

The first two chapters of our parashah complete the preparations for the Israelites' journey to the Promised Land. Everything is in order, and expectations are high. But human immaturity brings it all crashing down. The people begin to grumble כְּמִתּוֹנִים (*k'miton'im* – as if they were complaining), an awkward, unusual word that implies passive-aggressive provocation. The verse is usually translated: “The people sought a pretext that would be evil in HaShem’s ears.” (11:1) Why would they deliberately want to vex HaShem? Rashi explains that they were exhausted and frustrated after three days of traveling, and begin to seek a way to avoid following HaShem’s laws. After the euphoria of Sinai, the reality of the long road ahead and of the covenantal restrictions on their new-found freedom sets in. Our sages portray them fleeing from Sinai like children running away from school when the lessons end. Confusing freedom with entitlement, they complain without cause, crave without gratitude, and resent others. The driving force of all of the episodes that follow is *lashon hara*, literally evil tongue. Bored with manna, they fondly remember “the fish that we ate for free (דָּגָה *khinam*) in Egypt, the watermelons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.” (11:5) Citing Exodus 5:18, when the Egyptians announced they were no longer giving the Israelite slaves straw to make their quota of bricks, Rashi interprets the word דָּגָה as free from the commandments. If the Egyptians did not give them straw for free, they certainly did not give them fish. Nostalgia does strange things to the memory! Now they cry for meat, which so unnerves Moses that he loses heart and rails against HaShem: “I cannot carry this entire people alone, it is too hard for me. If this is the way you treat me, please kill me if I have found favor in Your eyes, so that I not see my evil.” (11:15) HaShem tells him to appoint 70 elders and bring them to the *mishkan* to receive a divine spirit of prophesy to assist him in caring for the people. This leads to the next instance. A lad hears Eldad and Medad, who had also received the spirit of prophesy but did not go with the 70 elders, prophesying in the camp. He runs to tell Moses of this apparent infraction, winning the enthusiastic approval of Joshua, who calls for their punishment. Like Joseph tattling on his brothers, the lad is filled with righteous indignation, which in turn incites Moses’ trusted servant and heir. Wiser than Jakob, Moses defuses the situation with a gentle reprimand. “If only all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would bestow His spirit upon them.” (11:29) In other words, mind your own business and pay attention to how you obey the mitzvot. The Torah does make allowances for constructive criticism, but it is important to exercise scrupulous discernment – something that two people who should have known better, then famously neglect to practice. “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. They said, ‘Has the Lord spoken only to Moses? Hasn’t He spoken to us too?’ And the Lord heard.” (12:1-2) Several things are at play here: The Cushite woman, Moses’ marital responsibilities, and the apparent challenge to Moses’ authority. Is “Cushite” a racist slur or an analogy? Is the wife in question the Midianite Tziporah, or a second, Ethiopian, wife? Is the issue actually not about the woman, but about the marital relationship itself? Or is this a case of sibling rivalry? Just as Moses had rebuked Joshua and the tattletale lad, HaShem points out their error in judgement and clarifies Moses’ unique position. Then, as HaShem departs, Miriam is inflicted with *tzara’at*, the punishment for *lashon hara*, and she is banished from the camp for seven days. Why only Miriam? Perhaps because she is mentioned before Aaron, which implies that it was she who had taken the initiative. As leader of the women, she may have been moved to engage in constructive criticism regarding Moses’ marital responsibilities, justifying it by stating that all three siblings are prophets. If so, she should have gone straight to Moses rather than speaking to Aaron behind his back, even if she was only seeking Aaron’s approval and support. Seen in the light of these episodes, the famous verse in our Haftarah reading: “Not by might and not by power, but by My spirit says the Lord of hosts.” (Zechariah 4:6) implies that destruction does not begin with brute force; it begins with speech. Talmud Tractate Arachin 15b–16a discusses the destructive power of speech at length, for example: “The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: Anyone who speaks malicious speech increases his sins corresponding to the three cardinal sins: idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed.” Indeed, on Yom Kippur 20 of the 44 sins in the *al chet* confession have to do with speech! In our parashah the hopeful structure established since the beginning of the Book of Numbers is destabilized by malicious speech, which has already led to so much destruction – starting with the serpent and Chava – and will lead to much more before the Israelites reach the Promised Land. In the Haftarah portion, Zechariah tells the impoverished, demoralized Israelites that Persia is completely in control, they have no army, and they cannot rebuild the Temple by weapons, oppression, or status. They can only rebuild through moral courage, communal unity, prophetic vision, and divine spirit. In essence, the Haftarah is juxtaposing two kinds of human interaction: *Khayil* (military force) and *khoach* (strength, power, authority) versus *ruach* (spirit, Divine presence). This is the spirit that enabled the elders to assist Moses and inspires us to seek the high moral ground. Used to the brute force of slavery, the Israelites still must learn that there are better ways to resolve conflict. Sadly, we still don’t understand. Our weaponized words continue to destroy reputations, incite violence, destabilize governments, and fracture communities and families through misinformation, harassment, intimidation, fear-mongering, coded hate speech, and cynicism – in the media and in real time. We need Zechariah’s words now more than ever. They are the antidote to *lashon hara*. Our sages teach that every word is an act of creation. Let’s try to use our words to help create the peace our world so desperately needs.

Shabbat shalom!