

Accursed is one who strikes his fellow stealthily. (27:24)

Rashi interprets this prohibition as reference to speaking *lashon hora*, slanderous speech. We do not realize the serious consequences which result from *lashon hora*. While it is true that refraining from speaking what comes to mind can be difficult, when we realize that the Torah considers it a *hakaah*, tantamount to striking someone - which most of us would never do – it might serve as a deterrent. We might say or even allude to something ethically or morally negative about someone. This statement might be overheard by someone who conveys the comment to others who embellish it. By the time the statement has been copiously enhanced, the person's reputation has been impugned, possibly destroyed, resulting in financial loss or having his child meet with increased difficulty in finding a *shidduch*, matrimonial match.

This Torah thought is not directed toward the individual who thrives on speaking *lashon hora*. Very little will prevent him from carrying out his nefarious goals. There are people, however, who, as a rule, do not seek to put down their fellow, but do respond with negativity when they are hurt. During such moments, which surface more often than we care to acknowledge, one can easily lose himself. It is to such a moment of challenge that the following inspirational story applies. The *Chafetz Chaim* writes that he heard the story from *Horav Yehoshua Heller, zl*, who heard it from his *Rebbe*, the *Nachalas David*, who heard it from *Horav Chaim Volozhiner, zl*, primary disciple of the *Gaon, zl, m'Vilna* – with whom the episode occurred.

During a certain period in the *Gaon's* life, he accepted upon himself to go into *galus*, exile. He traveled by wagon, hiring a Jewish driver to take him from place to place. One day, the driver was more tired than usual, and he started dozing behind "the wheel." As a result, the wagon went off the road and damaged a few rows of crops owned by a gentile farmer. The gentile saw this take place, and he immediately ran over to the wagon to confront the individual responsible for his loss. He came to the wagon and noticed two men in it: one was out cold, while the other was reading from some book. Assuming that the *Gaon*, who was learning, was the culprit who had damaged his crops, he began to pummel him repeatedly all over his body. The *Gaon* could have easily said that he had not been the driver, but the passenger, but that would mean that the other Jew (who was the responsible party) would get hurt.

Later on the *Gaon* was queried as to why he did not speak up. His response was, "Had I laid the blame on the wagon driver, I would have transgressed the prohibition of *Makeh reieihu baseiser*, he who strikes his fellow stealthily. Although the wagon driver is guilty, he must pay only for the damages. He is not subject to being pummeled by the gentile." Then the *Gaon* added a frightening statement: If he had not held himself back from revealing who was the guilty party – none of the Torah and *mitzvos* which he had studied and achieved throughout his life would have spared him from terrible punishment.

This is a statement from one of the greatest Jews of the last millennia, whose Torah commentary has illuminated the minds and hearts of Torah devotees for almost two centuries. So, what should

we say?