

Tazri'a Metzora April 17, 2010 / 3 Iyyar 5770

David Goldstein decides to call his mother, Selma... "Hi Ma, How are you doing?" "Everything is fine", she says. "I'm sorry," says David, "I must have the wrong number!"

A very Jewish joke... This morning I want to talk to you about complaining and finding fault and how this keeps us from living the happy lives we want and deserve. Living critical, judgmental lives, always finding fault and focusing on what is wrong holds us back, it causes needless aggravation and rarely if ever makes things better. We need to learn to keep the little annoyances in life from getting us down, and today I want to talk about how to do that better.

One of big stories over the past two weeks has been the tragedy of the coal miners. Here in the U.S. and in China many men lost their lives in the mines. And I heard an interview with one of the miners about the scary job that they do. They asked this miner what he feared the most about his job. They work in mines deep underground and an explosion or a cave in it could be catastrophic. It's a very dangerous job. But it is interesting, in spite of all of that, and in spite of what just happened last week, that's not what he worries about the most. His greatest fear is Black Lung Disease. It's when they inhale the coal dust for so long that it coats their lungs and they can't breathe. The miner said, "It's the small stuff that kills us." And that's the way it is so many times in life.

It's not usually the big things that keep us from being happy. Most of the time, thank Gd, we are not dealing with some major crisis. The big things are rare. It is the little inconveniences and interruptions and frustrations that get to us. How we handle the little things helps to determine the kind of life that we live. We have to learn to let the little things pass. The more we focus on these small and annoying issues, the bigger they become.

This week's Torah portion focuses, by and large, on skin diseases that the Rabbis tell us are caused by speaking harshly of other people. Today we would call this illness psychosomatic. The hurtful and harsh things you say about another person can literally make you sick. Most of the time, I don't think these harsh words come from malice or out of spite. I don't think many people wake up thinking, "Today I'm going to be hurtful to someone." And I don't think that the Rabbis are coming to teach you about the people you just can't stand. Sure it's wrong to talk about them, too. There are people you know, people you may come across from time to time, who you really can't say anything nice about, but chances are you don't spend much time thinking about them. They are just not worth the energy, and so thinking about them, speaking about them is not going to make you sick. No, it's the people you really care about that you have to watch out for. We need to focus on the people we do care about, our family members, our friends, our co-workers, and understand that the way we look at them, think about them and speak to them really effects our own health. They are the people we see day in and day out, and what we say to them, the way we speak about them, really matters.

The more we focus on something negative the bigger it becomes. If you focus on what you don't like about a person, you'll train yourself to overlook all of their good

qualities. And then it sort of snowballs; the little things that this person does begin to irritate you more and more. You lose your perspective. Soon you won't even want to be around them. The Rabbis teach that this skin disease, which can take over not just your body but your entire house, starts with just a little itch. You allow little things to literally get "under your skin" and soon enough they take over your life - it's all you think about. "Why are they doing this?" "I would never do that to them?" "Don't they see how much that bothers me?" How many times do you get stressed out and up tight about something because you have made it into a big deal when really it isn't? But those little things become a big deal and we become judgmental and harsh in ways we never thought we would. It's that little bit of black dust that just starts accumulating on the inside.

So what do you do about it? Well, the Midrash gives us an idea. It says that the reason people get this skin disease is because they are "haughty". They look down their noses at other people instead of accepting them for who they are. If it is one thing that I have learned it is that you simply cannot change another person. The only person you can change is yourself. As much as you grumble under your breath, as much as you make ugly faces or churn up on the inside, they are going to be who they are, and most of the time you have to learn to accept that. So that just leaves you with two choices: You can learn to gloss over the little things and not allow them to get under your skin, or you can deal with the big things when they come.

But, chances are, the really big things are, as we said, few and far between. It's the accumulation of little things that are going to get you unless you let them just slip away. When you see yourself getting judgmental, step back, don't be harsh, don't make a mountain out of a mole hill. Don't let the little things get to you. Don't allow your buttons to be pushed. Don't let it get under your skin. You can rise above that. True, sometimes you just have to draw a line and just say, "No", and that's OK, but save that for the really big stuff, and let the little stuff go. Our job is not to fix other people, especially those close to us, as much as it is to learn how to love them for who they are.

The Tzaraat, the skin disease is not limited to the body, it effects the whole house. When you learn to be more accepting and patient of people's faults, when you don't let every little issue become a cause for comment, when you don't start conversations with judgmental remarks, you are creating a more peaceful and calm home environment. Not only are you healing yourself, you are healing your family, and isn't that what Judaism is all about?

And I know that this is not easy. If it was easy and took no work, you wouldn't need to be here, you wouldn't need Gd. But you come here to find that place of peace within yourselves and to pray to Gd to expand on that base, which is what we do here each and every week. This place is so much more than simply a room in which to watch a bar mitzvah. Each week hundreds of people come into this room to step back, regroup, and breathe deep. Each week so many of us, (and as I look around I see the heads nodding, you understand,) we come to give thanks for what is going right in our lives, to appreciate the relationships we share and to pray for the serenity to accept what is not yet working out. That's why we call this room our "Sanctuary". And if you have that calm feeling inside at this very moment, and if you are interested in finding that place of peace, I urge you to join us here for an hour,

or more if you like. Let the words, the sounds of prayer wash over you and clean that little dust of negativity that starts to accumulate, let it was away, even for a few moments. Step into our shul, and step up to a new perspective, a better view on the great life that is truly yours to enjoy when you remember to appreciate it.