

He is to call out: “Contaminated, contaminated” ... He shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (13:45,46)

Shlomo Hamelech writes (*Sefer Mishlei* 18:21), *Maves v'chaim b'yad lashon*; “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” We can understand that slander defames a person; it can be viewed as character assassination, but murder? The victim that has been disgraced, slandered, is alive and well. Why is the act of speaking evil considered tantamount to murder? The *Baalei Mussar*, Ethicists, make a powerful statement, one which we rarely think about. When one is slandered, when one is the subject of *lashon hora*, he is no longer viewed in the same manner – even if it is a blatant lie! Subconsciously, we look at that person differently – even when we know that what we have heard is not true. The old maxim, “They don’t say those things about me/you,” is very apropos. Thus, the person that he was yesterday, before he became a *lashon hora* victim, no longer exists. He is gone from the face of the earth. A new person who has the exact same features as he does has taken his place.

I remember many years ago attending a *simcha* out-of-town. At the table were guests from various cities and stripes of religious observance. Someone whom I did not know made a casual derogatory statement about someone else, whose acquaintance I had never made. Years passed, and I met the subject of the slander. I still did not know him, but I looked at him through a different lens. That is human nature. For all intents and purposes, the *baal lashon hora*, slanderer, had years earlier murdered that person. I was looking at the mirror image of that original person, but, in my mind, he was not the same. *Lashon hora* transforms the victim. No one will ever look at him in the same manner. That is a fact.

It is for this reason that the *middah k'neged middah*, measure for measure, punishment meted out to the slanderer is *badad yeisheiv*, “he shall dwell in isolation”; even other contaminated people may not be in his proximity. Also, he must call out to whomever walks by “*Tamei! Tamei!* I am contaminated! Stay away, You do not want to go near me.” He transformed his victim into another person, so his punishment is that he, too, should become another person, one with whom no one wants to be. One caveat exists, one difference between him and his victim. He can do *teshuvah*, repent, and revert to his former self. His victim is finished. No one will ever look at him in the same way. He will always have a pall hanging over him.