

The Disease of Hatred: Thoughts for Parashat Tazria

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Tazria

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Each morning, we pray that the Almighty will protect us from various evils including “slander and false accusation, hatred and calumnious charges.” Although we and our ancestors have prayed these words for many centuries, the evils have not disappeared. We continue to face slanders, hatred and vicious calumnies. We continue to pray that the Almighty will indeed protect us from all the evils we face.

This week’s Parasha includes laws relating to *tsara’at*, a disease which our sages associated with the sin of *lashon hara*, evil speech. The *tsara’at* is a physical manifestation of a spiritual illness. Even though the physical signs of *tsara’at* are no longer identifiable these days, the spiritual malady remains. Evil speech is a symptom of a deep and contagious social disease.

The recent World Happiness Report (spring 2024) notes that the United States ranks only 23rd among the countries of the world in terms of the happiness of its population. Israel, by contrast, is ranked 5th. In spite of all the problems facing Israel—terrorism, war, economic sanctions etc.—Israelis remain among the happiest people in the world. Israelis feel that their lives mean something, that they are working for a better future.

So why is the United States doing so poorly? And why are American young people, in particular, suffering from a lack of happiness and meaningfulness in life?

Much of the problem stems from increased patterns of hatred, divisiveness, and *lashon hara*. American society has a *tsara’at* that is not being dealt with in an adequate manner. Extreme groups utilize mass media to spread lies and hatred. Hateful cult-like leaders promote anti-Semitism, racism, political violence. Universities—that should be bastions of humanism—have become hubs for violence and extremism. In too many circles, it has become fashionable to emphasize all the faults of America and to downplay the amazing historic achievements of this country.

An increase in anti-Semitic rhetoric and intimidation is a sign of the spiritual *tsara'at* of America (and much of the world!). The slander, false accusations, hatred and calumnious charges are unsettling—not only to Jews, but to all who foster a civil society in which all people are treated fairly and respectfully. Unfortunately, blatant lies against Jews gain credence among hateful and/or ignorant people. But once hatred goes unchecked against one group, the venom spreads.

In the United States, an assortment of hate groups emerge, each spewing its own brand of *lashon hara*: white supremacists, black supremacists, radical liberals, radical conservatives, anti-Asians, anti-immigrants etc. When a society is plagued with so many manifestations of hatred and divisiveness, it promotes societal malaise. It is difficult these days to be able to honestly describe America as “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” So many people are unhappy. The current political, intellectual and spiritual leaders of the country have not addressed the problems seriously enough and have not been successful in creating a more positive and unifying message.

The Torah states that one plagued with *tsara'at* needed to undergo a purification process. Similarly, a society suffering from spiritual *tsara'at* needs to examine the roots of its disease and to purify itself. Leaders in all strata of society need to mobilize against the hatred that is cutting at the soul of our nation. We not only need to speak and act against hatred and bigotry; we must articulate a positive message about civil society, about the values that make America a bastion of freedom, about working together to build an idealistic national consensus.

The antidote to *lashon hara*—evil speech—is *lashon hatov*, beneficial and constructive speech. As we say in our daily prayers each day: “My Lord, guard my tongue from speaking evil and my lips from uttering deceit.”