

Unfortunately, slander and talking ill of your friends are so commonplace today, that we almost pay no attention to it or to its negative consequences. However in the biblical period, the sin of Lashon Hara was immediately rewarded with an attack of Tzaraas, a skin disorder loosely associated with leprosy. The Metzora, as one afflicted with this Biblical malady was called, was also ostracized from the community and only eligible for return when he completed his sacrificial requirements.

The Torah tells us that the necessary ingredients for the Metzora's cleansing process were two living clean birds, cedar-wood, scarlet, and a hyssop. Once all of the ingredients were gathered together, the Kohen, the priest was commanded to sacrifice one of the birds in an earthen vessel over "Mayim Chaim, live running water." While all of the individual components of the sacrifice are quite remarkable and require an explanation, what is most remarkable is the necessity for the live water. No other sacrifice makes mention of live water, certainly there must be some message or metaphor of the live water.

Rav Yitzchak Meir Alter, the Gerrer Rebbe explains that the process of the slanderer's sacrifice is meant to engage him in a process of self-reflection to help him see the error of his ways. The sacrifice beautifully illustrates to the offending slanderer precisely where he went wrong and how to rectify his shortcomings. While his misdeed may have been slander, the root cause of his actions is arrogance and that is what lies at the heart of slander. It is only the person that truly believes himself to be above all others, that will slander others. The Metzora brings cedar wood along with the hyssop because the cedar tree, the tallest and strongest of the trees is the symbol of arrogance and the hyssop, the short, infirm, and insignificant reed, is the symbol of humility. The message for the Metzora is that the arrogance must be humbled, as the cedar wood must be transformed into hyssop. However, an unintended byproduct of the emphasis on humility is guilt and depression.

When one ponders his lowly existence, the fragility of our mortality, and the temporary nature of his presence on this earth, certainly he will feel humility, but the depression and its accompanying feelings of inadequacy are a very dangerous reality. In Chassidic thought avoiding depression is a paramount priority in our lives. The worldview of the Chassid demands happiness, vibrancy and passion, because the hallmark of a true Chassid is his ability to maintain a positive outlook in all of his endeavors. Yet, there is a very real likelihood that the emphasis on humility will leave the Metzora burdened with these debilitating depressive thoughts. It is for this reason that the Torah demands that the sacrifice must be completed over live water. Stagnant water lacks life and vibrancy, which is often the very real, yet unfortunate, consequence of the repentant slanderer's return. To insure that he doesn't fall prey to this natural reaction we mandate live running water, reminding the Metzora to remain positive and upbeat despite his humbling thoughts.

Engaging in true repentance for any sin can leave one feeling guilty and saddened by their inappropriate or mistaken behavior. The burden of guilt is a very heavy baggage not easily shed. It threatens to weigh us down to the very edge of a spiritual and emotional abyss. Yet precisely at those moments we have to find our own running water and retain our ability to move forward and beyond without drowning in a river of sadness and depression.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Meir Tannenbaum