



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

בס"ד

מצרע תשע"ט  
Metzora 5779

**The Power  
of Speech**

### WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks* for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at [www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe](http://www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe).



### PARSHAT METZORA IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Metzora continues with the themes from last week's parsha, including the process of purification for *tzara'at*, the

decay that causes skin disease in humans and discolouration in garments and the walls of houses.



### THE CORE IDEA

The Sages identify *tzara'at* – the condition that affects human skin, the cloth of clothes, and the walls of a house – not as an illness but as a punishment for the specific sin of *lashon hara*, evil speech.

The question is why is this harsh condition a punishment for evil speech and not some other sin? Why is speaking evil worse than, say, physical violence? There is an old English saying: "Sticks and stones may break my bones/but words will never harm me." It is certainly upsetting to hear bad things said about you, but is it really that terrible?

There is no direct mitzvah against evil speech in the Torah but there is a prohibition against gossip: "Do not go around as a gossiper among your people" (Leviticus 19:16). *Lashon hara* is an example of this command. The Sages go to remarkable lengths to emphasise its seriousness. It is, they say, as bad as all three cardinal sins together – idol worship, bloodshed, and forbidden sexual relations. Whoever speaks with an evil tongue, they say, it is as if he or she denied God. They also say: it is forbidden to live near someone with an evil tongue, and all the more to sit with them and to listen to their words. Why are mere words treated with such seriousness in Judaism?

The answer to this question touches on one of the most basic principles of Jewish belief. Ancient peoples

worshipped "the gods" because they saw them as powerful: lightning, thunder, the rain and sun, the sea and ocean, and sometimes wild animals. However Judaism is not a religion that worshipped power, even though God is more powerful than all of these "gods".

Judaism, like other religions, has holy places, holy people, holy times, and holy rituals. What makes Judaism different, however, is that it is first and foremost a religion of holy words. With words God created the universe: "And God said, Let there be... and there was." Through words He communicated with humankind. In Judaism, language itself is holy. That is why *lashon hara*, the use of language to harm, is not merely a minor offence. It involves taking something that is holy and using it for purposes that are unholy.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What does "Sticks and stones may break my bones/but words will never harm me" mean to you? Does it resonate?
2. How can words be holy?
3. Can you create worlds with words like God? Can worlds also be destroyed with words?



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

There once was an old man who loved to gossip. He would often be found shuffling around town whispering gossip to his friends.

One day, he just couldn't resist telling the Rabbi the latest news he had just heard. The Rabbi ran into his house and brought out a feather pillow. He told the old man to rip open the pillow. Puzzled, he did as the Rabbi asked.

As the wind picked up the feathers and blew them all over the village, a smile crossed the man's face as he began to enjoy the spectacle. "Right. Now go and collect all the feathers from my pillow!" said the Rabbi. "But Rabbi, that is impossible! I can't get them all back. They are spread all across the village and beyond!" the man exclaimed.

The Rabbi looked him in the eye and with a satisfied look said, "It is exactly the same with your gossip. Once it has crossed your lips it cannot be controlled or taken back. The words are out of your grasp forever and spread across the world. Think carefully about that, the next time you are tempted to gossip about a neighbour!"

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think is the message of this story?
2. Have you ever experienced the power of words for good or for bad (like in this story) personally?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

After creating the universe, God's first gift to the first man was the power to use words to name the animals. This was the start of the intellectual process that is the distinguishing mark of Homo sapiens. The Targum translates the phrase, "And man became a living creature" (Gen. 2:7) as "a speaking spirit." Evolutionary biologists nowadays take the view that it was the demands of language, and the advantage this gave humans over every other life form, that led to the massive expansion of the human brain.

When God sought to halt the plan of the people of Babel to build a tower that would reach heaven, He simply "confused their language" so they were unable to communicate.

Language remains basic to the existence of human groups. God created the natural universe with words. We create – and sometimes destroy – the social universe with words.

The first principle of language in Judaism is that it is creative. We create worlds with words.

The second principle is no less fundamental. Abraham's belief in one God introduced into the world the idea of a God who transcends the universe, and who therefore cannot be identified with any phenomenon within the universe.

God is invisible. This is why in Judaism all religious icons are a sign of idolatry. How then does an invisible God reveal Himself? The answer is, in words. God spoke. He spoke to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses. At the revelation at Mount Sinai, as Moses reminded the Israelites, "The Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice" (Deuteronomy 4:12). In

Judaism, words are the vehicle of revelation. The prophet is the man or woman who hears and speaks the word of God.

That was the phenomenon that science struggles to understand. Some scientists accept the idea of a God who created heaven and earth, the force of forces and cause of causes, the originator of, as we call it nowadays, the Big Bang, the God who was the architect of matter and the composer of order. Indeed, it is ultimately faith in the universe as the product of a single creative intelligence that underlies the scientific mindset from the outset. Judaism calls this aspect of God '*Elokim*'. But we believe in another aspect of God also, which we call '*Hashem*', the God of relationships – and relationships exist by virtue of speech. Speech allows us to communicate with others and share with them our fears, hopes, loves, plans, feelings, and intentions. Speech helps us to convey our inwardness to others. It is at the very heart of the human bond. A god who could create universes but not speak or listen would be an impersonal god – a god incapable of understanding what makes us human. Worshipping such a god would be like bowing down to the sun or to a giant computer. We might care about it but it could not care about us. That is not the God of Abraham.

Hence the idea at the heart of Judaism: *brit*, covenant, which is nothing other than a mutually binding promise between God and human beings. Covenant is the word that joins heaven and earth, the word spoken, the word heard, the word affirmed and honoured in trust. The Torah, in the most profound sense, is the word of God, and Judaism is the religion of holy words. It follows that to misuse or abuse

language to sow suspicion and conflict is not just destructive. It is sacrilege. It is a kind of desecration. It takes something holy, the human ability to communicate and thus join soul to soul, and use it for the lowest of purposes, to divide soul from soul and destroy the trust on which non-coercive relationships depend.

Judaism emerged as an answer to a series of questions: How can finite human beings be connected to an infinite God? How can they be connected to one another? How can there be co-operation, collaboration, collective action, families, communities, and a nation, without the coercive use of power? How can we form relationships of trust? How can we redeem the human person from his or her solitude? How

can we create collective liberty such that my freedom is not bought at the cost of yours?

The answer is: through words, words that communicate, words that bind, words that honour the Divine Other and the human other. *Lashon hara*, “evil speech,” by poisoning language, destroys the very basis of the Judaic vision. When we speak disparagingly of others, we diminish them, we diminish ourselves, and we damage the very ecology of freedom.

Never take language lightly, implies the Torah. For it was through language that God created the natural world, and through language that we create and sustain our social world. It is as essential to our survival as the air we breathe.



## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

“Words are holy. In Judaism the holiest object is a Torah scroll, for it contains God's word, His greatest gift to humankind. Judaism is a religion of holy words, because it believes in a transcendental God, a God who cannot be seen, felt, touched, represented in images or icons, a God beyond the universe unlike anything within the universe. The only ultimate connection between an infinite God and finite human beings is *language*.

In revelation God speaks to us. In prayer we speak to God. Language is the narrow bridge across the abyss between soul

and soul, whether the relationship is between two people, or between myself and the Self of the universe. Language is the redemption of solitude.”

*Future Tense*, pp. 185-186

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why is the Torah Scroll the holiest object for Judaism? What is the message behind that?
2. Why does God choose to interact with humanity through words? How do we use words to interact with God?



## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why are words important to God?
2. Why are words important to humankind?
3. Can you think of an example from history or from your life where words have “created worlds” and where words have “destroyed worlds”?
4. Do you think that the punishment of *tzara'at* is a fitting one for the sin of Lashon Hara (evil speech)?
5. How can words be holy?



## QUESTION TIME

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## THE CORE IDEA

1. The message behind this classic English phrase is that we should ignore words because they are insubstantial, as opposed to physical violence (“sticks and stones may break my bones”) which can cause real and lasting pain. This is a classic expression of the British trait of showing a “stiff upper lip”, telling us to “keep calm and carry on”. However, in reality, we know that words carry tremendous power, for the good and for the bad. In fact, negative or evil words can cause real and devastating emotional damage that can impact for a lifetime.
2. Words can be holy when used by God to create worlds, communicate with mankind and develop relationships with human beings. This is why we consider the words of the Torah to be holy. Words can also be considered holy when used by humans for the greater good, just like actions for the greater good can be considered holy.
3. “Creating worlds” is not to be taken literally, in the way God created the world with words. However, words can be used creatively for tremendous good. Sometimes just a small, positive word to someone can change a life, which is what we mean by creating worlds. The world can be changed (recreated) by positive and inspiring words. And conversely, worlds can be destroyed with negative and evil words. People’s lives can be destroyed with negative or careless speech.

## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Words are powerful and can have lasting impact on the lives of people. Do not be careless with them. The Rabbi taught the old man that once careless words have been let loose, they cannot be gathered back. There is no undo or delete function on speech. This lesson is as relevant to spoken and written words (and has special relevance to the media, especially social media!) and whether there is truth behind the words does not take away from the meaning behind the story (so saying “but it’s true” is not a good defence when gossiping or speaking badly about another person).
2. Everyone has experienced pain from the words of others, whether from a sibling or friend, teacher or parent, spouse or boss. Conversely if we try hard enough we can all recall when a kind word made all the difference (and there are many inspiring stories of a kind word from a stranger preventing a person who was considering taking their own lives from doing so.)

## FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Words, like any object or resource in the world, are neutral in value, moral worth, and holiness, until used for good or bad. Words that emanate from God are by definition holy, because they are the vehicle through which God interacts and creates the world, and builds relationships with His creation. The Torah scroll is a record of these words, the words God chose to give to the Jewish people, and the world, in order to create and maintain the world, and to form and develop relationships with humanity.
2. God is infinite and beyond the finite computation possibility of any human mind. There is no common ground through which to interact with God, except words. God chose words and language to be the bridge over which we can build a “connection between an infinite God and finite human beings.” We use words to fulfil our side of this relationship. Sometimes it is hard to find the words we need, and that is why we have a liturgy of prayers written long ago by rabbis who had the spirit of prophecy and deep knowledge of our traditions, and therefore found words to give us, in the form of the prayers written in the siddur. However, any human being can find the words for themselves in order to build relationship with God, and this is encouraged.

## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Words are the way that God chose to create the world and create relationships with humans, including formal covenants. God is infinite and there is no common ground through which to interact with God, except through words. God chose words and language to be the bridge over which we can build a connection between an infinite God and finite human beings.
2. We may use words to fulfil our side of our relationship with God, through prayer. Furthermore, we can also use words to create and sustain relationships with our fellow man, and create (and have the potential to destroy) society with words – “We create – and sometimes destroy – the social universe with words.”
3. “Creating worlds” is not to be taken literally, in the way God created the world with words. However, words can be used creatively for tremendous good. Sometimes just a small positive word to someone can change a life, which is what we mean by creating worlds. The world can be changed (recreated) by positive and inspiring words. And conversely, worlds can be destroyed with negative and evil words. People’s lives can be destroyed with negative or careless speech. Examples from history can be inspiring leaders who have changed the world with their words, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi. And of course there are many examples of people from history who have used speech and language to incite hate and destroy worlds, such as Hitler or Stalin.
4. The phenomenon of *tzara’at*, leprosy in people, mildew in clothes and houses, was God’s way of making evil speech public and stigmatised. According to the Sages, this is why the speaker of *lashon hara* was smitten by leprosy and forced to live as a pariah outside the camp. The punishment for using evil speech that is designed to marginalise and ostracise your victim from the community and society, is to do exactly that to the perpetrator: *tzara’at* is a punishment ‘measure for measure’, a punishment to fit the crime.
5. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2.