

Sent forth men, if you please, and let them spy out the Land of Canaan. (13:2)

The chapter of the *meraglim*, spies, follows immediately after the closing chapter of the previous *parshah*, which details the incident of Miriam *Ha'Neviayah's* criticizing Moshe *Rabbeinu* and the consequential punishment which she experienced. Despite the fact that the spying incident took place shortly after Miriam's debacle, the spies did not learn a lesson concerning the gravity of malicious gossip. They saw what happened to Miriam, yet they still had no compunction whatsoever about slandering *Eretz Yisrael*. The commentators question this exposition (*Midrash Rabbah* 16:6; cited by *Rashi*). They quote *Chazal* in the *Talmud Arachin* 16a, who deplore the speaking of *lashon hora*, applying a *kal v'chomer*, a priori logic. The spies spoke only against stone and wood (trees and rocks of *Eretz Yisrael*); they did not slander people. Yet, they were gravely punished. How much more so should one take extreme care not to spread anything negative about a fellow Jew? It is an interesting *kal v'chomer*, but, if this is the case, how could the *meraglim* have derived any lesson from Miriam? She spoke against a person of the highest caliber. They spoke only against inanimate wood and stone.

Horav Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal, zl, offers an enlightening explanation concerning the juxtaposition of the incident of the *meraglim* upon the incident of Miriam, thereby illuminating for us a new perspective on the evil of *lashon hora*. The *Talmud Arachin* 15a posits that *teshuvah*, repentance, is not an option for one who has spoken *lashon hora*. While Torah study can serve as a preventive measure, once the evil has exited his mouth he is beyond repair. This, in and of itself, is difficult to understand. It is accepted that nothing stands in the way of *teshuvah*. Why is it that no option of *teshuvah* is available in the sin of *lashon hora*?

The **Shem MiShmuel** explains (based upon a statement in the *Talmud Bava Metziah* 58b) that, when one publicly humiliates someone, he (the one who does the humiliating) receives all of the sins of the one whom he has humiliated. Thus, *Rav* Teichtal suggests that he who slanders his fellow is no different than the *malbin pnei chavairo*, he who shames his friend. He, too, will receive all of the *aveiros*, sins, of the subject of his slander. Accordingly, one who speaks *lashon hora* against his fellow has a serious problem with regard to his *teshuvah*. One can only repent for those sins of which he is aware. Now that he has "taken on" new sins, which originally were held against the man whom he slandered, he has a new cache of sins of which he is unaware, and for which he cannot repent. One can only repent for his personal transgressions; he cannot repent for those sins, which are committed by others.

Having said this, we must acknowledge a new level of stringency concerning the *aveirah* of *lashon hora*. One who speaks *lashon hora* loses the option of *teshuvah*. His sin is irreparable. The *meraglim* spoke *lashon hora* against the Holy Land – or wood and stone. The *Talmud* considers speaking against inanimate rock and wood to be secondary to speaking against a human being. Is speaking against the Holy Land, which Hashem praises so much, something to belittle? Imagine,

Hashem praises *Eretz Yisrael* with the greatest accolades, and the *meraglim* blast the country, undermining what Hashem said about it – and this is to be considered less critical than speaking against a person. Why?

Considering the above hypothesis, which delineates the harshness of *lashon hora*, we understand that, when speaking against wood and stone, one still retains the benefit of *teshuvah* as an option to repair his sin, while for *lashon hora* against people, this option does not exist.

Since we have established the primary severity of *lashon hora*, we understand that the slanderer does not have the ability to perform *teshuvah*; thus, when one slanders a holy, virtuous man who is “sin-free,” someone of the caliber of Moshe *Rabbeinu*, our quintessential *Rebbe* and leader, the option for *teshuvah* exists – since no sin is transferred from the subject to the slanderer! We now understand why the *meraglim* could have derived a lesson from Miriam who spoke against a person, when they only spoke against wood and stone. In this regard, both the person against whom Miriam spoke and the wood and stone against which the *meraglim* spoke have one thing in common: neither has sinned, allowing for the slander against them to be “*teshuvah*-receptive.”

Nonetheless, we can hardly compare *lashon hora* against a human being to its counterpart against inanimate objects. The *meraglim* should have learned their lesson. Sadly, they did not, and that is what precipitated the reaction of *Klal Yisrael*, which became the catalyst for our eventual national day of mourning, *Tishah B’Av*. It all started when the people ignored the lesson they could have derived from Miriam.