

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

One who is determined to correct the sin of *lashon hara* is confronted with two paradoxical issues. On the one hand, *Chazal* teach us that the Torah goes out of its way not to reveal any failing whatsoever, even in regard to an inanimate object. The *Midrash* teaches us that Hashem did not reveal the specie of the *Eitz HaDaas*, Tree of Knowledge, because an *aveirah*, sin, was actualized through it. We see this idea in regard to an animal with whom a woman had an immoral relationship: it is killed. While we understand that the woman should be put to death for her iniquity, why do we blame the “innocent” animal? *Chazal* explain that it would be improper for the animal to be walking around the marketplace in full view of the populace, so that people would remark, “That is the animal which was the cause of that woman’s death.” Seeing the animal recalls the iniquity, as well as the person who was involved. We see from here the extent to which the *Torah* goes to spare anyone any shame – even a hardened sinner.

Yet, we find a *mitzvah* in the Torah that stands in direct contradiction to this rule. The Torah in *Sefer Devarim* 24:9 admonishes us, to “Remember what Hashem, Your God, did to Miriam on the way, when you were leaving Egypt.” *Ramban* notes that this *mitzvah* is a positive commandment with the same weight as the *mitzvah*, “Remember the *Shabbos* Day to keep it holy”. We are taught to learn and remember the result of Miriam’s unfair criticism of her brother, Moshe *Rabbeinu*. The tragic punishment was *tzaraas* covering her entire body. We now wonder why, on the one hand, the Torah does not reveal the specie of the *Eitz HaDaas* due to its negative effect on mankind, but reveals – and even makes a *mitzvah* out of revealing – Miriam’s criticism and its tragic consequences? Why is the Torah not just as concerned with Miriam’s esteem as it is with the inanimate Tree of Knowledge?

*Horav Mordechai Miller, z.l.*, explains that the incident with Miriam teaches us a lesson. It is Miriam’s eternal privilege that her ordeal reminds every generation of Jews that death and life are in the power of the tongue. The prohibition of *lashon hara* does not apply when it can be helpful and meaningful to people. The Torah publicizes the episode with Miriam because we can learn from it. Her ordeal has a therapeutic effect on others, helping to guide them.

We must add that while *lashon hara* is a terrible sin with dire consequences, keeping still and not speaking up when someone’s name is being disparaged is equally reprehensible.

The Torah admonishes us in *Sefer Vayikra* 19:16, “You shall not be a gossipmonger among your people; you shall not stand aside while your fellow’s blood is shed”. One is prohibited from telling someone what others have said about him behind his back, if there is even the slightest possibility that it will cause ill will. A *rachil* is related to the word *rocheil*, peddler, because a gossipmonger is like a peddler who goes around “peddling” his filthy gossip. He is a sick person who thrives on hurting others. He is a backstabber who receives his enjoyment in life from hurting people behind

their backs.

The *pasuk* begins with the gossipmonger and ends with the enjoinder not to stand aside when our fellow's blood is being spilled. *Horav Chaim z.l., m'Volozhin* explains the juxtaposition. While it is prohibited to gossip, it is equally forbidden to stand by idly as someone's reputation is being slandered. One who is quiet, who suddenly becomes self-righteous at a time when another person's name is being sullied by people who are either sick, envious or puerile followers – who will do anything for attention – is guilty of standing by while his fellow's blood is being shed! *Lashon hara* is a dreadful sin; murder is much worse!