

## **“If a person will have on the skin of his flesh a s’eis, or a sapachas, or a baheres.” (13:2)**

In the *Pleasant Way*, a collection of some of the *shmuessen*, ethical discourses, of *Horav Avraham Pam, z.l.*, a meaningful *shmuess* focuses on the root of *lashon hara*, evil speech. In his inimitable manner, *Rav Pam* lovingly explains and guides us concerning how to distance ourselves from the harmful effects of this dreadful sin. He explains the juxtaposition of *Parashas Tazria*, which discusses the laws of *tzaraas*, to *Parashas Shemini*, which addresses the laws of *Kashrus*. Just as we should be meticulous in what we ingest, we should likewise take great care in what emerges from our mouths. The consumption of forbidden foods causes *timtum ha’lev*, a spiritual malady that severely hampers one from serving Hashem. Forbidden speech does the same. We just do not realize its harmful effects, because we are so oblivious to our participation.

While in recent years there has been a strong movement to raise public awareness in regard to *lashon hara*, its effects and consequences, to a certain extent the focus is on the mouth, when actually it should be on a person’s eyes and heart. The mouth only speaks the faults that the eyes have seen and the bad feelings which the heart has felt. The mouth expresses the jealousy and insensitivity of the heart, and the faults perceived by our eyes, when we view another Jew in the wrong light.

When one cares about another Jew, he overlooks his deficiencies; he glosses over his shortcomings. We must train ourselves to react to another person’s failings as if they were those of our own children. We overlook and defend our children from their critics. Why should not all Jews be granted a similar dispensation?

By focusing on the positive aspects of every person, we curtail the urge to speak *lashon hara*. Looking for opportunities to speak well of another person – seeing the good side of that individual, finding a reason to justify his seemingly inappropriate behavior – is a sure way to prevent *lashon hara* from occurring.

*Rav Pam* comments that guarding one’s tongue is not limited exclusively to avoiding *lashon hara*. Avoiding *onoas devarim*, verbal abuse, is equally important. The *Sefer HaChinuch* writes that one should not say words that cause pain and shame to another Jew from which he cannot defend himself. Included is making another person the subject of a joke or a sharp retort.

This form of harmful speech is not necessarily intended to hurt. It is only the careless, thoughtless expression of a person who, if he would think twice, would never have said it. Yet, he did not think, he did not care, and, therefore, he hurt someone’s feelings to such a point that he has no idea how deeply and how painfully. This is forbidden speech, thoughtless speech, harmful speech.

*Rav Pam* cites the following incident to illustrate the damage of words spoken inconsiderately: A

young girl, Malke'le, saved a portion of her weekly allowance, so that she could buy her mother a small gift. Finally, she had amassed enough money to buy her mother a small, inexpensive trinket. This gift meant so much to Malke'le.

Malke'le brought the gift home all wrapped in colorful wrapping paper. Her mother was in the kitchen preparing dinner, so Malke'le placed the gift prominently in the middle of the dining room table. When her mother walked in she noticed the gift. "Where did this come from, Malke'le?" her mother asked. Malke'le was very excited when she answered, "I bought you a present, Mommy. Please open it up. You will love it."

The mother opened the package and noticed that it was a simple trinket. Without thinking, not realizing her lack of self-control, the mother blurted out, "Malke'le, why did you waste your money on this? It is worthless junk. Who needs it?"

One can only imagine what went through the young girl's mind. She was devastated. She wanted so much to please her mother, to demonstrate her love and appreciation. So what if she did not know the value of the trinket? Is that a sin? She meant well, and her actions should have been encouraged and lauded. What possessed her mother to act so heartlessly, so cruelly? Is this the action of a mean mother – or a thoughtless mother? Surely, no mother wants to hurt her child, but we often forget – or we are under pressure, and we act and speak thoughtlessly.

*Rav Pam* extends this thought to all relationships, especially the delicate relationship of marriage. Consider the following situation: A spouse "remembers" a birthday or an anniversary and buys a present. It just so happens that it was a poor choice. Let us play the Malke'le scenario at home between husband and wife. We can imagine the disappointment and hurt that an inconsiderate comment or even a sour face can create. The individual who takes a positive outlook on life will only see good and will not "lose it." He will give credit for good intentions, even if the result was not that perfect. He understands what goes on in the mind of the giver. His intentions were noble, and that is all that matters.

Last, little things make a world of difference in someone's life: a compliment, a "thank you." It is so easy to do; yet, for some individuals, it is almost impossible to give a compliment. It is almost as if complimenting another person takes away from his own stature. "Thank you" are two words that cost nothing, but mean so much. While it is important that we are meticulous in eradicating any form of forbidden speech, we should not lose focus of our obligation towards positive speech.