

This shall be the law of the metzora on the day of his purification. (14:2)

Taharah, purity from sin, can only be achieved once the sinner has repented. While repentance addresses the sin between man and Hashem, the hurt that he has caused his fellow can only be ameliorated once he sincerely asks for *mechilah*, forgiveness. Otherwise, he has achieved nothing. What about the sin of *lashon hora*, whereby one has slandered his fellow, but the fellow is unaware of this incursion? Does the *baal lashon hora* need to meet with his victim and inform him, “I spoke *lashon hora* about you, and I would like to beg your forgiveness”? Why not let “sleeping dogs lie” (a metaphoric expression advising against disturbing a situation that is currently calm or trouble-free)? By leaving things undisturbed when they are functioning smoothly, we prevent unnecessary complications. Why should this be different? What the victim does not know will not hurt him.

The *halachic* ruling concerning this question is actually a debate between two giants of the *mussar*/Torah world: The *Chafetz Chaim* and *Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl*. The *Chafetz Chaim*, who wrote the “book” on the laws concerning *lashon hora*, rules that the slanderer must inform the victim that he spoke *lashon hora* against him. Otherwise, he is really unable to ask *mechilah*, forgiveness. One cannot sincerely absolve someone of guilt, if he does not know for what and why he is forgiving him. When the *Chafetz Chaim* completed his *mussar* magnum opus, *Shemiras HaLashon*, “Guard Your Tongue,” he sought the approbation of *Rav Yisrael Salanter*.

Rav Yisrael replied that he would be pleased to give his *haskamah*, approbation, after he had reviewed the *sefer* cover to cover. The *Chafetz Chaim* happily agreed to leave the *sefer* with him. A few days passed, and *Rav Yisrael* told the *Chafetz Chaim* that he had reviewed the entire *sefer* and everything that is contained therein was true. However, he took issue with one *halachah*: If one speaks *lashon hora* against someone, and the victim is unaware of the deed, the slanderer must inform him and then ask *mechilah*. “It is forbidden to inform a person that he spoke *lashon hora* against him because this will cause him pain,” was *Rav Yisrael*’s *p’sak*, ruling. “I can approve the *sefer* if you delete this *halachah*.”

The *Chafetz Chaim* felt strongly that the victim must be informed. He was prepared to forgo the *haskamah* of the *gadol hador*, preeminent Torah leader of the generation, because he felt that he was correct. He then asked if *Rav Yisrael* could render his *haskamah*, but add a footnote that he did not agree with the above *halachah*. *Rav Yisrael* refused, asserting that people do not read the entire *haskamah* word for word. They see the name of who approved of the *sefer* – and nothing else. Since it was possible that his approbation might serve as a *michshol*, stumbling block, he just could not do it. This is why no *haskamah* from *Rav Yisrael Salanter* is in the book.

Horav Moshe Shternbuch, Shlita, writes that, years earlier, he had received a letter from *Horav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, zl* (*Michtav MeiEliyahu*), in which he ruled in agreement with *Rav Yisrael Salanter*.