to white through repentance (*Yesha'yahu* 1:18). When we speak negatively about others we think we are better than them but in truth it is the opposite, we are lowly like the hyssop and those we speak against become high like the cedar tree (*Sefer Toldot Yitzchak, Vayikra* 14:4).

Purification of Body, Mind and Soul

All the rituals of the service in the Tabernacle and Temple have deeper than symbolic significance, even if we don't always understand them. For example, it states: "The kohen shall take of the blood of the guilt-offering, and the kohen shall put it upon the tip of the right ear of the person being purified, and upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the great toe of his right foot" (*Vayikra* 14:14). What is all this sprinkling of blood all about? Toldot Yitzchak continues to explain that the evil speaker sins through all of these body parts. Kicking with the foot, and finger pointing is all part of *lashon hara*, so is listening with the ear. Therefore, each of these places deserves blood. Yet, in the end, we are forgiven and this is symbolized by the oil poured on those same places (*Ibid.* 17). The three body parts where blood and oil was sprinkled include the upper body (ear), the middle body (hand), and the lower body (foot). These three places may possible allude to the mind, heart and body, which all need to be purified. The Shem M'Shemuel explains that the cedar tree, the scarlet producing worm and the hyssop allude to the גוף/*guf* – body, נפש/*nefesh* – soul and שכל/*sechel* – intellect. Since the cedar is the tallest of trees, it corresponds to the intellect, the worm, which is red like blood corresponds to the *nefesh*, while the lowly hyssop corresponds to the body. All of these three parts need to be purified, as they include the elevation of man, the desire and will of the soul, and the subjugation of the body. During the Exodus from Egypt the hyssop was all they needed, because in Egypt the Children of Israel weren't arrogant at all; on the contrary they were very submissive (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 2:5). Therefore, only their body needed purification so that it would be subjugated to Hashem alone and not be submissive merely due to the suffering of exile. Why did King David pray, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean..." (*Tehillim* 51:9)? The reason he mentioned only the hyssop is that he had already purified his mind and soul and was only concerned about purifying his body from despair. Therefore, all he needed was the hyssop (*Shem M'Shemuel, Parashat Metzora*, Year 5673).

Arrogance – the Plague Causing Character Trait

Arrogance is the underlying negative character trait expressed through evil speech. When we attribute greatness to ourselves as if we are a tall cedar tree, we need to humble ourselves to become like the lowly hyssop, in order to receive atonement (*Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Metzora* 3). We know that the cedar is the tallest and the hyssop the lowliest of plants from the wisdom of King Shlomo (*I Melachim* 5:13).

Why does the leper receive purification through both the very tallest and the very lowest? Although the tall cedar tree alludes to arrogance, it is still part of the healing process. This is because when we repent it is our previous arrogance, which helps us to lower ourselves to become even more humble. We also sometimes need atonement from being overly humble, when we think we are not good enough to do a certain mitzvah. It is important to find the right balance

between feeling “I’m a worm and not a man” (*Tehillim* 22:7), and “The entire world is created for me (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 30b), (*Pardes Yosef, Vayikra* 14:4). In the purification ritual from the impurity of death the two plants, cedar and hyssop are juxtaposed, while the worm and birds are mentioned afterwards. This is the natural order moving from flora to fauna. Why then is the worm interspersed between the two plants in the purification ritual from *tzara’at*? One answer is that the speaker of *lashon hara* is lowly like a worm, but hits on people who are compared to the lofty cedar tree. The atonement for an evil tongue that committed a wormy deed against the prominent cedar, is to lower himself as a hyssop without desiring to blemish others. Therefore, the worm, which corresponds to the person committing the evil speech, is interspersed between the cedar corresponding to his victim and the hyssop corresponding to his rectification (Kli Yakar, *Vayikra* 14:4).

Tapping into the Devotion of Yitzchak & the Humility Ya’acov

While idol worship and murder characterizes Esau, conversely in the side of holiness *מְסִירַת נְפֶשׁ/mesirat nefesh* – devotion to Hashem is the aspect of Yitzchak and *עֲנָוָה/anava* – humility the aspect of Ya’acov. Therefore, *אֶרֶז/erez* – cedar has the same numerical value as *יִצְחָק/Yitzchak* (208), while the worm alludes to Ya’acov, who is called “the worm of Ya’acov” (*Yesha’ayhu* 41:14). Tapping into the humility of Ya’acov allows others to live and exist without being picked on or backstabbed. Furthermore, the phrase *אֶרֶז וְאֵזוֹב/ Etz Erez v’Ezov* (cedar tree and hyssop) has the same numerical value as Yitzchak, Ya’acov (390) = (160+208+22) = (208+182) (*Panim Yafot, Vayikra* 14:4). Evil speech is compared to idolatry, (*Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra* 14:558), which is an attempt to view reality as we wish, circumventing whatever gets in our way. When someone is seeking to benefit himself, he doesn’t care if his view of reality is unsubstantiated by what is real and evident. If he thinks it will be in his advantage he may turn to idol worship. Likewise, when a person speaks *lashon hara*, he lives in a delusional reality. If a certain person makes him feel inferior, he may need to ‘correct’ this by putting that person down. Evil speech is also compared to murder (Rambam, *Hilchot Deot* 7:1), as words can kill. The Midrash brings the famous example of Doeg the Edomite who told King Shaul that the Achimelech the Kohen had offered David protection. Consequently, Shaul had 85 kohanim killed (*Midrash Tanchuma, Metzora* 1). See also *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 30:1). The cedar tree can also allude to Hashem. Just as the cedar is taller than all other trees, so is Hashem taller than all. The hyssop alludes to the *tzaddik* (righteous person) who emanates from Hashem like a small tree that stem forth from a big tree. The scarlet string teaches us to connect ourselves to the *tzaddikim* by means of this we may be able to connect ourselves to the Creator (*Avodat Yisrael, Parashat Para*).

Plants of Repentance

We need to apply the character trait of *גְבוּרָה/gevurah* (might and self-discipline) in order to overcome our negative impulse for evil speech. This is a very heavy and difficult inner war that we must wage. The tall and stout cedar tree teaches us to be hard and strong as this tree to fight against our negative impulse and overcome it. This is another reason why *אֶרֶז/erez* – cedar shares the numerical value of *יִצְחָק/Yitzchak*, as Yitzchak is known to correspond to *gevurah*. In our repentance process, we simultaneously need the humility of both the worm and the hyssop.



Just as humility cleans us from our puffed up ego, hyssop is a cleansing herb both in the Torah and according to folk medicine. In the Torah, hyssop is used for spiritual cleansing, from the impurity of Egypt, arrogance and death, whereas in folk medicine it cleanses and eliminates viruses and infections. All sicknesses comprise a decrease of life force and hence a small death. The more humble we become, the more alive, since there is no true life but Hashem. While arrogance causes us to be far from Him, humility creates space for Hashem to enter our lives. The humility of the hyssop empowers us to purify from various forms of death and enables us to pierce through the darkness of death and impurity to connect with the eternal light of life. "Who is the man that desires life, and loves many days that he may see good? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from deceitful speech (*Tehillim* 34:13-14). May we overcome the tendency for evil speech by tapping into the energies of these plants of repentance!