

This shall be the law of the metzora. (14:2)

Chazal say that the word *metzora* is an acronym for "*motzi ra*," "(he) brings forth evil." This is a reference to *lashon hora*, evil tongue/speech which is the source of *tzaraas*. Nowhere do we find a sin such as *lashon hora*, in which the punitive efforts to cleanse the individual and bring him to *teshuvah* are visited upon him in a descending order. First, his house is struck; then, his *begadim*, clothes, became *tamei* until eventually he himself is struck by Hashem. In the process, terrible pain is inflicted upon him. Moreover, the pain of loneliness, the humiliation of being cast away from the community to live alone as a recluse, is all a result of his disparaging talk. The rifts that he has caused with his foul speech are now returning to haunt him.

Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, contends that the severe punishment in store for the *baal lashon hora* is reserved for one who spreads evil through his mouth. While one must not hurt or defame another Jew through any means of communication, it is only for the wrongful use of his "tongue" that he is punished to such an extreme. Why does the *Torah* demand so much from the power of speech? What evokes such a drastic punitive response?

Horav Shmuel Truvitz, Shlita, explains that the power of speech, the ability to communicate and articulate thoughts, distinguishes man from the animal world. Regarding the *pasuk* in *Bereshis 2:7*, "*And He (Hashem) blew into his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living being*"; *Targum Unkelos* defines the phrase, "*living being*", as a "*speaking spirit*." Furthermore, to paraphrase the *Zohar Hakadosh*, "One who blows, blows from within himself," indicating that man's soul, the life of this living spirit, is in essence part of Hashem *Yisborach*. Since man's most significant characteristic is the power of speech, it makes sense that this gift be set aside to be used only for *Torah* study, prayer and other communications designated for a holy and virtuous purpose. Truly, *lashon hora* does not conform to this criterim. To defame one's speech is to take that part of him which is most G-d-like and contaminate it. Is there any wonder that the *baal lashon hora* deserves such a grave punishment?

While the most sinful form of *lashon hora* is expressed through speech, it does not decrease the impact of *lashon hora* that is effected through other means of communication. The story is told that *Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl*, was once eating breakfast together with a visitor who had come to speak to him. It so happened that there were two containers of milk on the table, both from reputable dairies who adhered to the strictest standards of *kashrus*. *Horav Feinstein* picked up one container and was about to pour milk into his coffee, when he suddenly stopped, put down the container and used the other one. The visitor who observed this thought that something was wrong with the *kashrus* of the first company. Following the "natural" procedure for spreading *lashon hora*, this thoughtless visitor took it upon himself to publicize throughout America that *Rav Moshe* prefers the *kashrus* standards of the second company. Word spread. In no time, vendors, hotels, caterers - everyone refrained from purchasing milk from the first company - all because of what one person saw, did not have the common sense to question, but had the audacity to spread *lashon hora* about.

The owners of the first company asked *Rav Moshe* what there was about their milk that did not live up to his standards. *Rav Moshe* had no idea what they were saying. In fact, that very day he had drunk that milk. What was it that made them think he did not accept their *kashrus*? When they told him about the incident involving the visitor at his home, he was shocked. He said, "I put down that container because it was empty!" Needless to say, this response was immediately publicized, to the satisfaction of the relieved owners. We see the evil workings of *lashon hora* - even when one does not mean to do any harm. This also attests to the importance of using *seichel*, common sense, before one opens his mouth.