

“This shall be the law of the metzora on the day of his purification.” (14:2)

We do not realize the power of the words that exit our mouths. Indeed, it is possible that a simple, innocuous comment made needlessly can have a far-reaching effect, as demonstrated by the following story: The Chafetz Chaim and another rav once set out on a three-day journey on a dvar mitzvah, a matter of religious significance. They stopped at an inn, whose impeccable kashrus standards were well-known, to have dinner. After the meal, the proprietress of the restaurant came over and asked them if they were pleased with their dinner. The Chafetz Chaim immediately responded in the affirmative. His co-traveler concurred, but added that a bit more salt would have enhanced the meal.

As the woman left, the Chafetz Chaim turned white and exclaimed, “I cannot believe it. All my life I have avoided hearing or speaking lashon hara. Now I travel with you, and I hear lashon hara. This is an indication that the purpose of the trip is not really a mitzvah. Otherwise, this would not have happened to me.

When his companion saw the Chafetz Chaim’s reaction, he became flustered and frightened:

“What did I say that was so bad? I only mentioned that a bit more salt would have been appreciated!”

“You do not realize the impact of your words,” cried the Chafetz Chaim. “Our hostess probably does not do her own cooking. Her cook could very well be a poor widow who has been forced to take this job to support her family. As a result of your criticism, the owner will complain to the cook, who, in self-defense, will deny the claim and say that she did put in enough salt. This will escalate to an all-out argument between the owner and the cook, resulting in the poor widow’s dismissal. So, you have caused unnecessary strife between two people, as well as a loss of livelihood for a widow and her orphans. Look at how many sins you committed with your “innocent” words. You spoke lashon hara, and you caused the owner and myself to hear lashon hara. You caused the owner to repeat the lashon hara, which created a situation in which the cook was compelled to lie. You also caused pain to a widow, and an argument between the owner and the cook. Six sins: Is that enough?”

The rabbi looked at the Chafetz Chaim, smiled and said, “You know, you are carrying this a bit far. Surely a few words could not have caused such harm.” The Chafetz Chaim said, “Come, let us go to the kitchen and see for ourselves.” They turned towards the kitchen and entered, only to hear and see everything exactly as the Chafetz Chaim described it would happen. The owner was berating the cook, who, amid tears streaming down her face, was gathering her few things together and preparing to leave the employ of the restaurant.

The rabbi absorbed all of this and felt terrible. He immediately went over to the cook and begged her forgiveness for any distress he might have caused. He pleaded with the owner to reconsider

her position vis-à-vis the cook, which she did. Indeed, she quickly remarked, “I only wanted to impress upon her the need to be more careful.”