

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

One sins – he is punished. It is as simple as that. *Lashon hora*, the sin of slanderous speech, is apparently different. Shortly after he commits the act of defaming his fellow, he is visited by various *negaim*, plagues, which first appear on the walls of his house. Then, if his scurrilous activity does not cease, he will see the plague make an appearance on his clothes. If he still does not get the message, he becomes a *metzora*, spiritual leper, which requires him to be removed from the community and take up residence in isolation. It seems that the slanderer must go through an elaborate process of ascending punishment. Whatever happened to old-fashioned *mussar*, rebuke? When we see someone blatantly commit an *aveirah*, sin, we reprove him – at first, subtly. If his deficient behavior does not change, he becomes a candidate for punishment. He does not receive multiple subtle messages. What makes the *baal lashon hora* different?

The *baal lashon hora* does not believe that he has committed a sin. On the contrary, he may even posit that he is performing a public service by letting people know what kind of a scoundrel the subject of his slander is. Additionally, he feels that a few negative words will not have such a terrible impact. It is difficult to rebuke someone who thinks that he is a hero. He certainly is no sinner – in his warped mind. He does not realize the hurt that he is causing his fellow. A few well-placed slanderous words can destroy a person. I recently attended a wedding at which I met someone whom I had not seen in many years. I had great difficulty shaking his hand. Why? Because decades ago, I had attended a *simchah* and sat at a table with a group of young men – all from fine backgrounds. In the course of the conversation, someone made a snide remark about this person, which had a terrible connotation. I overheard the comment and, sadly, never forgot it. The slanderer probably did not have sinister intentions. He simply did not care, and, as a result, he destroyed someone's reputation [I must add that I am probably at fault for not having ignored that remark.] This is why the *metzora* is isolated from the community. He will experience a pain similar to what his victim sustained as a result of his sinful speech. The isolation will give him the opportunity to think about and confront the reality of the hurt and humiliation that he caused.

Slander does not necessarily involve untrue allegations spoken with malicious intent. Even the truth spoken innocuously can have a deleterious effect on someone's reputation. The harm goes far beyond the immediate verbal exchange. It can damage a person's reputation, destroy relationships and deprive him of opportunities for growth. The nature of the slander is obviously worse if it is false. The slanderer may come up with a number of reasons to justify his actions. He may even apologize and make nice. Unfortunately, it is often too late. The bullet has hit its mark, and the damage has been done.