

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXVIII: Metzora (Lev. 14:1–15:33)

Essay 1. *Tzara'at* as punishment for derogatory speech also leads to atonement

פָּרָק ג' דְּעֶרְכִין אָמַר ר' שְׁמוּאֵל בְּרַחֲמַנִי אָמַר ר' יוֹחָנָן עַל שְׁבָעָה דְּבָרִים נִגְעִים בָּאִים, עַל לִשׁוֹן הָרַע וְכוּ'. וּמִקֻּשָּׁה הֵתָם וּמִתְרִץ לֹא מִשָּׂא: הָא דְּאֶהְנוּ מַעֲשִׂיו, הָא דְּלֹא אֶהְנוּ מַעֲשִׂיו. אִי אֶהְנוּ מַעֲשִׂיו, אֶתָּה נִגְעִים עָלֶיהָ. אִי לֹא אֶהְנוּ מַעֲשִׂיו, מִעֵיל מִכֶּפֶר עָלֶיהָ.

In the **third chapter of tractate Arachin (16a)**, **Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said, Rabbi Yochanan said, “There are seven reasons for skin lesions of *tzara'at* to come, for derogatory speech [*lashon hara*], for bloodshed, for an oath taken in vain, for forbidden sexual relations, for arrogance, for theft, and for stinginess.” A question is raised there in the Gemara, as Rabbi Anani bar Sason said that the various priestly garments atoned for these seven sins, with the robe of the High Priest atoning for derogatory speech. If there is atonement, why are there skin lesions?**

The solution given there in the Gemara is that this is no difficulty. “Here, [the statement of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani that skin lesions of *tzara'at* will come on account of derogatory speech etc. is referring to a case] where his actions [such as derogatory speech], were effective [and caused damage]. There, [Rabbi Anani bar Sason’s regarding the priest’s garments effecting atonement is referring to a case] where his actions were not effective [and caused no harm]. If his actions were effective [and caused harm or quarrels], skin lesions of *tzara'at* come upon him [as punishment]. If his actions were not effective [and did not cause any damage], the robe atones [for his sin].”

קֻשְׁיָה דְּהָא לְעֵיל בְּסֻמוּךְ ר' א[ח]א בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא אָמַר סִיפֵר אֵין לוֹ מִקְנָה שְׂכָבָר כְּרָתוּ דְּוֹד בְּרוּם הַקּוּדֶשׁ שְׁנֶאֱמַר "יִכְרֹת ה' כָּל־שִׁפְתֵי חֲלָקוֹת" וְכוּ'.

This is difficult, for it is brought above in the adjacent page, Arachin 15b, Rabbi Acha,¹ son of Rabbi Chanina says: [If one has already] spoken [derogatory speech], he has no remedy, as [King] David, [inspired] by Divine Spirit, has already cut him off [with the punishment of *karet*], as it is stated: “May the L-rd cut off [*yachret*] [יִכְרֹת] all flattering lips” (Ps. 12:4). That

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¹ The first edition read Rabbi Abba.

is, Arachin 15b makes no distinction whether the derogatory speech was “effective” in causing harm or not.

וַיֵּשׁ לֹאמַר דְּאִיתָא בְּפָרְקָא קְמָא דְּמוֹעֵד קָטָן תַּנְיָא "וְטָמֵא טָמֵא יִקְרָא" צָרִיד לְהוֹדִיעַ צָעְרוֹ לְרַבִּים, וְרַבִּים יִבְקָשׁוּ עָלָיו רַחֲמִים. וְקוֹשֶׁה לָמָּה בְּחוּלֵי זֶה שֶׁל נִגְעִים אֲמָרָה תוֹרָה צָרִיד שְׂוִידִיעַ וְכוּ', אֲלֵא וְדַאי הַטַּעַם הוּא שֶׁהוֹאִיל שָׂאִין לוֹ תַקְנָה שֶׁכָּבֵר כָּרְתוֹ דָּוָד בְּרוּם הַקּוֹדֶשׁ הָיָה כְּמוֹ גִּזְרֵי דִין חֲתוּם וְצָרִיד תַּפְלַת הָרַבִּים לְבַטְלוֹ.

It can be said that it's brought in the first chapter of tractate Moed Katan (5a), “It's taught [in a Baraita], [Regarding the verse:] ‘For the person with a skin lesion [of *tzara'at*], his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out, “Unclean! Unclean!” ’ (Lev. 13:45). He needs to inform the public of his trouble, and the public will request mercy for him.”² One may ask why for this disease of skin lesions of *tzara'at*, the Torah says that it's necessary for him to inform the public. Certainly, the intent is that since he has no remedy—as King David, [inspired] by Divine Spirit, has already cut him off with the punishment of *karet*—this is like a judgment that is already sealed, and thus he needs the prayer of the public to render [the judgment] void.

וְזֶהוּ אֵין לוֹ תַקְנָה, לוֹ לְבַדּוֹ דְּהָיָה כְּמוֹ יְחִיד, וְגִזְרֵי דִין דְּצִיבוּר אָף עַל פִּי שְׁנֵהֶם מִתְקַרֵּעַ, כְּדִאִיתָא בְּפָרְקָא קְמָא דְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה. וְעוֹד, "כֹּה" אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּכָל-קְרָאֵנוּ אֵלָיו" מִיֵּרִי בְּצִיבוּר. וְעוֹד אֲמָרִינוּ קִלְלַת חֶכֶם אֲפִילוּ עַל חֲנֹם הִיא בָּאָה. וְתַקְנָה לִזֶּה לִילָף בְּגִלוּת דְּאָמַר מֵר גְּלוּת מְכַפֶּרֶת עוֹן, וּמִשּׁוּם הֵכִי אֶתוּ נִגְעִים עָלֶיהָ שְׂוִיהָ מוֹכֶרֶת לִילָף בְּגִלוּת, "כְּדֹד יֵשֵׁב מְחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה מוֹשְׁבוֹ" וְהוּא לִיהַ בְּפָרָה.

This one discussed on Arachin 15b by Rabbi Acha, he has no remedy, not for him alone, for he is an individual, for which once a judgment is sealed, it cannot be retracted. **But the judgment of the community, even though it has already been sealed, can still be torn up, as is brought in the first chapter of tractate Rosh Hashana (page 18a). Further, we have the verse, “For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as the L-rd our G-d whenever we call upon Him?” (Deut. 4:7), that verse is saying “call upon Him” as a community.**

Further, it says, “The curse of a sage, even if baseless, comes [to be fulfilled].”³ I.e., the curse from King David that one who engages in derogatory speech will be subject to *karet* stands to be fulfilled. The remedy for this is to go into Exile, “as the Master said: Exile atones for transgression.”⁴ Because of this, skin lesions came upon him, that he will be compelled to go into a personal exile, as it were, “alone he shall sit, outside the camp is his dwelling” (Lev. 13:46), and for him that will be an atonement for his derogatory speech.

Thus, according to Rabbi Yochanan, on Arachin 16a, if one's derogatory speech did no harm, the robe of the High Priest will atone for him. If his derogatory speech was harmful, he will

² In addition to Moed Katan 5a, this appears in Shabbat 67a.

³ Berachot 56a; Makkot 11a; Sanhedrin 90b.

⁴ Berachot 56a.

develop skin lesions. According to Rabbi Acha on Arachin 15b, one who engages in derogatory speech, whether harmful or not, will be subject to King David's curse of *karet*, regardless of whether his speech caused harm or not. Thus, if his speech did cause harm, then Rabbi Yochanan would say that he would develop skin lesions. This would lead to his "exile," which atones for the curse of a sage. In addition, he appeals to the community, which prays on his behalf, which can also affect atonement even when a judgment has already been sealed.⁵

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⁵ If one's derogatory speech caused no harm, Rabbi Yochanan would say that he will not develop *tzara'at*. He is still subject to King David's curse of *karet*, according to Rabbi Acha. Without *tzara'at*, he will not have to go into personal "exile," and he will not think to appeal to the public, so how will he be saved from the curse of *karet*? It doesn't seem right that one whose derogatory speech causes harm will avoid *karet*, while one whose derogatory speech causes no harm will be condemned to *karet*. The *mevuar* edition of Zera Shimshon discusses this, citing Yehuda ben Ya'akov Katz's sefer, Mareh Cohen (Frankfurt 1776), chapter 8 of Chidushei Zevachim. The suggestion is that while Rabbi Acha's teaching regarding King David's curse didn't explicitly differentiate whether the derogatory speech causes harm or not, that should be read into it, so that the curse only applies if there is harm.