



## Natural Healing

By Ramona Rubin, Parshat Metzora

This week's Torah portion, Metzora, can teach us about restoring balance both to creation and human society. According to the Jewish tradition, *tzaraat*, a skin disease described in this week's portion, is understood to result from *loshon hara* (gossip, or other derogatory or harmful speech)<sup>1</sup>. The portion describes the ritual healing of a person who has contracted *tzaraat*. To understand this healing in context we will examine a key cause- the sin of *loshon hara* -and the particulars of its cure. We will look at the plants used in the purification and how this teaches us about appreciating and protecting the earth's botanical diversity and healing potential.

Speech represents the articulation of identity or belief, the generative force of creation. Within Jewish taxonomy, human beings are referred to as "*medabrim*" or "speaking ones."<sup>2</sup> Our power of logic-based communication distinguishes us from the rest of creation. Our words are powerful. Through prayer and blessing we have the potential to transform our reality and the world around us. This effect of speech is evident in the laws pertaining to *tzaraat*. R' Yehoshua ben Levi explains that the *metzora* (person with *tzaraat*) is required to dwell outside the camp in solitude because their speech caused a separation between people.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the *metzora's* spiritual healing must occur in a state of separateness.

When our speech becomes blemished, a strong remedy is required to heal it.

The remedy described in the portion of Metzora comes about through a cleansing immersion process involving two wild birds, a red wool string and samples from two plant species: the cedar tree and the low-lying hyssop.<sup>4</sup> The healing process is clearly spiritual- the plants are not ingested, merely held. And yet, the Torah requires their inclusion in the process. We can understand from this that G-d is reminding us of the curative powers of plants, and invoking the symbolism found in the natural world to aid the spiritual healing of a person.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch<sup>5</sup> teaches that the ritual healing of the *metzora* is aimed at reintegrating the individual into the social community. The *metzora's* harmful words disturbed the social fabric that binds the community together, and therefore the *metzora* must go through a reintegration process involving banishment to the field outside human encampment, and a cleansing ritual that brings in elements of the natural world.

For centuries, Jewish sages understood the birds and plants involved in the healing ritual to carry symbolic lessons through the nature of their being. Rashi (France, 1040-1105) explained that two wild birds are used in this purification ritual because birds are constantly chirping and twittering,<sup>6</sup> alluding to the mindless chattering of one who slanders others. The Sfas Emes (from the early 1800's) hints that the birds represent both the harm caused through negative speech, and the powerful expression of beneficial, life-giving speech.<sup>7</sup>

The Sfas Emes also explains that the two plants used in the healing ritual- cedar and hyssop- represent two poles of being brought into harmony through the actions of the cleansing ritual. Because cedar

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grows so tall and hyssop is a lowly shrub, together they represent the highest and lowest types of plant life.

Symbolism and representation are often the most important part of any healing ritual involving plants. Herbal and homeopathic healing traditions follow a practice of recognizing the healing power of herbs based on the physical qualities of the plant, such as their shape, texture, color or resemblance to an organ. In homeopathy this is referred to as the “law of similars,” and the principle that “like cures like” is a profound one in many natural systems of healing. We are reflected in nature, and nature is reflected in us.

In the same vein, the Sfas Emes comments<sup>8</sup> that the cedar is associated with pride and haughtiness, which lead a person to speak *loshon hara*. Just as the cedar is distanced above the earth, harmful speech comes from feeling “above” or distanced from others. In contrast, hyssop grows low to the ground. The *kohen* (priest) sprinkles water on the *metzora* using a bundle of both these plants during the healing ritual to be reminded that though loftiness is part of creation, it should be countered with humility.

Because it is one of the few times that healing is discussed in the Torah, and certainly the most detailed instance, the case of the *metzora* has become a paradigm for Jewish sickness and healing. The central use of two specific plant species in the ritual is very important. Their mere presence at the ceremony is enough to reap their curative powers, probably due to the powerful symbolism described above. From this we can learn the profound importance of ensuring the survival of the vast diversity of plants on this earth.

The use of plants for healing is an ancient and time-tested practice. Exploration into the rainforest and other areas of great biodiversity has yielded riches for the medical world.<sup>9</sup> Indigenous peoples around the world maintain traditions rich in knowledge about the healing and curative powers of their local plants. Medicinal knowledge as well as agricultural practices can be learned from similar studies. We must remember that these plant foods and medicines are part of G-d’s gift to us to use for healing and result in a responsibility to pass on as resources for future generations. Like the *metzora*, we may need their presence to stay healthy.

G-d has provided us with abundance and healing through the natural world. These gifts are to be found in the specific plants and the diversity of uses in healing and nutrition. Plant medicines come to use in many different styles of healing. They are prepared in teas, tinctures, poultices and capsules, are used in cooking as seasonings and vegetables, as sources of inspiration for lab-synthesized medical products, as fragrance or oils in aromatherapy and in micro-doses in homeopathic remedies or flower essences. In the case of the *metzora*, the Torah requires their presence for the powerful symbolism they offer. The plants become our teachers, balancing specific energies and sharing metaphors for growth that impact both body and psyche.

Our role in creation is symbiotic. We are both caretakers of nature and we can also be cared for and healed through nature. Like the opposing natures of the cedar and the hyssop, we contain both extremes. Through positive speech we can build relationships within both human communities and our natural environment that will support and encourage connection and life.



**Suggested Action Items:**

- Get in touch with the healing properties of plants, by exploring herbal medicinal practices.
- Try planting your own herb garden, preferably with species native to your location.
- Learn about seed saving practices as a way of cultivating pure non-genetically modified strains of medicinal herbs.

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi on Leviticus 14:4

<sup>2</sup> Commentary of the Ra'avad on Sefer Yetzira, Chapter 1, Mishna 10. Several Jewish Scholars throughout history have been called "Ra'avad". There is a dispute as to which one wrote a commentary on the book Sefer Yetzira. According to most authorities, it was Rabbi Avraham ben David of Posqueires 1120-1197. However, the Ari"zal believed that it was a different scholar.

<sup>3</sup> Talmud Bavli (200 C.E.-~500 C.E.) Erchin 16b

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 14:4

<sup>5</sup> "Horev" Commentary of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch on the Torah, Leviticus 14

<sup>6</sup> Same as (1)

<sup>7</sup> Sfas Emes, Parshas Metzora

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see: Plotkin, Mark: *Medicine Quest*, Penguin Books, NY, 2000. and Evans-Schultes, Richard: *Ethnobotany: The Evolution of a Discipline*, Dioscorides Press, Portland, 1995.