

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

The Torah devotes no less than 115 *pesukim* (*Tazria-Metzora*) to the various forms of *tzaraas* and their purification process. Clearly the lengthy focus on *tzaraas* indicates the significance the Torah extends to the precursor of *tzaraas*: *lashon hora*, evil/slandering speech. The *motzi shem ra*, individual who uses his tongue to propagate negative information about a fellow Jew, is the one who becomes the *tzaraas* victim. Thus, the *parshiyos* dealing with the *tzaraas* plagues indicate the severity of *lashon hora*. Interestingly, the only allusion in the Torah that connects *tzaraas* with *lashon hora* is in *Devarim* 24:8,9 when the Torah admonishes us to beware of a *tzaraas*. This *pasuk* is juxtaposed upon the stipulation to remember what happened to Miriam *HaNeviah* when she criticized her brother, Moshe *Rabbeinu*. This was not a public slander; rather, Miriam's concern over Moshe's marriage, which she privately intimated to none other than her other brother, Aharon *HaKohen*. Yet, this became the classic example of *lashon hora* in the Torah.

The *Rishonim* debate whether the adjuration to remember what happened to Miriam is, in fact, a *mitzvah* or just that, an *eitzah tovah*, sound piece of good advice, to protect oneself from falling into the abyss of *lashon hora*. *Rashi* views the remembrance as a warning about what can happen if we are not careful. If it could happen to Miriam *HaNeviah*, what can we say? *Ramban* considers it to be a *mitzvah* similar to remembering *Shabbos* and remembering to obliterate Amalek's name. It is a *mitzvah* that Hashem gave us as a tool in our battle against the scourge of evil speech. *Ramban* offers his extensive commentary, concluding by asking how one can surmise that a sin which is equal to murder (because one can kill with a slanderous tongue. This is why it is called character "assassination") should not have a prohibitive *mitzvah* (*lo saaseh*) or negative derivative from a positive *mitzvah* (*laav ha'bah michlal ase*) to underscore its interdiction.

Concerning *Ramban's* question as to why there is no explicit prohibition (*lo saaseh*) banning one from speaking *lashon hora*, *Horav Aryeh Leib Heyman, zl*, explains that other prohibitions similarly are not distinctly expressed in the Torah. As to why *lashon hora* in particular, he suggests that the Satan is able to prosecute us only when we transgress an explicit *mitzvah* in the Torah. The sin of *lashon hora* is so rampant, touching almost everyone, that Hashem took pity and did not record it definitively in the Torah – to sort of diminish the prohibition and undermine Satan's prosecutorial power.

As an aside, *Rav Heyman* wonders what provoked Miriam to speak against/question Moshe's behavior *vis-à-vis* his wife. It is not as if she was speaking about a regular member of the Jewish community. Moshe was its quintessential leader, a man who had spent forty days and nights in Heaven, who regularly spoke with Hashem. Clearly, to question him and express negative feelings concerning his behavior took extraordinary intrepidity, a gutsiness which one would not expect from Miriam.

Rav Heyman explains that the situation reverts to eighty years earlier when Amram, the leader of the Jewish People in Egypt, separated from his wife, Yocheved, as a preemptive move, so that

others would follow his example. He conjectured – no wife – no children – no children – no Jewish babies for Pharaoh's guards to drown. Miriam was then a young girl of six years old, who stood up to her father with the indictment that his decree was more unjust than Pharaoh's, whose decree was only against the Jewish boys. Amram's decree would negate the possibility of having children – period – no boys – no girls. Amram shared his daughter's views with the *Sanhedrin* who agreed, and everyone returned to their respective wives.

Fast forward eighty years, and Miriam observes what she feels is another injustice – this time perpetrated by her distinguished brother – who was now *Klal Yisrael's* leader. Miriam respected leadership, but when she felt that leadership had rendered an unsound decision, she spoke up. This time, however, she erred. Her courage was derived from an incident that had taken place eighty years earlier. Things had changed, and the decisions which the leadership rendered were different. What was then righteous indignation was today *lashon hora*. Moshe was not Amram, and Miriam was no longer a young girl. Today she was a *Neviyah*. People had changed, and so had expectations.