

LASHON HARAH DAMAGES THE SANCTITY OF THE SHECHINAH

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "All the days that the lesion is upon him, he shall remain unclean. He is unclean; he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Vayikra 13:46).

Our Sages have taught (Torat Kohanim, Tazria 5:12) that the metzora [leper] was sent to live outside the three camps of the Children of Israel. The Gemara also says, "If a man has one of these four symptoms of lesions, it is nothing but an altar of atonement" (Berachot 5b). Rashi explains that this was because he was expelled from the camp and humiliated as a result.

My son once asked me why G-d commanded Moshe, on the day of the altar's inauguration, to humiliate the metzora'im [lepers] so severely by expelling them from the three camps. After all, even those who are liable to malkut [lashes], if they suffer humiliation, are exempt from receiving lashes (Makkot 22b). How are they different from those with lesions, since they receive no lashes when they endure humiliation? As for those with lesions, although they are humiliated to the point of being expelled from the three camps, they are still not exempt from punishment!

Our Sages have said, "This shall be the law of the mezora [Vayikra 14:4] – refers to one who motzi shem ra [raises an evil name, i.e., slanders]. It [the five-fold repetition of this matter in the Torah] is meant to teach that if one indulges in Lashon Harah, it is as if he has transgressed all five books of the Torah. It was for this reason that Moshe warned Israel: This shall be the law of the mezora" (Vayikra Rabba 16:6). In other words, these lesions result from the sin of Lashon Harah and slander.

This is why the Holy One, blessed be He, told Moshe on the day of the altar's inauguration that he should humiliate those who speak Lashon Harah. Why? Because when we speak Lashon Harah, G-d is, so to speak, humiliated before the hosts of Heaven. In fact the Sages state, "When the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to create man, He [first] created a group of ministering angels and said to them: 'Do you wish us to make a man in our image?' They said, 'Sovereign of the universe... "what is man, that You are mindful of him; and the son of man, that You think of him?" [Tehillim 8:5]. He then stretched out His little finger among them and consumed them with fire. The same thing occurred to a second group. A third group said to Him, 'Sovereign of the universe, how did it help the former [angels] when they spoke to You [as they did]? The whole world is Yours, and whatever You wish to do in Your world – do!' " (Sanhedrin 38b).

When man sins before G-d, the ministering angels say to Him: "Sovereign of the universe, You wanted to create man, but we did not. Now that You have created him, he has sinned and ruined Your world. What ben-

efit do You have from him being in Your world?" The Gemara also says, "When He came to the generation of the flood and the generation of the dispersion, whose deeds were corrupt, they said to Him: 'Sovereign of the universe, did not the first [group of angels] speak correctly before You?' " (ibid.).

At that point G-d is, so to speak, humiliated before the hosts of Heaven by the deeds of the wicked. That being the case, a person who speaks Lashon Harah shows absolutely no consideration for the respect owed to his Creator. Furthermore, every man has been created in the image of G-d, as it is written: "G-d created man in His image; in the image of G-d He created him" (Bereshith 1:27). Therefore when he speaks Lashon Harah about another person – made in the image of G-d – it is as if he were speaking about G-d himself. This goes without mentioning the fact that Lashon Harah itself is very serious, for it kills three people [the speaker, the listener, and the subject]. Thus the three images of G-d are humiliated, which is why the perpetrator is expelled from all three camps. Hence measure for measure, just as G-d was humiliated three times, he is expelled from the three camps.

Forsaking Jealousy and Hatred

My dear brothers, we must avoid speaking Lashon Harah. Saying something truthful about others [if it is also negative and serves no constructive purpose] is Lashon Harah as well, and by doing so we will eventually end up speaking lies. Whoever speaks Lashon Harah about a person, it is only because he wants others to hate that person as well, something which is diametrically opposed to the concept of unity. A person who respects the word of G-d will flee from Lashon Harah that is spoken about the great men of Israel. In this regard, the book Likutei Moharan states the following:

"Know that Lashon Harah causes damage and diminishes humility. In fact because of the Lashon Harah that people speak, and because of the damage that it causes, it is impossible for the tzaddikim to be humble, since Lashon Harah creates a rift between humility and wisdom. Humility is thus diminished, and it becomes impossible to be humble. Now humility is nothing without wisdom, for it is certainly not out of humility that we lower our heads out of foolishness, a kind of humility that is undignified. Humility is only valuable when accompanied by wisdom. Because of the defect caused by Lashon Harah, a rift is created between humility and wisdom, such that it is impossible to be humble. This was the great character trait of Moshe, for which the Torah extols him: He was so humble that even Lashon Harah could not affect his humility, as it is written: 'Miriam...spoke against Moshe' [Bamidbar 12:1]. There was therefore a defect in the world caused by Lashon Harah, and yet 'the man Moshe was very humble' [v.3]. In fact Moshe was at such a high level, even the defect created by Lashon Harah could do nothing to his humility."



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Consequently, when ordinary people speak Lashon Harah, they also harm the tzaddikim. In order to rectify this, great men must be in agreement with one another, and regular individuals must be careful about their words, in which case everyone will be united. Furthermore, because of the Lashon Harah that we say about another individual, people tend to view that individual differently, and they look down on him. As a result, an imperfection is created in the Divine image of that individual, the work of G-d's hands, for whom He created the world. The Sages say that Adam was created alone in order to teach that whoever harms a Jewish life, it is as if he destroyed

an entire world. That being the case, speaking Lashon Harah is considered like destroying G-d's world, a sin that cannot be rectified unless we ask forgiveness from everyone we have disparaged. If we fail to do so, this sin will accompany us to the grave. We will have to render an accounting, even in the case of a great individual.

We see that all the misfortunes which people experience start with baseless hatred. Let us therefore put an effort into forsaking jealousy and hatred, and to no longer speak Lashon Harah. We will then merit welcoming Mashiach, speedily and in our days!

Real Life Stories

The Power of Remaining Silent

At the center of this week's parsha, we find a description of all the damage caused by speech, as it is written: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Mishlei 18:21). How great is the punishment of anyone who uses his tongue to incite disputes and feuds among people, thereby dividing those who were united. Such a person will discover that his very body, his clothes, and sometimes his house will be afflicted. In parallel to this, we know how highly the Sages regarded an individual who remains silent when confronted by those who slander him, an individual who prefers to be insulted rather than to insult. Of such a man it is said, "Those who love Him will be like the sun when its rises in its might" (Judges 5:31).

What follows is a story that occurred not long ago. It is told by Rav Zilberstein in the book *Barchi Nafshi*:

"I was sitting in a Beit HaMidrash in Jerusalem when a man approached me and said, 'I was childless for many years, a situation that overwhelmed my wife and I. We went from one doctor to another in order to fulfill everyone's dream of having children. Unfortunately, nothing worked. Then one day, in the book *Aleinu Leshabeach*, I discovered a piece of advice that Rav Kanievsky generously offered to a childless man: He was to find a person who preferred to be humiliated rather than to humiliate others, and he was to ask that person for a blessing. This was how he was to be rescued from his trial. The book also recounted how the man followed this advice, and his prayers were answered in a miraculous way.'

"The man [telling me this] thought that since G-d had caused him to read this account and learn about that piece of advice, it was certainly a sign that this 'remedy' also applied to him.

"He said to me, 'I then decided that instead of pursuing medical treatments, I would go looking for a Jew who, despite enduring humiliation, does not respond or react, but accepts the insults that are heaped upon him. I would then ask him to bless me. Yet that's when doubts started to assail me: Where was I going to find such a man, whom people insult but he does not insult in return? I couldn't place an ad in newspapers saying that I was looking for such a person...and it was also unthinkable to post a flyer like this in synagogue. I then decided to get up and start tackling the problem myself. At that very instant, something incredible happened before my very eyes: Just as I was starting this process, I entered a Beit HaMidrash and saw a scene that perfectly corresponded to what I had been looking for! Several people were surrounding a single individual and insulting him...and yet he didn't react! No more, no less. This scene unfolded for several minutes, and as soon as his aggressors left, I approached him with great emotion. I told him everything that had happened to me, and I asked him for his blessing. He blessed me, and nine months later our little boy was born!'"

It is probably not necessary to linger over the lessons of this story. We should instead keep the main thing in mind, which is the greatness of an individual who, when insulted, does not respond. Anyone who conducts himself in this way must realize that he possesses special and powerful forces, and that his prayer is unlike that of an ordinary person...even if

nobody comes to ask him for a blessing.

The prayer of such an individual has the power to bring about great deliverance, both for himself and everyone around him.

This is why, at the moment when he refrains from responding to insults, he should beseech Hashem to eliminate everything that irritates him, as well as to remove all the pitfalls and obstacles that can impede his service of G-d.

Moreover, anyone who excels by not reacting when attacked realizes its greatness and miraculous abilities. Knowing that he benefits from such a great gift from Heaven, it will be easier for him to overcome this trial and remain unshakable, like a rock, before those who offend him.

Four Girls Were Engaged

Let us cite another story, one recounted in the same book and connected to the same subject:

A girl studying in a seminary in Bnei Brak went to see the gaon Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky to explain a strange situation that was affecting her entire class. Although the girls in her class were already at an age for marriage, none of them were yet engaged. She had therefore come to ask the Rav for his thoughts and advice.

The Rav told her that since everyone in her class was affected, it was certainly due to a "collective sin," and therefore they had to uncover what misdeed had rendered the entire class guilty. There were two possibilities: Either they had offended a teacher, or they had offended one of their schoolmates. The Rav's thoughts were conveyed to the girls in the class, and after having an open and sincere discussion, everyone concluded that it couldn't be due to a lack of respect for a teacher. Instead, it was probably because they had offended a certain girl in their school. The girl in question was a loner, and although none of the girls in the affected class had intentionally tried to hurt her, they had wronged her in one way or another. The offense was certainly not serious (perhaps they hadn't said hello to her in a friendly, or maybe they told her that she wasn't dressed properly), but it did exist.

A respected schoolmate was therefore sent to ask the girl for forgiveness. Yet to their great surprise, she adamantly refused to forgive them!

Her schoolmates then understood that the situation was very serious, and they realized that as long as things weren't corrected, the "blockage" in their shidduchim would continue.

They made another attempt, deciding that the whole class should go to sincerely and adamantly apologize to her. They didn't stop there, for they also took other initiatives in the hope of achieving peace. They went to see their offended schoolmate, apologized for their behavior, and promised to do everything they could to find her a good shidduch. If that weren't enough, one of the parents of these girls was prepared to pay for a professional shadchan, up to one thousand dollars, for the girl in question.

When the girl realized that her schoolmates were serious – that they truly regretted what they had done and wanted to improve their behavior – she was appeased and sincerely forgave them.

Fifteen days later, four girls in the class were engaged!

Unfit to Examine

It is written, “Wherever the eyes of the kohen can see” (Vayikra 13:12).

Our Sages deduce a lesson in regards to leprous afflictions from this verse: “We must not examine lesions on a cloudy day.” Thus a one-eyed kohen is unfit to examine such lesions, since the verse states: “Wherever the eyes [plural] of the kohen can see.”

The book *Gelilei Zahav* interprets this teaching allegorically:

“On a cloudy day” – when clouds thicken the skies of Israel, and evil decrees swoop down upon the people; “we must not examine lesions” – there is no reason to examine the faults of the Children of Israel, but instead what provoked them. We must look at their hardships, not their sins!

This is why a one-eyed kohen, meaning one who is only interested in the lesion – who does not consider the circumstances that preceded it, and who cannot judge others favorable – is unfit to examine leprous afflictions.

Open Scorn

It is written, “He is a leprous man; he is unclean. The kohen shall surely declare him unclean; his lesion is upon his head” (Vayikra 13:44).

The Ohr HaChaim asks why the verse states, “He is a leprous man” rather than, “It is leprosy,” as in the preceding verses. He answers that qualifying a man as “leprous” is more scornful and degrading than saying, “It is leprosy.” As such, the Torah is teaching us that because of his misdeeds, this man is so abhorred by G-d that He made him leprous.

In general, most lesions affect people in hidden areas, for Hashem preserves the dignity of His creations. Even when He must punish them, He does so in such a way as not to dishonor them in the eyes of others.

Nevertheless, the individual in the above verse was so abhorred by G-d that the leprosy afflicted his exposed areas: “his back or front bald area” (Vayikra 13:42). Everyone then perceived that he was scorned and despised in the eyes of Hashem, and thus in the eyes of man.

Sincere Regret

It is written, “The kohen shall look after the lesion has been washed, and behold – the lesion has not changed its appearance...you shall burn it in fire” (Vayikra 13:55).

In his book *Pituchei Chotam*, Rabbi Yaakov Abuhatzera explains how a person will sometimes sin and then, in hindsight, realize that he has transgressed and acted improperly. He will then start to change his attitude and follow the right path from then on. Fortunate is the one who does so, and fortunate is his fate. This situation is comparable to a garment that was dirty, but is then cleaned.

Deciding to behave differently (a resolution for the future) is nevertheless just one aspect of the mitzvah of repentance. Indeed, “the lesion has not changed its appearance” – the transgression has not been erased or annulled as long as the sinner has not completed the process of repentance through sincere regret and an explicit admission of sin. The verse alludes to this by stating “you shall burn it in fire” – through sincere regret that comes from the depths of the heart.

Accepting the Verdict of Heaven

It is written, “He shall be brought to the kohen” (Vayikra 14:2).

In his work *Oz Tzaddikim*, Rabbi Yosef Karo points out a particularity in the terminology of this verse. Why does it state, “He shall be brought” rather than, “He shall come [on his own],” as we see further on: “He shall come” (Vayikra 14:35)? This teaches us that if the metzora delays in presenting himself to the kohen out of fear that he will be placed in quarantine, declared impure, and humiliated, then the Torah commands that “He shall be brought” – even against his will.

Yet further on, the text uses the expression, “He shall come.” This is a warning to the afflicted individual that he must not conceal the reality of things, even if he is the only one aware of it. It follows that a person who is motivated by a fear of G-d will accept the verdict of Heaven with joy, and Hashem will show him mercy.

Garments and Man

It is written, “The kohen shall look at the lesion, and he shall quarantine the lesion for seven days” (Vayikra 13:50).

The Ohr HaChaim asks why the procedure involving tzara’at [leprosy] which appears on a garment differs from that involving tzara’at on the skin. In fact when a man is afflicted with tzara’at, he is considered unclean even before the kohen decides to quarantine him. Yet when a garment is afflicted by tzara’at, the kohen simply quarantines the individual, without declaring him unclean. Isn’t this surprising, that the Torah seems to have more consideration for garments than for people?

He responds by saying that if the kohen declares garments unclean as soon as he first sees them, they will be condemned (and burned) even if the individual repents and regrets the sin that caused this tzara’at. Now it is well known that G-d does not want us to incur suffer financial loss.

This agrees with the explanation of our Sages on the verse, “The kohen shall command, and they shall clear the house” (Vayikra 14:36), namely that Hashem safeguards the money of even the wicked.

Thus garments cannot be declared unclean at first, which is not the case for man, who can repent and rectify the damage even when the kohen declares him unclean. In fact declaring him unclean does not result in his death, but only in a temporary quarantine. When he repents, the lesion will disappear and he will once again be clean.

In the Light of the Parsha

Exile is the Result of Lashon Harah

In several instances, we note that exile is the punishment for Lashon Harah. In fact when Cain killed his brother Abel, G-d decreed: “You shall become a vagrant and wanderer on earth” (Bereshith 4:12). During that incident, Cain was clearly guilty of Lashon Harah by declaring: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” By this he meant, “I hate him so much that I can’t even stand being near him.”

Following this declaration, G-d condemned him to exile (“You shall become a vagrant and a wanderer on earth”) despite his repentance, for Lashon Harah is an extremely grave sin. We find an allusion to the connection between exile and Lashon Harah in the very words themselves: The last letters of Lashon Harah are nun and ayin, which together form the term *na*, meaning “to wander.”

I once discovered the relationship between Lashon Harah and exile, namely that exile is a measure for measure punishment for Lashon Harah. Indeed, when a person disparages his fellowman, he is attempting to denigrate him in the eyes of others so they too will discredit him and no longer trust him. By exiling the speaker of Lashon Harah, G-d puts him in a position where he is always an outsider. As a result, nobody will trust him or pay attention to his words, and he will be denigrated.

In reality, the extreme gravity of Lashon Harah stems from the fact that it leads to other sins, such as dissension, libel, talebearing, hurtful words, humiliation, lies, and sometimes even murder. In fact our Sages explain that when we transgress the commandment “you shall not hate,” we will eventually transgress the commandment “you shall not kill.” We learn this from the verse, “If he pushed him out of hatred, or threw something at him with premeditation, and he died...” (Bamidbar 35:20-21), a reflection of Cain’s killing of Abel out of simple hatred, as we have explained.

The words of the Rambam are like a beacon that has guided the steps of the great men of Israel throughout the generations. He traced the guidelines and steps to follow for assured success in the study of Torah: “Words of Torah will not be permanently acquired by a person who applies himself feebly [to obtain] them, nor by those who study amid pleasure and [an abundance] of food and drink. Rather, one must give up his life for them, constantly straining his body to the point of discomfort...”

“Similarly, Solomon said in his wisdom... ‘Af [Still], my wisdom stayed with me’ [Kohelet 2:9] – the wisdom that I acquired under af [difficult] conditions is what remained with me” (Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:12).

When the gaon Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer, the Rosh Yeshiva of Etz Chaim, had to consult a book for his studies, it was impossible to overtake him. He approached his library with impressive speed and zeal, taking out the book he required before any of his students could do it for him.

This behavior made a great impression on people. Despite his age and frailty, the Rav never allowed his students to get him a book that he wanted to consult. He always rushed to get it himself, taking a ladder with incredible dexterity and climbing it himself to retrieve a book.

Rav Shach explained that this approach had two objectives: To not disturb others, and to include this effort in his labor for Torah.

Rav Aharon Kotler elaborated upon this subject as follows: “Work and exertion whose objective is the acquisition of Torah are so valuable that it is impossible to imagine learning Torah in comfort and without effort. On the other hand, exertion not for the sake of learning Torah is not considered an effort for Torah, and therefore is not connected to it.”

A Remedy for Suffering: Torah Study

The gaon Rabbi Fischel Rabinowitz Shlita, the Rosh Yeshiva of Bayan, described one of his early friends from the Kamenitz yeshiva, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Cheshin Zatzal (author of the famous children’s book *Hamasoret*): “He was among the best in the yeshiva! He was respected by us all, and we loved to discuss Torah with him.

“Making an effort for Torah was his whole life. He wrote the majority of his Torah commentaries at night, while in pain, and as he was going to work at the cheder. At night, terrible pain prevented him from sleeping. What did he do? He arose from bed and wrote Torah commentaries until his pain abated.

“Strengthened by this experience, he would say to his students: ‘A remedy for suffering is Torah study!’

“As he walked to his job as a teacher at the Etz Chaim cheder, located in the middle of the city, he believed that it was impossible to proceed with open eyes without being confronted by indecent sights. He told his son that he prayed to Hashem each time he traveled, asking that He allow him to find new Torah explanations along the way. He himself testified that the majority of his Torah interpretations were discovered as he was on his way to work.”

I Left Him, My Soul Troubled

Concerning the gaon Rabbi Tzvi Pesach Frank, the Rav of Jerusalem, it is said that he was once extremely ill and had to be hospitalized for an operation. Before leaving, he asked that a certain volume of the Gemara be brought to the hospital for him. The delicate operation took place, and upon returning to his room, he found his entire family anxiously awaiting him. At that point he simply signaled for his son to bring him the Gemara, and he immediately returned to learning. The famous saying of King David accurately corresponded to him: “If Your Torah had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction” (Tehillim 119:92).

The gaon Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Waldenberg Zatzal came to visit Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank prior to a serious operation. He found him immersed in thought, reflecting upon faith in G-d and plumbing the depths of the holy Torah. The Rav turned to his visitor and confided to him: “King David said, ‘Fortunate is the one whose help is Jacob’s G-d, whose hope is in Hashem his G-d’ [Tehillim 146:5]. This verse means the following: Fortunate is the one who, even when his ‘help is Jacob’s G-d’ – meaning that he lacks nothing – nevertheless still puts all his ‘hope...in Hashem his G-d.’ He places all his confidence in Hashem, and does not forget that He is the One Who procures everything for him.”

After the operation, Rav Waldenberg again visited Rav Tzvi Pesach to see how he was feeling. Noticing his presence, the patient rejoiced and enthusiastically repeated the above explanation. Despite his fever and the terrible pain assailing him, he told Rav Waldenberg of his plan to publish his responsa, praying for Hashem to help him in this mission. He also asked Rav Waldenberg to bring him tractate Eruvin.

“I left him,” Rav Waldenberg said, “my soul troubled by the extraordinary sight of a man who was in a dreadful physical state, and yet he still clung to Hashem and His Torah. I then thought, ‘Who can boast of having persevered in Torah and constantly maintained such faith in G-d?’ May we attain just half the level of Rav Tzvi Pesach!”

All the Principles of Medicine

The following story took place during the last semester in which Rav Shach gave open classes at the Ponevezh yeshiva. Once during that time, he fell ill and his relatives summoned his personal doctor.

While the doctor was examining him, the Rav asked him to hurry because he had a class to give. The doctor then smiled and said to him, “You can’t even make it to the yeshiva, so how can you give a class?” However Rav Shach did not share the same view, and he asked his relatives to bring him to the yeshiva. Surprised by this, the doctor interjected: “I want to see with my own eyes how the Rav can give a class.” He therefore accompanied him to the main hall of the yeshiva, which was packed.

The doctor stood at the side of the Beit HaMidrash and observed with astonishment how Rav Shach, who was old and frail, treated a difficult issue in the sugia being studied at the time. A discussion then arose in the hall: One person raised a question, and the Rosh Yeshiva engaged in a back and forth debate. For an entire hour, a “sacred battle” ensued – an effervescent overflow of Torah that involved both heart and mind, body and soul – all in search of the truth. At the end of the class, the doctor told the students surrounding him, curious to hear what assessment he could make after listening to such a class given by the Rav: “I’m now forced to reject all the principles of medicine that I learned in university. According to these principles, Rav Shach shouldn’t even have been able to open his mouth in his current physical condition.”

Guard Your Tongue

A Real Crime

Know that it is even forbidden to scorn and denigrate the dead. The poskim have written that an ancient decree was enacted against denigrating the dead or harming their reputation. All this applies if the deceased was an ignoramus. Thus if he was a talmid chacham, how much more certain is it that the one who denigrates him commits a real crime and should be excommunicated from the community, as decreed in Yoreh Deah (243:7). The prohibition regarding a talmid chacham applies if he is being denigrated personally, and even more so if his Torah teachings are being denigrated. – Chafetz Chaim