

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

The *metzora* is one who is ritually contaminated due to a physical manifestation of a spiritually-induced disease, sort of a spiritual leprosy. The term *metzora* is an acronym for *motzi shem ra*, “one who brings forth a bad name” (*Arachin* 15), engages in evil, slanderous, vulgar speech. It is a broad term which applies to one who uses his mouth to disparage and hurt others. It is not, however, always about vulgarity and disparaging; it is about decency and sanctity, recognizing that the power of speech is a gift from G-d, which is meant to distinguish us from animals. Speech should not be deceptive. It should be a form of communication which is respectable and demonstrates that the individual who is speaking is refined. Silence is a form of speech when used appropriately. Silence that ignores is not much worse than speech that negates. Rather than use the word “nice” to describe a Jew’s speech, I would use the term “kind.” Jewish speech should be kind, meaningful, benevolent. Indeed, it should be *lashon tov*. This is often manifest in the way that we react to someone’s success, or the control we exert when things do not go our way, such that frustration and even anger take hold of us. Let us first address the way we react to another’s success. Do we pay a compliment? Or do we negate his achievement? Or do we just ignore him and his success?

Our reaction to someone else’s success, as mentioned, can be broken down into three forms: the negative reaction, in which one denigrates and finds fault; the indifferent reaction, whereby one simply disregards his fellow’s success/good fortune as if it had not occurred; the positive reaction, which includes accolades, compliments, and best wishes for the future. One who ignores his fellow’s success is no less jaundiced than his invidious counterpart who is openly negative. Neither one can tolerate another person’s success. Pay a compliment – *lashon tov*? Good speech? This is the farthest thing from his mind. Why? It costs nothing to pay a compliment, to be kind, to make someone smile, to empower someone. Yet some of us act as if paying a compliment would diminish our own self-worth. Envy is a powerful deterrent. One whose self-esteem is already low will find himself hard-pressed to say something nice about someone else, for fear that it would compromise his own self-esteem even more.

We all know that most people appreciate a compliment. One who puts time and effort into a project appreciates it when his work is positively recognized. We all like to hear good things about ourselves. Deep down it bothers us when someone who is (supposedly) a good friend ignores our accomplishment. What is it with these people? I gleaned the following idea from a paper written by a respected psychologist. Compliments can trigger our own insecurities. Recognizing that a fellow has an admirable quality or achievement causes us to focus on ourselves and on our own inadequacies. Why could I not have done that? I am just as smart and capable – yet, here I am and there he is. When we are compelled to pay a compliment, when we express our admiration and esteem to someone else, we introspect as if to say, “I could never have done that. I could never have done it as well. I could never look so good or be as accomplished as you.” To be able to laud someone else requires a hefty dose of self-confidence.

Some people see no need to compliment others because they themselves feel self-conscious when they receive compliments. Thus, since they do not appreciate a compliment, why should they bother putting another person in the same uncomfortable position? Such a person views a compliment with suspicion. What does he want from me? Why is he complimenting me? He is about to ask me for a favor, otherwise why would he be flattering me?

Compliments make us vulnerable. When I offer a compliment, I am implying that I took notice and was impressed. By expressing my praise, I put myself in a position which could catalyze my rejection. Does he think I want something from him? Perhaps he wonders what right I have to judge him. Do I think that I am better than he is, that I dole out compliments?

Last is the individual who feels that offering a compliment shifts the balance of power. He fears being perceived as weak. By complimenting someone, am I elevating him over myself? A relationship often involves a power struggle. Am I abdicating my position to him by offering him a compliment?

All of the above are pertinent issues which anyone who is interested in positive personal growth will work through. In conclusion, the inability to render proper recognition of another's achievement is a personal failing which must be counteracted in order to maintain positive relationships and to grow in personal character as *bonei Torah* and as human beings. *Lashon hora* is not only about speaking negatively or ignoring someone; it is about making a consummate effort to think and speak benevolently of others. The greater our focus is on the positive, the less chance exists that we might utter something negative about someone.

Saying something kind not only makes a person feel good, but it can transform the lives of the benefactor as well as his beneficiary. The following story underscores this idea.

The heroine of the story was living in Germany in the late 1930's, when Hitler's anti-Semitic diatribes were becoming more virulent and the Nazis were carrying out threats with impunity. She was living with her husband and two children in a small town, and decided that if they were going to survive, they had to leave the country. Without a visa, however, it was impossible to leave. The good news arrived in the way of information that a small number of visas for Jews was available in the office in Berlin. Her husband could not leave his job, so she decided it was her responsibility to do what she could to save her family. She boarded the train for Berlin with the hope that she would return that night with four visas.

She arrived in Berlin and immediately took a taxi to the address where the visas were to be available. When she reached the designated office, she was greeted by dozens of men and women who were also applying for the precious visas – to no avail. One mean-looking, bored German bureaucrat was sitting at a desk. He refused to acknowledge anyone. Hours passed, and the people suffered in silence. It was foolish to complain. The Germans did not require an excuse or a reason to punish a Jew. Suddenly, after waiting all day, the bureaucrat stood up, looked at the

people and, with a loud contempt-filled voice, announced, "No more visas today. Come back tomorrow!"

The thought of going through the same ordeal again pushed some people to the brink, but what could they do? Our heroine had to find a place to spend the night. She was at her wits end, but she had to dig in and try again. Without visas, she and her family's lives were at stake. She found a room for the night, and, bright and early the next day, she presented herself at the office. The line was shorter, because some people had lost patience. She did not have that luxury. She had no idea how many visas were available. Despite the people who had left, a crowd was still waiting.

Hours passed in fear and silence. These people knew what going home without a visa meant. The bureaucrat continued to ignore them as if they did not exist, as he continued with his paperwork. Late in the afternoon, the bureaucrat broke the silence when he stood up and made another loud announcement: "No visas today. Everyone must go home!" The people were crestfallen; the shock too much to bear. They could no longer hold their quiet, and they responded with declarations of anger. Their pent-up emotions were frazzled and, with raw anger, they exploded at the bureaucrat.

The woman who had waited patiently for two days was tired, starved, and emotionally spent. How could she return home empty-handed? It was a death warrant for them all. She was about to join the chorus of despair when she decided to do something else – something that no one would have expected. She went over to the bureaucrat's desk, leaned over and said to him, "I would like to thank you for all your time. I am sure that your job is not easy. I would like to wish you a good day." She then slowly turned around and walked out of the room. She walked down the hall with the little strength she had left, her head held high, knowing that she was returning to despair and possibly worse. Suddenly, she heard a voice calling out to her. She turned around to see the bureaucrat running towards her with a handful of papers, "Here, I have visas for you!" She was saved, because she had controlled her emotions and said something kind to a man who probably did not deserve it. She realized that he must have had a small number of visas about which he had to decide to whom he would give them and whom he would ignore. Whatever he would do would cause a riot. So he ignored everyone. She had no idea what prompted him to act in such an ignoble manner, but she was not about to allow his despicable manner to shape her character. Neither should we. We come across people who are good at bringing out the worst in us. We should not permit their contemptible actions to influence our character.