

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

Parshiyos Tazria and *Metzora* are dedicated primarily to the deleterious effects of an uncontrolled, slanderous tongue. Various plagues which strike the human body – and even the individual's house and possessions – are all attributed in some way to *lashon hara*, evil speech, and its "derivatives." The Torah does not come out and clearly present the connection between *lashon hara* and *tzaraas*; rather, it alludes to it in *Sefer Devarim* 24:8, 9: "Beware of a *tzaraas* affliction, to be very careful and to act... Remember what Hashem, your G-d, did to Miriam." According to *Rashi*, a distinct connection exists between these *pesukim*. The affliction of *tzaraas* is a punishment for slander, gossip, and other forms of anti-social behavior. Miriam *HaNeviah's* unfair critique of her brother, Moshe *Rabbeinu*, resulted in her body being covered with *tzaraas*. The Torah is warning its readers: If you want to ensure that you do not contract *tzaraas*, do not speak *lashon hara*. Remember what happened to the righteous Prophetess Miriam, as a result of a simple criticism. The Torah is either giving a stern warning or good advice concerning the effects of *lashon hara*. This seems to be a debate among the early Biblical commentators, *Rashi*, *Rashbam* and *Ramban*. Nonetheless, one thing is clear: There is no prohibitive *mitzvah*, no clear Biblical transgression that forbids the speaking of *lashon hara*. Why? Is this sin any less pernicious than the other sins stated in the Torah? Why does *lashon hara* not warrant "*mitzvah* status"?

Horav Aryeh Leib Heyman, zl, explains that the prohibition of *lashon hara* is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah due to Hashem's kindness. The *Satan* is *mekatreg*, prosecutes, *Klal Yisrael* for those sins which are Biblically definitive, unambiguously stated. Owing to the fact that *lashon hara* is a unique sin from which one should distance oneself, Hashem took pity on us and did not include it explicitly in the Torah. Indeed, the *Zohar HaKadosh* writes: The *Satan* asks, "Is this activity not written in the Torah?" When the response is affirmative, *Satan* immediately asks, "So, why did 'so and so' do this?" Thus begins man's judgment before the Heavenly Tribunal. In order to spare us the certain fate in store for the *baal lashon hara*, Hashem did not write it prominently in the Torah.

Not all *lashon hara* is punishable by *tzaraas*. The *Talmud Arachin* 16a discusses: "What atones for *lashon hara*?" On the one hand, *tzaraas* is immediately visited upon one who slanders. Yet, *Chazal* observe that the *Korbanos Miluim*, Inauguration ritual, is juxtaposed to the description and laws concerning the *Bigdei Kehunah*, Priestly Vestments. This teaches that just as *korbanos* atone a variety of sins, so, too, does the *Kohen Gadol's* wearing of the *Bigdei Kehunah* atone for certain sins. The *Meil*, Robe, atones for the sin of *lashon hara*. If so, why is *tzaraas* visited on the person? The atonement was already effected by the *Kohen Gadol*!

Chazal explain that *tzaraas* is visited on a person whose words have a deleterious effect. An example of this is if two people end their relationship based upon the derogatory words spoken by the slanderer. However, if his words did not achieve efficacy, if they remain just "simple" reprehensible slander, he is atoned for by the *Kohen Gadol's* wearing the vestments or through the burning of the *Ketores*, Incense. This applies to *lashon hara* spoken covertly.

With the above in mind, we see that *tzaraas* is an exclusive punishment reserved only for one whose *lashon hara* has a harmful effect. If one's disparagement did not cause harm, one's atonement is "covered" by the *Bigdei Kehunah*. One issue is debatable concerning this statement. What about Miriam's critique of Moshe? What harm was generated by her words? She did not create enmity, sore feelings. Yet, she was struck with *tzaraas* to the point that she has one of the *Zechiros*, "Remembrances" dedicated to her! This is seemingly a case of *lo ahani maasav*, the actions had no detrimental effect (because it had not impact) and should be atoned for by the Priestly vestments.

In his *Shemiras HaLashon*, the *Chafetz Chaim*, *zl*, asks a similar question, wondering why the burning of the *Ketores* did not atone for Miriam's *lashon hara*. He explains that speaking against the *Adon Ha'Neviim*, Master of all Prophets, requires greater stringency. *Ketores* atones for the sins of average people speaking against individuals of parallel status. Miriam was the most distinguished woman in *Klal Yisrael*, a righteous woman among righteous women. She spoke against her brother who was the quintessential teacher and leader of *Klal Yisrael*. Such *lashon hara* does not dissipate with *Ketores*. For Miriam to return to her original status and favor, she would have to undergo severe penance. *Tzaraas* was her only way of return. Through her punishment, countless individuals would learn and understand the meaning of *lashon hara* and its consequences. She served as a vehicle for increased *kavod Shomayim*, glory of Heaven, and *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying Hashem's Name.

Rav Heyman offers his own perspective, suggesting a penetrating analysis of the meaning of *ahani maasav*. *Parashas Shelach*, which opens with the tragic episode of the spies who reconnoitered *Eretz Yisrael*, is juxtaposed to *Parashas Beha'alo-secha*, which concludes with the ill-fated story of Miriam's critique of Moshe. *Chazal* see a significant lesson to be derived by this juxtaposition. Miriam violated the prohibition of *lashon hara* for which she was punished. The *meraglim* observed what should have been a powerful lesson for everyone, yet they returned from *Eretz Yisrael* and presented a jaundiced view of the land, going so far as discouraging the nation from wanting to go further. While, clearly, their words were the nadir of *lashon hara*, they are held in greater contempt for not deriving a lesson from Miriam. They should have learned that even the truth – said covertly about one's brother – even noble intentions are considered *lashon hara*. How much more so were their slanderous words *lashon hara*. They did not learn; they ignored the lesson, therefore, they sinned.

Miriam's transgression opened the door for others to speak *lashon hara*. **She** spoke against **Moshe**. True, she was punished, but most often, people focus on the sin and the sinner, rather than delve into the punishment. If she could speak *lashon hara*, so could the *meraglim*. The *rav* goes one step further by suggesting that this is the reason that Miriam was not permitted to enter *Eretz Yisrael*. Moshe lost the opportunity due to the sin of the *Mei Merivah*, the waters of dispute; Aharon's involvement in the sin of the Golden Calf, in addition to *Mei Merivah*, sealed his fate, but why Miriam? We now understand that her few words about Moshe opened the door for the *meraglim's* slander of *Eretz Yisrael*, a sin for which all Jews paid. Miriam's words inadvertently

exacerbated their sin. Thus, she was not permitted to enter the Holy Land.