



# THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

# IN THE PARSHA

## “A Time for Silence, a Time for Speech”

He did most of his writing and public speaking almost exactly one hundred years ago. He had no secular education, and it is doubtful that he even read the newspapers of his day. Nevertheless, he had insights into the problems of his era that were astounding, even prophetic.

His diagnosis of the ills of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century holds true even now, a century later. He understood the power of words. He knew how written and spoken language could be used as weapons to destroy humanity. How incredibly relevant his words are in our age, when words can be communicated electronically!

He based his teachings and preaching upon the verse in *Psalms* which reads:

“Who is the man who is eager for life,  
Who desires years of good fortune?”

Guard your tongue from evil,  
Your lips from deceitful speech.” (*Psalms* 34:13-14)

He took this biblical advice seriously and urged all who would listen to guard their tongues and speak no malice and no falsehood.

His name was Israel Meir HaCohen, and he named his first major work “*Chafetz Chaim*”, “Eager for Life”, after the above verse in *Psalms*. He is now part of Jewish history and forever known as the Chafetz Chaim.

His teachings have a special connection to this week’s Torah portion, *Metzora* (*Leviticus* 14 and 15), and to its *Haftarah* (*II Kings* 7:3-20). Note that there is no explicit reference in the text of our *parsha* to the theme of the negative powers of language, nor is there any such reference in the *Haftarah*.

Our text this week deals, rather, with the detailed laws of the *metzora*, usually translated as “leper”, and the selection from *II Kings* tells the story of the four lepers who dwelled outside the gates of Jerusalem, who were the first to discover the abandoned camp of the Aramean army that had laid siege to the city.

Rabbinic tradition, however, looks to understand why the *metzora* has been afflicted with his disease. The Talmud in the tractate *Arachin* understands the word *metzora* as a contraction of the phrase “*motzi shem ra*, one who spreads a ‘bad

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name” about his fellow. And so, the *metzora* has come to symbolize the person who is guilty of malicious gossip (*lashon hora*), or other abuse of words – deception, profanity, verbal assassination.

Interestingly, another early 20<sup>th</sup> century rabbinic sage, Rabbi Baruch Epstein, author of *Torah Temima*, points out that the Talmudic rabbis had the license to thus interpret the word *metzora*. This is because the usual term for the leper is “*tzarua*”, not “*metzora*.” The use of the unusual term suggests another, in this case, homiletic, meaning—he who speaks evil.

When the Chafetz Chaim urged us all to “guard our tongues” and “speak no evil”, was he suggesting that we adopt silence as a guide to our behavior, avoiding speech and self-expression entirely?

The answer to this is a resounding “no”, and this is illustrated in a fascinating story about Rabbi Israel Meir and his son-in-law, Rabbi Hershel Levinson. I found this story in a Yiddish language biography of the Chafetz Chaim, written by Moshe Mayer Yashar. An excerpted edition of this book is available in English, but without some of the more interesting and personal anecdotes.

Rabbi Hershel, the son-in-law, was a very pious man who spent his days in the study hall who seldom spoke at all. Many believed that he was even more saintly than his revered father-in-law. After all, his father-in-law spoke all over the place and taught and preached, and even joked,

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However, the Chafetz Chaim did not entirely approve of his son-in-law's avoidance of speech and devotion to almost complete silence about worldly matters. Rather, he insisted that one must use his gifts of speech, and use them widely and frequently, yet wisely and carefully.

Silence, for the Chafetz Chaim, was not the preferred way of life. Speech that carefully avoided gossip, insults, and profanity was the preferred behavior.

Today, there are groups of very well-intentioned individuals who emphasize the evils of *lashon hora*. Sometimes, I am afraid, they do so by avoiding to speak negatively when such speech is necessary. They sometimes refrain from protesting criminal behavior out of fear that, in doing so, they are maliciously gossiping about a criminal.

This was not the Chafetz Chaim's way. In the book mentioned above, by the title of which he is known to the ages, he emphasizes that there are opportunities when one must use speech to warn against sinful or dangerous individuals, or to protest breaches of Torah or of universal moral law. When negative talk has a beneficial objective, it is no longer to be considered negative, but actually becomes a *mitzvah*.

The four lepers who are described in the narrative contained in this week's

*Haftarah* were stationed outside the gates of Jerusalem because such was what the Torah required of lepers. They were to have no contact with the residents of the city, perhaps because of the fear that their condition was contagious.

They were thus doomed, in a sense, to silence. They could not communicate with their friends and family within the city's gates. And so it is no wonder, then, that when they found that the Aramean besieging Jerusalem had been abandoned overnight, their first inclination was to keep that secret to themselves. But then, in *II Kings* 7:9, they came to their senses, and their sound consciences prevailed:

"Then they said to one another,

'We are not doing right.

This is a day of good news,

And we are keeping silent!

If we wait until the light of morning,

We shall incur guilt.

Come, let us go and inform the king's palace.'

They went and called out to the gate keepers of the city

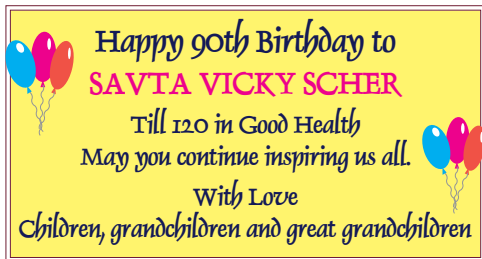
And told them..."

Words can harm, but they can also heal. This was the teaching of Rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen. It is perhaps best encapsulated in the words of *Kohelet*:

"There is a time for all things...

A time for silence

And a time for speaking" (*Ecclesiastes* 3:7) ■



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