

Parashat Tazria/Metzora: Words Create Reality

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Vayikra 13:45	
וְהַצְרוּעַ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ הַנֶּגַע בְּגָדָיו יִהְיוּ פְרָמִים וְרֹאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פְרוּעַ וְעַל-שִׁפְפִּים יַעֲטֶה וְטָמֵא אָמַר יִקְרָא:	As for the person with a leprous affection: their clothes shall be rent, their head shall be left bare, and their upper lip shall be covered over; and they shall call out, "Impure! Impure!"
Isaiah 22:16-17	
מִה־לָּךְ פֶּה וּמִי לָךְ פֶּה כִּי-חֲצַבְתָּ לָּךְ פֶּה קֶבֶר חֲצָבִי מְרוֹם קִבְרוֹ חֲקַקִּי בְּסֹלַע מִשְׁכָּן לוֹ: הִנֵּה יְהוָה מְטַלְטֵלְךָ טַלְטֵלָה גָּבֶר וְעֵטָךְ עֵטָה:	What have you here, and whom have you here, that you have hewn out a tomb for yourself here?— O you who have hewn your tomb on high; O you who have hollowed out for yourself an abode in the cliff! GOD is about to shake you severely, fellow, and then wear you like a wrap.
Bavli Sanhedrin 26a-26b	
מֵאִי קֶשֶׁר רְשָׁעִים? שֶׁבְנָא הוּא דְרִישׁ בִּתְלִיסָר רַבּוּתָא, חֲזַקְיָה הוּא דְרִישׁ בְּחֵד סָר רַבּוּתָא.	The Gemara asks: What is the source of the <i>halakha</i> that a conspiracy of wicked people is not counted as part of a group? Shebna , a steward and a minister in King Hezekiah's court, was a prominent and influential figure. He would teach Torah to an audience of 130,000 followers, whereas King Hezekiah would teach Torah to an audience of 110,000 followers.
כִּי אֵתָא סַנְחֲרִיב וְצָר עָלָה דִּירוּשָׁלַם, כָּתַב שֶׁבְנָא פִתְקָא שָׂדָא בְּגִירָא: "שֶׁבְנָא וְסִיעֵתוֹ הִשְׁלִימוּ, חֲזַקְיָה וְסִיעֵתוֹ לֹא הִשְׁלִימוּ." שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "כִּי הִנֵּה הַרְשָׁעִים יִדְרֹכּוּן קֶשֶׁת כּוֹנֵנוֹ חֲצֵם עַל יֶתֶר."	When Sennacherib came and besieged Jerusalem, Shebna wrote a note and shot it over the wall with an arrow. It read: Shebna and his camp have appeased Sennacherib and are ready to surrender; Hezekiah and his camp have not appeased Sennacherib. As it is stated in allusion to this incident: "For behold, the wicked bend the bow, they have made ready their arrow upon the string" (Psalms 11:2).
הוּא קָא מְסַתְפִי חֲזַקְיָה, אָמַר: דִּילְמָא חֹס וְשָׁלוֹם נְטִיָה דְעֵתִיָּה דְקִדְּשָׁא בְרִיָּה הוּא בִּתְר רַבָּא, כִּיֵּן דְרַבָּא מִימְסָרִי אִינְהוּ נְמִי מִימְסָרִי. בָּא נְבִיא וְאָמַר לוֹ: "לֹא תֵאמְרוּן קֶשֶׁר לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר הָעָם הַזֶּה קֶשֶׁר," כְּלוּמַר, קֶשֶׁר רְשָׁעִים הוּא, וְקֶשֶׁר רְשָׁעִים אֵינוֹ מִן הַמִּכְּנִין.	Hezekiah was afraid. He said: Perhaps, God forbid, the opinion of the Holy One, Blessed be He, will follow the majority; and since the majority have submitted to the Assyrians, even those who have not submitted will also be submitted into their hands. The prophet Isaiah then came and said to him: "Say not: A conspiracy, concerning all of which this people say: A conspiracy" (Isaiah 8:12). Meaning, it is a conspiracy of wicked people, and a conspiracy of

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

	<p>wicked people is not counted. Therefore, although they are many, they are not considered the majority.</p>
<p>הָלַךְ לַחצֹב לוֹ קֶבֶר בְּקִבְרֵי בֵּית דָּוִד. בָּא נָבִיא וְאָמַר לוֹ: "מָה לָּךְ פֶּה וְיָמִי לָךְ פֶּה כִּי חֲצַבְתָּ לָּךְ פֶּה קֶבֶר... הִנֵּה ה' מְטַלְטֵלְךָ טַלְטֵלָה גְּבֵרָה."</p>	<p>Shebna went to carve out a grave for himself among the graves of the house of David, as he thought that the kingship would be given to him. The prophet Isaiah then came and said to him: "What have you here, and whom have you here, that you have carved out a grave for yourself here? You, who have carved yourself out a grave on high, and hollowed a habitation for yourself in the rock? Behold, the Lord will make you wander like the wandering of a man; and he will wind you round and round" (Isaiah 22:16–17).</p>
<p>אָמַר רַב: טַלְטֵלָה דְּגֵבְרָא קָשִׁי מִדְּאִיתָתָא.</p>	<p>The Gemara mentions tangentially: Rav says that the wandering of a man is more difficult than that of a woman. He derives it from the expression "like the wandering of a man."</p>
<p>"וְעָטָךְ עֵטָה" – אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹסִי בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא: מְלִמַּד שְׁפָרְחָה בּוֹ צָרַעַת. כְּתִיב הֲכָא "וְעָטָךְ עֵטָה", וְכִתִּיב הָתָם "וְעַל שִׁפְמָה יַעֲטָה".</p>	<p>With regard to the phrase: "And he will wind you round and round," Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina, says: This teaches that Shebna developed leprosy; it is written here: "And he will wind you round and round [ve'otkha ato]," and it is written there, in the Torah, with regard to a leper: "And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall go loose, and he shall cover his upper lip [ya'tel]" (Leviticus 13:45). The Hebrew word for upper lip is from the same root as the verb in the verse cited from Isaiah.</p>
<p>"צָנוֹף יִצְנָפְךָ צָנָפָה כְּדוֹר אֶל אֶרֶץ רַחֲבַת יָדַיִם וְגו'". תֵּנָא: הוּא בִּיקָשׁ קָלוֹן בֵּית אֲדָנָיו, לְפִיכָךְ נִהַפָּךְ כְּבוֹדוֹ לְקָלוֹן. כִּי הָיָה נִפְיָק אִיהוּ, אֶתָּא גְּבַרְיָאֵל אַחֲדִיָּה לְדָשָׂא בְּאִפִּי מִשְׁרִייתִיָּה.</p>	<p>The Gemara continues to interpret the prophecy about Shebna: "He will violently roll and toss you like a ball into a large country; there you shall die, and there shall be the chariots of your glory, you shame of your lord's house" (Isaiah 22:18). A baraita taught: He, Shebna, desired shame for his master's house; therefore his glory turned to shame. This is what happened to him: When he was going out of the gate of Jerusalem to submit to the Assyrians, the angel Gabriel came and held the gate in front of his camp so they could not follow him. Consequently, he went out by himself</p>
<p>אָמְרוּ לִיָּה: מִשְׁרִייתְךָ הֵיכָא? אָמַר: הִדְרוּ בִּי. אָמְרוּ לִיָּה: אִם כֵּן, אַחֲוִי קָא מַחֲיִיכְתָּ בּוֹ! נִקְבוּהוּ בְּעֵקְבוֹ וְתִלְאוּהוּ בְּזַנְבֵּי סוּסֵיהֶם, וְהָיוּ מְגַרְרִין אוֹתוֹ עַל הַקּוֹצִים וְעַל הַבִּרְקָנִין.</p>	<p>The Assyrians said to him: Where is your camp? Shebna said: They backed out on me. They said to him: If so, you are mocking us; you led us to believe that behind you stands a large camp of supporters. They punched holes in his heels and hung him by the tails of their horses, and dragged him on the thorns and on the bristles.</p>
<p>Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Words as Vessels of Spirit," <i>Man's Quest for God</i></p>	
<p>One of the major symptoms of the general crisis existing in our world today is our lack of sensitivity to words. We use words as tools. We forget that words are a repository of the spirit. The tragedy of our times is that the vessels of the spirit are broken. We cannot approach the spirit unless we repair the vessels. Reverence for words—an awareness of the wonder of words, of the mystery of words—is an essential prerequisite for prayer. By the word of God, the world was created.</p>	