



Tazria Metzora; Rosh Chodesh 2023

Isolation Redux

3 minute read | Straightforward

When a person is officially diagnosed with the skin condition the Torah calls tzaraas, the Torah imposes a mandatory seven-day quarantine; the person must leave town and live in solitary isolation. Anyone who lived through COVID has primary experience of isolation and quarantine. However difficult and unpleasant, it has the valuable function of attempting to stop contagion and transmission, saving lives in the aggregate.

Yet our sages teach that this skin condition resulted from gossip and slander, which is to say that it wasn't a contagious or transmissible condition.

So why are quarantine and isolation appropriate?

Perhaps isolation is an appropriate measure for the wrongdoing of harmful speech.

Language distinguishes humans from animals and is the tool that has built and compounded human civilization. More than smarts or strength, it is arguably humanity's most powerful tool to control and influence the world around us.

Gossip has a positive social utility, exposing genuine threats among us, like abusers and molesters. That kind of gossip is not only permitted but arguably mandatory – תועלה; but most gossip doesn't meet that standard. Most gossip is destructive speech that puts others down, modifying bonds and cohesion in an imagined social hierarchy, subtly eroding people's relationships in the perceptions of others. By lowering somebody's reputation, you can feel superior in gaining status relative to the unknowing victim.

So gossip quietly but very literally tears apart the fabric of your community and social circle by planting divisive and harmful ideas and impressions, sabotaging trust and relationships.

If that is correct, then quarantine is highly appropriate – society needs protection, not from the disease, but from the person.

And perhaps there's something else to it as well.



Beyond helping society, perhaps it helps the gossip as well. They have subverted their precious power of language for nefarious purposes, and isolation from others may help a person who gossips recalibrate how they communicate, reorienting them to their place in society when they rejoin.

Human beings are social creatures; our power of communication is what makes us human, so losing the power of communication is literally dehumanizing. Deprived of human interaction, stimulus, and activity, a person's mind must fill the void of boredom and sensory deprivation. Solitary isolation isn't a trivial thing; the prevailing view holds that, generally speaking, more than 15 days in isolation qualifies as torture; it's not hard to imagine why.

Moreover, this isn't the only time the Torah talks about isolation as a punishment; the Torah describes how the penultimate plague of darkness was experienced by its victims, primarily as a form of isolation:

לֹא־רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו וְלֹא־קָמוּ אִישׁ מִמְּתָחָיו – People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was... (10:23)

Presumably, Egyptian adults weren't like children who are scared of the dark; it's not just that it felt like blindness, it's that their worlds were isolated, completely cut off from each other – לֹא־רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו.

The Chiddushei HaRim highlights that this isolation was the worst punishment God could inflict on Egypt, short only of death itself – that people could not see each other. In a very real way, recognizing another human and moving ourselves to help them cuts to the very heart of what it means to be human, and we should take that notion seriously. Our sages go so far as to say that someone in isolation is effectively considered dead to the world.

Humans need each other; it's an existential design feature of being human – לֹא־טוֹב הָיֹוֹת הָאָדָם לְבֶדוּ.

Our most fundamental nature, the root of our behavior, is generosity, empathy, courage, and kindness. Isolation exposes what it means to be human by stripping those things away.

Perhaps by being alone for seven days, a person who gossips can appreciate their ability to communicate in a new light, cultivating a new understanding of the value of community for when they return.

Human beings are social creatures; make sure you use your precious gift of communication to build, not break. But some breaking can be constructive; not all gossip is destructive; some forms of gossip are not only permitted, but required.



A good rule of thumb that should only fail rarely is that if there is a credible threat to communal safety and wellbeing, it is better to expose the threat than suppress it. Someone's potential status of innocence should never trump everyone else's certain and definite status of safety.

Suppressing public awareness of abusers only protects and serves the interests of abusers. Exposing them is worthy of pride, not shame; utilizing gossip correctly serves to effectively isolate abusers from the general population and protects vulnerable people in our communities.

When there are dangerous folks people need to be careful around, remember that you can serve the highest of purposes in spreading the word.

Come As You Are

3 minute read | Straightforward

We often think of holiness or sanctity as the hallowed privilege of a rare few, the people who have made it, the inner circle of those who are better and wiser than us. They are the ones who can pray for us, guide us, and bring healing. Sometimes that's true; other times, that view is propounded by self-righteous, holier-than-thou folks who self-serve by making us feel that way.

That being said, it is an objective and measurable fact that some people are further on their religious journey and are more advanced on the observance spectrum.

Make no mistake that everyone has the same obligation to meet the standard of perfect observance of the Torah – so, for example, the Torah unambiguously says to keep Shabbos with no exceptions.

Yet, in the external world where theory meets practice, achieving perfection is neither possible nor actual; that standard has only ever been theoretical. We ought to know better than to hold every human to the same standard.

The only uniform standard everyone is mandated to uphold is the half-shekel donation to the Mishkan, the tiniest sum of money, a de minimis threshold contribution. This contribution went towards the foundation sockets, which compare to our threshold foundation of faith and membership of the Jewish People.

But beyond that basic common and tiny denominator, everyone is radically different. Everyone is born in a particular environment, makes mistakes, and is only capable of so much or going so far. We



know this intuitively – it is clear that, like all things in life, there must be a subjective element to religiosity by necessity, and there is.

In as much as sacrifices and the Beis HaMikdash are the domain of the privileged few, every single human may bring an offering. One form explicitly recognizes human subjectivity and meets us where we are, contingent on a person's means – קרבן עולה ויורד. While a wealthy person would bring expensive cattle, a working person would be expected to offer a pair of affordable birds, and a person in poverty would only have to provide some cheap flour:

וְאִם-לֹא תִשָּׂיג יָדוֹ לְשֵׁתֵי תְרִים אוֹ לְשֵׁנֵי בְּנֵי-יוֹנָה וְהֵבִיא אֶת-קֶרְבָּנוֹ אֲשֶׁר חָטָא עֲשִׂירֵת הָאֶפֶה סֶלֶת – And if one's means do not suffice for two turtledoves or two pigeons, that person shall bring as an offering for that of which one is guilty a tenth of an ephah of choice flour... (5:11)

Whatever the form, the result is a “pleasant scent,” which is how the Torah describes God receiving them warmly – רִיחַ נִיחֹחַ לֵה'. This is quite obviously a metaphor; burning feathers smell disgusting. And yet unmistakably, the same reception reveals that whatever the form, they are substantively the same, whether bull, bird, or flour; all are warmly embraced, with no distinction between rich and poor – נֹאמַר בַּעוֹף רִיחַ נִיחֹחַ וְנֹאמַר בַּבְּהֵמָה רִיחַ נִיחֹחַ, לֹמַר לְךָ אֶחָד הַמְרַבָּה וְאֶחָד הַמִּמְעֵיט וּבִלְבָד שִׂיכוּיִן לְבוֹ לְשִׁמִּים.

The Chafetz Chaim notes that the principle holds even while the sacrifices have lapsed. If you have the means to help others and do less than you could, you need to step up and meet your duty. To whom much is given, much is expected, and with great power comes great responsibility.

The legendary Reb Zusha of Hanipol would say that when he'd get to Heaven, he wouldn't be afraid to answer why he wasn't like Avraham, because he wasn't Avraham, nor why he wasn't like Moshe, because he wasn't Moshe. But when they would ask why he wasn't like Zusha, he'd have no answer for failing to live up to his unique potential.

As much as we all need to be better, you can only move forward from where you are. You are in the right place to do what you need to – הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֶדְמַת-קֹדֶשׁ הוּא.

One of the most powerful phrases in the Torah is when God saw the young Yishmael dying in the desert. The Midrash imagines the angels arguing against divine intervention to save Yishmael because of the atrocities his descendants would commit, but they lose the argument because God evaluates things differently. God answers the boy based on where he is and the facts and circumstances as they are here and now – בְּאֲשֶׁר הוּא שָׁם.

In your present condition and natural state, you have a key stake in Judaism and a contribution to make that matters, even before the changes you must still undergo.

You are where you're supposed to be right now, and you are enough.



Under Observation

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah describes a skin condition called tzaraas and many associated laws of diagnosis, quarantine, and rehabilitation. The Torah treats it as a spiritual affliction as opposed to having any apparent medical significance, and as such, it falls under the holiness and purity rubric of the kohen.

The Torah is deliberate and precise that the condition can only be diagnosed or treated by a kohen, the religious leaders of an era before rabbis. If the patient were a learned expert and the kohen an illiterate imbecile, the patient's status still turns on the kohen's word alone and nothing else.

If the kohen doesn't need to know what he's doing, why is the kohen a central figure at all?

Our sages understood that the condition called tzaraas was a symptom experienced by people who gossip and speak ill of others. In this light, it follows that the entire treatment process serves to rehabilitate the patient.

By requiring someone else to make the diagnosis, the Torah acknowledges that it's pretty easy to find faults in others and that it can be hard to see our own; being subjected to the judgment of another is precisely the experience you subject others to when you gossip about them.

It is easy to figure out what others are doing that feels annoying, disappointing, or hurtful. It tends to be harder to figure out what you are doing that is annoying, disappointing, or hurtful. But gossiping about what others are doing gets you nowhere, and the Torah's focus is on reorienting your interactions.

The Tur notes that when the kohen makes his determination, the Torah describes how the kohen quarantines the condition away for a week; not the person – וְהִסְגִּיר הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַנִּגַּע שְׁבַעַת יָמִים.

R' Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk highlights how the kohen must look at the condition first but then also looks at the whole person – וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַנִּגַּע / וְרָאָהוּ הַכֹּהֵן – suggesting the need to see an issue for what it is critically but to consider the totality of a person in context; their qualities and redemptive features as well.

One of the laws of diagnosis is that if the condition persists but does not spread, the kohen must declare the illness healed – וְלֹא־פָשָׂה הַנִּגַּע בְּעוֹר וְטָהַרוּ הַכֹּהֵן. When someone is in a stable medical condition, you might equally describe them as stable and therefore improving; or you might say that the lack of



improvement is a sign of deterioration, that they're not going to get better. Neither is wrong, but in terms of our orientation to the world, this law indicates a clear bias towards positivity.

R' Zusha of Hanipol observes how severe the Torah is about gossip and slander; if a person has the propensity for gossip and slander within them, they don't belong around others – כְּלִימֵי אֲשֶׁר הִנָּגַע בּוֹ יִטְמָא – טָמֵא הוּא כְּדֵד יֵשֵׁב מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה מִיָּשְׁבוֹ.

The Rema notes that this could well be someone with tzaraas on their entire body doesn't quarantine; their exterior physical condition matches their inner spiritual condition, and people will know to steer clear just by looking.

R' Yisrael Salanter sharply notes how the punishment of isolation fits the crime. The sin isn't just telling stories about others; it's specifically about finding fault in others, a sin of misappropriating a skill you're supposed to use on yourself. The Torah describes the skin healing from its nucleus but quite literally talks about inverting the eye – הִפְךָ הִנָּגַע אֶת עֵינָיו – . By placing the laws of Tzaraas next to the laws of kosher, the Torah suggests that what comes out of our mouths is just as important as what goes in. If the condition and isolation are a result of judgmental eyes, then he has healed when his eyes are fixed firmly inward.

The Rambam says that when disaster strikes, it is forbidden to treat tragedy as a chance act of nature or randomness and that all things come from God and should be catalysts for teshuvah. Our response to suffering should be humility and introspection; don't look elsewhere and blame it on those you don't like.

The Brisker Rov taught his students that the prophet Yonah fled from God, preferring to suffer rather than betray his people, but that when God sent a storm after him, he took ownership of the predicament around him – בְּשֵׁלִי הִסְעָר הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה – . In taking responsibility, you claim the power and ability to respond.

R' Asher of Stolin suggests that the Torah's approach to our personal shortcomings is to be upfront and forthcoming with them – נָגַע צָרַעַת כִּי תִהְיֶה בְּאֲדָם וְהוּבָא אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן – . A problem shared is a problem halved; when people know you have an issue, they are in a position to help you in the way you need it. With self-compassion, you can be gentle and forgiving with yourself enough to display your mistakes and vulnerabilities and can be open with trusted people about the fact that you are flawed, like everyone else. The error of gossip is hiding your faults by exposing other people's rather than doing anything. Share your flaws with trusted teachers and friends; own them before they own you.

At every step, the Torah reminds us repeatedly that we don't see things as they are; we see them as we are. Take ownership rather than point a finger.

Humans are highly subjective creatures, and we need to be mindful of how we use our ability to analyze critically. You need to take responsibility for your faults, not point fingers and place the blame



elsewhere. Acknowledging imperfections opens the door to doing something about them. Success isn't hiding your cracks or revealing others; it's in honestly confronting yourself and bringing attention to the cracks within.

When everything is someone else's fault, you will suffer a lot. When you realize everything springs from within, you will discover peace and joy.

Living with Newness

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the key skills children learn is how to read a clock; what time is it?

Beyond answering the basic question with hours and minutes, there is something deeper behind the question; knowing the time means knowing what to do. The time of day and time of year, the seasons, and the calendar establish the boundaries and time frames upon which our world is built, with specific routines for morning, afternoon, evening, and night, summer, fall, winter, and spring.

Different cultures have established various numeral systems and calendars to measure time. Today, most of the world uses the Gregorian calendar, a fixed calendar determined by how long the earth takes to make one complete orbit around the sun.

The Torah asks us to track time using the moon as a frame of reference; when people spot the new moon, they would report it to the highest court, which declares the beginning of a new month – Rosh Chodesh. It's not Rosh Chodesh because there's a new moon, but because the Jewish leaders say so. It's the very first commandment in the Torah, given to the Jewish People still enslaved in Egypt:

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשׁוֹן חֳדָשִׁים רֵאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה – This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you. (12:1)

There are lots of mitzvos, so one of them has to come first. But why is establishing the lunar calendar through Rosh Chodesh the first mitzvah as opposed to any other?

The story of the birth of the Jewish People begins at a time of stuckness, with the Jewish People systematically subjugated and oppressed, powerless objects with no choice or control over their circumstances.

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Although slavery is illegal in most of the world, it persists. Moreover, slavery isn't just a legal status; it's a state of mind, body, and soul. If you have ever felt helpless or stuck, you have experienced an element of slavery.

When we internalize that forces of change exist and that we have the power to harness and steer them, the possibilities are limitless. This moment can be different to the moments that have come before; this newness is the beginning of all newness – הַחֲדָשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשִׁים רֵאשִׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֲדָשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה –

The Shem miShmuel explains that the power of the Exodus story is that its story of freedom on a national level offers us the opportunity to become free of the tendencies and troubles that hound us on a personal level. With the power to change, hard times don't need to be so scary anymore, and the world isn't threatening; it can be full of exciting possibilities. It follows that the first mitzvah is the one that empowers us to change by giving us a symbol of change.

The sense of futility, powerlessness and stuckness that come from being burnt out or overwhelmed is poison. But as much as stuckness can come from attachment to the past, R' Nachman of Breslev teaches us to avoid dwelling too much on the future and focus on the present day and present moment.

The Torah often speaks to us in terms of here and now – הַיּוֹם / וְעַתָּה – which our sages take to mean as references to Teshuva, our capacity and power to change and repent – וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ שֶׁאֵל מֵעַמּוֹךְ כִּי וְאַנְחֵנוּ עִם מְרֻעֵיתוֹ וְצֹאן יְדוֹ הַיּוֹם אִם-בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ – אִם-לִירְאָה.

The world tracks time using the sun; the Sfas Emes notes that the nations of world history rise and fall like the sun, lasting only when things are bright. The Jewish People track time using the moon, persisting in darkness, and even generating light among total blackness.

The very first mitzvah is the lunar calendar, the only calendar with a visual cue for changing times; and a powerful symbol of change, a natural metaphorical image of a spiritual reality. It's not just an instruction to count the time but a commandment to rule over time and even natural phenomena. It's a mitzvah to live by and with the power of change and renewal.

Every day, every week, and in truth, every moment, is brand new, brimming with freshness, vitality, and renewal.

Language Redux

4 minute read | Straightforward



Humans are the apex predator on Earth.

We share this planet with thousands of species and trillions of organisms, and none but humans carry a lasting multi-generational record of knowledge of any obvious consequence. And yet, a feral human being left alone in the woods from birth to death kept separate and alive, would be not much more than an ape; our knowledge isn't because humans are smart.

It's because we speak – מדבר.

We communicate and cooperate with others through language, giving us a formidable advantage in forming groups, sharing information, and pooling workloads and specializations. Language is the mechanism by which the aggregated knowledge of human culture is transmitted, actualizing our intelligence and self-awareness, transcending separate biological organisms, and becoming one informational organism. With language, we have formed societies and built civilizations; developed science and medicine, literature and philosophy.

With language, knowledge does not fade; we can learn from the experiences of others. Without learning everything from scratch, we can use an existing knowledge base built by others to learn new things and make incrementally progressive discoveries. As one writer put it, a reader lives a thousand lives before he dies; the man who never reads lives only once.

Language doesn't just affect how we relate to each other; it affects how we relate to ourselves. We make important decisions based on thoughts and feelings influenced by words on a page or conversations with others. It has been said that with one glance at a book, you can hear the voice of another person – perhaps someone gone for millennia – speaking across the ages clearly and directly in your mind.

Considering the formidable power of communication, it follows that the Torah holds it in the highest esteem; because language is magical. Indeed, the fabric of Creation is woven with words:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי אוֹר; וַיְהִי-אוֹר (1:3) – God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

The Hebrew root word for “thing” and “word” is identical – דָּבַר / דָּבָר. R' Moshe Shapiro notes that for God – and people of integrity! – there is no distinction; giving your word creates a new reality, and a word becomes a thing. R' Shlomo Farhi points out the obvious destruction that ensues from saying one thing but meaning and doing something else entirely.

R' Jonathan Sacks notes that humans use language to create things as well. The notion of a contract or agreement is a performative utterance – things that people say to create something that wasn't there before; a relationship of mutual commitment between people, created through speech. Whether it's God giving us the Torah or a husband marrying his wife, relationships are fundamental to Judaism.



We can only build relationships and civilizations with each other when we can make commitments through language.

Recognizing the influential hold language has over us, the Torah emphasizes an abundance of caution and heavily regulates how we use language: the laws of gossip and the metzora; and the incident where Miriam and Ahron challenged Moshe; among others. Even the Torah's choice of words about the animals that boarded the Ark is careful and measured:

Of every clean creature, take seven and seven, each with their mate; and of the creatures that are not clean two, each with their mate. (7:2)

The Gemara notes that instead of using the more accurate and concise expression of “impure,” the Torah utilizes extra ink and space to articulate itself more positively – “that are not clean” – אשר לא טהרה הוא. While possibly hyperbolic, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would refer to death as “the opposite of life”; and hospital infirmaries as “places of healing.”

The Torah cautions us of the power of language repeatedly in more general settings:

Do not allow a gossip to mingle among the people; do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor: I am Hashem. (19:16)

The Torah instructs us broadly not to hurt, humiliate, deceive, or cause another person any emotional distress:

Do not wrong one another; instead, you should fear your God; for I am Hashem. (25:27)

Interestingly, both these laws end with “I am Hashem” – evoking the concept of emulating what God does; which suggests that just as God constructively uses language to create – so must we – אגני ה. The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught that as much as God creates with words, so do humans.

The Gemara teaches that verbal abuse is arguably worse than theft; you can never take back your words, but at least a thief can return the money!

The idea that language influences and impacts the world around us is the foundation of the laws of vows, which are significant enough that we open the Yom Kippur services at Kol Nidrei by addressing them.

Our sages praise people whose words God concurs with, one of which is the language of repentance. Words have the power to activate a force that predates Creation; Moshe intercedes on behalf of the



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Jewish People for the calamitous Golden Calf, and God forgives them specifically because Moshe asked – וַיֹּאמֶר ה' סְלַח־לִּי כִּדְבָרְךָ –

Of course, one major caveat to harmful speech is intent. If sharing negative information has a constructive and beneficial purpose that may prevent harm or injustice, there is no prohibition, and there might even be an obligation to protect your neighbor by conveying the information – לֹא תַעֲמִיד – על-דַם רֵעֶךָ.

As R' Jonathan Sacks powerfully said, no soul was ever saved by hate; no truth was ever proved by violence; no redemption was ever brought by holy war.

Rather than hurt and humiliate, let's use our language to educate, help and heal; because words and ideas have the power to change the world.

They're the only thing that ever has.

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - Neli@TorahRedux.com.

If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?

Neli

PS - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I broker healthcare businesses for sale; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might want to buy or sell a healthcare business!*

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.