Talking without Conversing: Thoughts for Parashat Metsora

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Metsora

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Several years ago, I took a taxi to the airport and the driver did not stop talking for the entire ride. Every now and then, I said “umhum” or “yes” but other than these few utterances, I do not think I said a single word. The driver told me of his family’s origins, about someone in his family who was ill, about his vacation plans, about traffic problems…and on and on and on.

When we finally arrived at the airport, I paid my fare and opened the door of the taxi to get out. The driver turned to me with a broad smile on his face and he said: “I really enjoyed our conversation this morning. Thanks so much for making my day!” I smiled back, left the cab, and wondered where in the airport I could find a few aspirins.

As I think back on this incident, I realize that a great many people are similar to the taxi driver. They talk at you relentlessly but have no real interest in hearing what you have to say. They don’t engage in “conversation” but in monologue. They are happy to have a captive audience.

Some such people may have a personality disorder. Others may be lonely, insecure, egotistical or all of the above. They feel validated when they are talking, and they will keep talking as long as anyone is there to listen. This type of person is almost always annoying to others, but seldom realizes it.

This week’s Torah portion deals with the malady of “tsara’at” which our sages understood as a punishment for “lashon hara,” negative language. Generally, this refers to words that disparage others. Miriam was punished with “tsara’at” when she spoke ill of her brother Moses.

The word “tsara’at” may be related to the word “tsar”—meaning narrow. It may have the connotation of narrowing/diminishing the value of others. When one diminishes others, the punishment is self-diminishment.

This relates not merely to technical “lashon hara” when one speaks badly of another. It relates to any speech that depreciates the value of others. Thus, a person who talks at you, rather than with you, is thereby undermining your own self-esteem. The talker does not think your comments or feelings are worthy of attention.

We have all had teachers and acquaintances who have talked at us. They have lectured and droned on without the least interest in hearing anything we have to say. But we have also been fortunate in having teachers and acquaintances who have actively engaged us, prodded us to think and to ask and to share our views. These latter people have been our real educators and friends, the ones who have respected us and guided us and helped us to grow.

Some people are talkers who prefer monologue to dialogue. Some teachers are pontificators who expect people to listen to them but do not invite serious interaction with them. Such people, knowingly or unknowingly, diminish and disrespect others.

They probably do not realize that in their self-absorbed diminishing of others, they diminish themselves most of all.

Angel for Shabbat