

All the days that the affliction is upon him, he shall remain impure; he is impure. He shall stay in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (13:46)

Not only must the *metzora* be isolated from pure, healthy people, but even those who are also impure are to be isolated from him (*Rashi*). The commentators debate concerning the identity of these impure ones to whom *Rashi* refers. Some say this refers to individuals who are in a severe state of impurity, such as those who have been in contact with the dead. They are not banished from all three camps – as are those who are afflicted with *tzaraas*. Others contend that *Rashi* refers to other *metzoraim*, who may not stay together outside all three camps. *Rashi* explains why there is such stringency with regard to the *metzora*'s punishment. The *metzora*'s *lashon hora*, slanderous tongue, caused a parting between a husband and wife, between a man and his colleague; he, too, shall be set apart. Malicious talk creates a rift – even though the report may be far-fetched and is probably not true. People begin to wonder, however, why he is saying this. It must be that there is some truth to his allegations. By the time the person discovers that it was nothing more than vicious slander and totally unfounded, it is too late. The damage has already been done. (More often than not, the relationship will never be the same. Recrimination sets in, since, after all, “Why did you believe slander about me,” etc?)

Horav Reuven Karlinstein, zl, supplements this with his own pragmatic explanation. It is very difficult to guard oneself from *lashon hora*, because not always is the *lashon hora* – *ra*, evil – or prohibited. In some instances, one does not only not have to refrain from speaking, but it might even be a *mitzvah*, positive, good deed to speak *lashon hora*! Let us take a standard (all too occurring) case, in which a simple, timid, unknowing friend is about to partner – or enter into a business deal – with someone whom we know with complete certainty is unscrupulous. Our friend is about to lose his savings for which he slaved for years. Is there a question as to what our reaction to this ill-fated partnership should be? Certainly, we must warn our friend to stay away and not close the deal. Is this considered to be *lashon hora*?

Furthermore, we observe a friend about to enter into a *shidduch*, matrimony, with an individual (boy or girl) who has been trouble. (Everyone claims that change has occurred. He/she is not the same person. It might be true, so you take him/her for your son/daughter.) At times, to remain silent is tantamount to transgressing the prohibition of *La saamod al dam reiacha*, “Do not stand on the blood of your fellow; do not stand idly by as your friend’s blood is being spilled.” Who would want to assume such responsibility?

Interestingly, the sin of *lashon hora* is perhaps one of the most vile transgressions that one can commit. Yet, when it comes to rendering a *halachic* decision/perspective on the appropriateness (or even *mitzvah*) of a given comment, we do not hesitate to render our judgment. We immediately (or, after some seemingly justified validation) *pasken*, decide, that what we are about to say is one hundred percent permissible. Why is this? If it is such a great sin, we should shudder to offer our

opinion regarding its authorization.

When a drop of milk falls into a pot of meat, are we so quick to render our *halachic* opinion? Who would take a chance? Why is it that, regarding the sin of slander, we do not ask the *Rav* for a *halachic* ruling if we may speak? *Lashon hora* can be more devastating than profaning *Shabbos*. Slander can kill, destroy lives, break relationships. Yet, we have no *shailos*, *halachic* queries. Why is this? What is it about slander that is so tempting that a person is prepared to throw it all away just to malign his fellow?

I came across a story which I think sheds some light on the above. A student in *Yeshivas Slabodka* approached the *Rosh Yeshivah* and posed the following question: "I have fallen victim to the sin of *lashon hora*. No matter what I do, I always end up speaking *lashon hora*. What should I do? It is a *taavah*, passion, that I seem unable to control. Can the *Rosh Yeshivah* counsel me in order to break the hold the *yetzer hora* has over me."

The *Rosh Yeshivah*, *Horav Aizik Sher, zl*, listened intently and then spoke. "You know, your father visited with me last week. We had a wonderful time together. Indeed, your father is truly a distinguished man. By the way, are you able to speak *lashon hora* against your father? Does your *yetzer hora* come into play when it concerns your father?"

"No, I have no *yetzer hora* whatsoever to speak against my father," the student replied.

"Do you feel that, with regard to your father, you are able to overcome the challenge of speaking *lashon hora*?" the *Rosh Yeshivah* asked. "Absolutely not. It is no challenge at all. I simply have no *taavah*, desire, to speak ill of my father," the student reiterated.

"Why is this? What is there about your father (or your relationship with him) that precludes your speaking negatively about him?"

"Not only do I not speak against my father – if I ever hear anything negative about him, I become so angry that I am unable to speak until I do something about it!" the student emphasized.

"So then, what is it? What is the key to this anomaly?" The young man replied, "I love my father! I would never speak ill of him!"

"If this is the case, you have the solution to your problem concerning *lashon hora*. If you would learn to love your fellow, your desire to speak *lashon hora* would dissipate. It is all about caring about your fellow," said the *Rosh Yeshivah*.

This is why we speak *lashon hora*. There is a smoldering ember of animus within us that hates, and this disdain provokes us to lose control of our senses and speak *lashon hora*. The only solution to the problem is to train ourselves to like, to love, to care, to put our fellow before ourselves – only

then are we protected against the scourge of *lashon hora*.