

**“They brought forth an evil report on the land that they had spied... ‘it is a land that devours its inhabitants...we were like grasshoppers in our eyes, and so we were in their eyes.’”
(13:32-33)**

The spies returned from their mission and spread malicious lies about *Eretz Yisrael*. They said the land was made for huge and robust people, not for ordinary people like the Jews. They failed to realize that they were the beneficiaries of Hashem’s favor. Wherever they went, they noticed funerals going on. Rather than realize that Hashem was sparing them by engaging the Canaanites in funeral preparations, they were quick to charge that it was a land that devours its inhabitants. They felt especially insignificant in the eyes of the giants that lived there. This statement was especially slanderous and pure conjecture. They had no right to consider how the people viewed them. Indeed, as the *Kotzker Rebbe* posits, this was the root of their sin. They were sent on a mission. All that should have been occupying their minds was the success of the mission. The people’s attitudes towards them should not have concerned them. They were indeed looking for trouble – and they succeeded in their endeavor.

Slander, *lashon hara*, evil speech – regardless of the terminology – is one of the most destructive forces that confronts society. The first instance of this destructive form of speech takes place early in Creation. This occurs when the serpent convinced Chavah to partake of the *Eitz HaDaas*, Tree of Knowledge. He convinced Chavah that Hashem forbade them from eating of the *Eitz HaDaas* because He was jealous of them. The serpent portrayed the negative, because he saw only negative. His jaundiced perspective was at the root of his malignant tongue. The same sin was repeated by the *meraglim*, Jewish spies. Instead of seeing the positive reason for the funerals; rather than realizing that Hashem spread disease among the inhabitants so that they would be preoccupied and too busy to notice the twelve Jewish spies, they perceived it to be a destructive land that devoured its inhabitants.

Lashon hara has its genesis in the way we look at things. When we see negative, we speak evil. The person who focuses on the negative becomes a negative, unhappy person. He literally consumes himself with self-hate. Such a person goes through life seeing only the negative, judging people through his distorted perspective, building mountains of hate on the foundation of his warped and bitter point of view.

Horav Yissachar Frand, Shlita, cites *Rabbeinu Yonah* in his *Shaarei Teshuvah*, who interprets the *pasuk* in *Mishlei* 14:9, “The fool pleads a fault, but among the upright there is good will” – A fool searches for another person’s shortcomings and indicts him, while the wise man praises the one in whom a good thing is found.

The negative person is embittered, lonely and lacks any joy in his life – other than denigrating

people. When he puts someone down, he thinks that he elevates himself. Little does he realize that by degrading others, he buries himself.

Horav Isser Zalman Meltzer, z.l., exemplified the character trait of respecting all people, of seeing the Divine Image in every Jew. He was once sitting in his *succah* during *Chol HaMoed*, and he asked *Rav David Finkel* to bring him a pen and paper. *Rav David* was surprised that *Rav Isser Zalman* would write on *Chol HaMoed*. *Rav Isser Zalman* told him, "It is a matter of *pikuach nefesh*, life or death." He then proceeded to write the *pasuk* from *Mishlei* 4:25, "Let your eyes look opposite you, and your eyelids look straight before you" on the piece of paper.

When *Rav David* noticed this, he became increasingly perplexed.

What about the *pasuk* could possibly create a matter of *pikuach nefesh*? *Rav Isser Zalman* explained that during *Chol HaMoed*, hundreds of people came to visit him. Not all of his guests were noted scholars. Among the people were two mentally challenged individuals with visible and some covert failings. *Rav Isser Zalman* wanted a constant reminder that when he greeted these people, he would concentrate only on their individual good points – rather than on their faults. He remembered the *Netziv's* rendering of the *pasuk*: "When you look at someone and discern a fault, turn your eyes inward and look at yourself instead."

Rav Isser Zalman seriously felt that this *pasuk* constituted *pikuach nefesh* for him. He understood that the key to life was the ability to focus on the positive traits of people, things and situations. Otherwise, one runs the risk of becoming a lonely, embittered person, lacking any joy in life. This is only one step away from death.

If we look around the world today, we see countries that have spawned evil despots who terrorize the world. *Eretz Yisrael* is surrounded by enemies who seek every way to destroy our people. This is only sixty years after *Amalek* incarnate destroyed six-million of our brethren. There are Jews who have, regrettably, given up. How can they maintain faith through all the darkness that has accompanied us through history? What they do not realize is that it was specifically our faith in Hashem that maintained our sanity during those days of infamy. We know that we have survived, and continue to do so, only because it is the will of Hashem. If our enemies would have their way – none of us would survive.

We have been endowed with freedom of choice, the ability to choose between good and evil. It is up to us to see the good in what seems evil, to see the blessing amidst the curse. There is a poignant story that took place after World War II, between *Horav Eliezer Silver, z.l.*, and a Holocaust survivor. *Rav Silver* was one of the first American Jewish chaplains to arrive at the concentration camps. Representing the *Vaad Hatzala*, Rescue Committee under the auspices of the *Agudath HaRabbonim*, he performed wonders and saved many Jewish lives. His words of wisdom and encouragement gave hope to many a broken Jew. The sight that confronted him was beyond description. Piles of dead bodies were strewn all around, while those who were alive were

nothing more than breathing skeletons, so emaciated that they did not even cast a shadow. With tears streaming down his face, he went from survivor to survivor, speaking to them, encouraging them, attempting to raise their spirits and give them something for which to look forward. He infused life into those broken souls, and they offered gratitude to Hashem for delivering them from death. That is, most of them did – except for one man, who was visibly angry.

“I have no use for rabbis.” he exclaimed bitterly. “After what I have seen, I am finished with religion.”

Rav Silver was patient. He understood the trauma which this man had sustained. “Would you care to share with me the experience that turned you off?” he asked calmly. “Sure, I will tell you,” the man retorted. “There was a religious Jew in our camp who somehow managed to smuggle in a *Siddur*, prayer book. Do you know what he did with it? Do you want to know how he took advantage of his poor wretched brethren? If anyone wanted to pray from the *Siddur*, they had to give him their portion of bread. You should have seen all the people whose bread he took! After seeing that, I neither respect nor care for religious Jews any longer.”

“My son,” Rav Silver answered gently, “instead of focusing on the one man who demanded bread for every prayer, why do you not think about the special Jews who were willing to give up their morsel of bread so that they could pray to the Almighty?”

It is all a matter of perspective. One either looks at the positive and sees the praiseworthy aspect of a person or situation, or he falls prey to the negative in order to justify his own cynicism and bitterness. We can look at one wretched, evil man and blame religion, or we can search for the spark of good, the aspect of G-d within each soul and discover the truth of what religion can accomplish.