

Three Weeks of Building Part 1

A collection of inspiring essays on the topic
of Shemiras Halashon

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Introduction

There was once a woman who had terrible shalom bayis in her home, and she, therefore, went to her rav to seek his advice. She begged him to help her, because all she really wanted was to restore the peace and harmony in her home, and she was willing to do all it takes to get there. So, the rav advised her to treat her husband like she's a newlywed wife. The next day, when her husband will be out, she should prepare the most delicious supper, clean the house to sparkling clean, purchase a present, and wear her nicest Shabbos clothing, as an attempt to convince her husband that she is trying her utmost to find his favor.

And so she did. The very next day, she worked very hard cleaning all the floors and counters in the house, and shopped for a special gift. She took out her old cookbooks from when she was a kallah, and found a wonderful recipe for a delicious supper. She wore her nicest clothing and jewelry, and had everything ready for when her husband would return.

Finally, her husband walked in, and she faced the biggest surprise. Her husband began crying and screaming. "Enough and enough," he said. "You mean you're trying to bribe me with presents?! It's your behaviors that are repulsive to me, not the dress and the pieces of chicken! This is not what I want! I want real change, change of your behaviors and the way you talk to me, not presents and sweets!"

[Think for a moment. Can you imagine how terrible that wife felt? Can you imagine her pain and her emotions, hearing all that?]

So, she went back to the rav, and the rav said, "I guess there must be a lot more work that must be done. If this is the case, then it's going to take weeks, if not months, of real work on your character, to restore the shalom bayis."

In the words of the Neviim we find many strong words of rebuke, however, perhaps the most powerful of all of them is what we learn on Shabbos Chazon. There the Navi Yeshaya tells us:

שְׁמָעוּ דְּבַר יְהוָה קְצִינֵי סֶדוֹם Listen to the words of Hashem chiefs of Sedom ..

While the Bais Hamikdash was still standing, we wanted to have shalom bayis between Hashem and us [Klal Yisroel], and to that end, we did things to find Hashem's favor. We prepared many fatty animals for karbanos, but the Navi tells us:

לָמָּה לִּי רַב זִבְחֵיכֶם יֹאמֶר יְהוָה שָׂבַעְתִּי עֲלֹת אֵילִים וְחֶלֶב מְרִיאִים וְדָם פְּרִים וּכְבָשִׁים וְעִתּוּדִים לֹא חָפְצָתִי
Why do I need your numerous sacrifices? says Hashem. I am satiated with the karbanos of rams and the fats of the fatty animals; the blood of bulls, sheep, and goats I do not desire.

[Hashem says he is not interested in our karbanos!]

Whole families would gather together and make the pilgrimage to the Bais Hamikdash, to find Hashem's favor. And the Navi says:

כִּי תָבֹאוּ לִרְאוֹת פָּנַי מִי בִקֵּשׁ זֹאת מִיָּדְכֶם רֶמֶס הַצֹּרִי: לֹא תוֹסִיפוּ הִבִּיא מִנְחַת שְׁוֹא קִטְרֶת תוֹעֵבָה הִיא לִי וְגו'
When you come to appear before Me, who sought this from your hand, to trample My

courtyards? Bring your worthless meal-offerings no more; it is incense of displeasure and repulsiveness to Me.

We would buy expensive lulavim and esrogim, build beautiful sukkos, and purchase expensive matzos, but Hashem says ..

Your Rosh Chodesh and holidays are appalling to Me, they are for Me a burden. I am tired of carrying them.

We would daven heartfelt tefillos, but Hashem says ...

When you spread your hands to daven, I will hide My eyes from you. Even if you were to intensify your davening I will not listen; your hands are filled with blood.

So, what is it that Hashem wants from us, we ask?

And the Navi says:

Wash yourselves, purify yourselves, remove the evil of your deeds from before My eyes, cease doing evil.

In essence, Hashem has told us, that the reason for the churban, is like the mashal we mentioned earlier; Hashem says, He doesn't want lip service, He doesn't want presents, and He doesn't want bribes. He wants real change.

So, what is it that we must change? What is it that we must fix?

The Chid"l, Ariza"l, and others explain to us, based on Chaza"l, that the first Bais Hamikdash was destroyed because of the three aveiros chamuros, עריות, עבודה זרה גילוי עריות, and lashon hara. However, the second Bais Hamikdash was destroyed because of the sin of lashon hara and sinas chinom. And, just as the aveira of lashon hara is more severe than the three aveiros chamuros combined, so too, this gallus is longer than the previous gallus. Hence, until we rectify this aveira of lashon hara, we can't expect this long and bitter galus to end.

The Mahara"l, in his sefer Nesivos Oilam (Nesiv Lev Tov Ch. 1), writes that the longevity of this gallus cannot be blamed on anything else, other than the aveira of lashon hara.

Similarly, the Chafetz Chaim is quoted (see Sefer Shemiras Halashon with Orchos Chaim pg. 38, footnote 20) as saying that there hasn't been a single period in Klal Yisroel that the aveira of lashon hara was at least part of the cause of the tzaros.

The passuk tells us that after the Moshe Rabbeinu said חטא העם הזה חטא העגל אנא חטא העם הזה חטא העגל גדולה.

Why was Moshe magnifying the aveira of Klal Yisroel, shouldn't he have been trying to minimize it?

One of our great sages explained this with a mashal as follows:

There was once a father that saw his son mischievously running on the roof of a building, so he scolded at his child that he must stop such behavior. A short while later, the father found his son again doing the same on the roof, so this time his father went and also hit his son, and warned him that he must stop doing such a dangerous thing. Shortly

thereafter, the child went again to the roof top, and this time the child fell off. The child broke a couple of bones, was bleeding, and screaming for help. Some children ran to call the father, and the father came running to help his child. Some of the children thought the father now would surely yell at his child, but the father didn't. Someone actually went and asked this to the father, why aren't you punishing your son for this? To which the father replied, now is not the time for me to punish or rebuke him. Now is the time that I care for him, and show him my greatest love. Now, when he is injured, he can't handle my rebuke, and he also greatly needs my help. After all, he is my son, whom I love so dearly. I only give him rebuke so that he shouldn't fall into such a thing, but now that he has, of course I will take care of him and do everything possible that he should get healed. My entire purpose is that he should be the healthiest and most well-behaved child.

So too, Moshe Rabbeinu told Hashem, that because Klal Yisroel have done such a terrible aveira they aren't ready for rebuke, rather now is the time to treat them like a father and lift them up.

And the same is true, once the Bais Hamikdash was destroyed. In fact, this is precisely what the Midrash tells us.

The Midrash (Eicha Rabba, Pesicha, 24) reads as follows:

וכיון שנשרף אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא שוב אין לי מושב בארץ, אסלק שכונתי ממנה ואעלה למכוני הראשון, הדיא הוא דכתיב (הושע ה, טו): אלה אשובה אל מקומי עד אשר יאשמו ובקשו פני. באותה שעה היה הקדוש ברוך הוא בוכה ואומר אזי לי מה עשיתי, השריתי שכונתי למטה בשביל ישראל, ועכשו שחטאו חזרתי למקומי הראשון, חס ושלום שהייתי שחוק לגוים ולעג לבריות, באותה שעה בא מטטרו"ן ונפל על פניו ואמר לפניו, רבונו של עולם אני אבכה ואתה לא תבכה, אמר לו אם אין אתה מניח לי לבכות עכשו, אכנס למקום שאין לך רשות לכנס ואבכה, שנאמר (ירמיה יג, יז): ואם לא תשמעוה במסותרים תבכה נפשי מפני גוה וגו'. אמר להן הקדוש ברוך הוא למלאכי השרת באו ונלך אני ואתם ונראה בביתי מה עשו אויבים בו, מיד הלך הקדוש ברוך הוא ומלאכי השרת וירמיה לפניו, וכיון שראה הקדוש ברוך הוא את בית המקדש, אמר בודאי זהו ביתי וזהו מנוחתי שבאו אויבים ועשו בו פרצונם. באותה שעה היה הקדוש ברוך הוא בוכה ואומר אזי לי על ביתי, בני היכן אתם, כהני היכן אתם, אוהבי היכן אתם, מה אעשה לכם, התריתי בכם ולא חזרתם בתשובה. אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לירמיה, אני דומה היום לאדם שהיה לו בן יחיד ועשה לו חפה ומת בתוך חפתו

In short, the Midrash tells us, that after the Bais Hamikdash was destroyed, Hashem, כביכול, cried terribly for the loss of the Bais Hamikdash, and Hashem said it was like losing an only child on the day of their chuppa. Hashem cried for the loss of the Bais Hamikdash and for the tzora of Klal Yisroel, His beloved children. Hashem cried with such passion, that He said if you will try to stop me, I will go to a place where you can't enter, and cry there.

As such, in a certain sense, during the time of churban it is easier for us to get close to Him and find His favor. Hashem has certainly not abandoned us, and waits anxiously for our teshuva. He loves us, even more than we love ourselves. He is just waiting for us to show that we truly love Him.

And, how do we show Him that we truly love Him?

By showing true love to every single Yid! With caring for all our brethren, not speaking lashon hara about them, or hurting them in any way, we are showing love to Hashem.

May we be zoche soon in our days, to see all of this come to reality, with complete teshuva by all of Klal Yisroel, so that Hashem will see how we really want to change, and may we then be zoche to see the coming of Moshiach! Amen.

Essay 1: Seeing the Positive

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The passuk in Parshas Shelach tells us of the aveira of the Meraglim, and how they got so terribly punished. The gemara tells us that their aveira was in essence the sin of lashon hara. Rash"i in Chumash adds, that the Meraglim should have learned from seeing how Miriam got punished for lashon hara, and because they didn't, they were so severely punished.

The Chafetz Chaim (hilchos lashon hara klal 5, seif 7) writes, that based on words of the Sefer Yereim we can learn that it is also an aveira to speak negatively about objects, when it causes harm to its owners. Seemingly, from the writing of the Chafetz Chaim, this is a chiddush that needed its own source, that there is an aveira of lashon hara even with such statements.

If that's the case, we can wonder, why then were the Meraglim expected to learn from Miriam, when seemingly their incident was so different? Miriam spoke about Moshe Rabbeinu, a person, whereas, the Meraglim spoke about Eretz Yisrael, an object. Why were they so accountable, when, perhaps, they simply weren't aware of this chiddush?

We find another puzzling thing in the same parsha. The passuk states that Klal Yisroel were punished to wander in the midbar for forty years as punishment, midda kneged midda for the forty days that the Meraglim spent spying Eretz Yisroel. Asks Hagaon Rav Chaim Shmulevitz Zt"l, why were they punished for the days of spying? The spying itself wasn't the aveira, the aveira was the reporting negatively, which was only for a day or less, not forty days?

To answer these questions, we should quote a very interesting note of the Chafetz Chaim. The Chafetz Chaim (hilchos lashon hara klal 1, seif?, in hagah) writes that we can learn from the wording of the passuk, תֵּלֵךְ רַכִּיל בְּעַמֶּךָ, that since the Torah used the word תֵּלֵךְ—walking, that even walking to say lashon hara, or even to see something to be able to say lashon hara, is also part of the aveira. The Chafetz Chaim writes, that later he found that the Shel"a also writes the same thing.

This itself needs explanation, we don't find by any other aveira that the walking to do the aveira is itself part of the aveira. For example, there is no source to tell us that walking to a store to buy treif food, as preparation for eating it, is considered as part of the aveira. So why here does the Torah include the preparation as part of the aveira?

I think, that the answer to this question, lies in the words of the Ramba"m. The Ramba"m generally uses the Torah's words when talking about a lav. It would follow, that we would assume the Ramba"m would do the same thing writing about lashon hara. As such, I would think the Ramba"m would write הִמְרִיגַל בַּחֲבִירוֹ עוֹבֵר בְּלֹא תַעֲשֶׂה like the wording of the Torah הִמְרִיגַל בַּחֲבִירוֹ (Hilchos Deos 7;1). However, the Ramba"m writes (Hilchos Deos 7;1) עוֹבֵר בְּלֹא תַעֲשֶׂה שְׁנֵאֵמַר לֹא תֵלֵךְ רַכִּיל בְּעַמֶּיךָ. The Ramba"m used the word מְרַגֵּל, which means someone who spies on his friend, like the word meraglim. The Ramba"m is לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְכַאֲוֵרֶא

us, that the root of the aveira of lashon hara is the spying and looking at the shortcomings of one's friend.

The Sefer Orchos Tzadikim writes that baalei lashon hara are compared to a fly, that doesn't get attracted to the good parts of the meat, rather, only to the filthy parts of it. So too, the baalei lashon hara always seek out the negative aspects of their victims. The Rosh Hayeshiva, Hagaon Rav Shneur Kotler Zt"l, would add, that these flies, don't talk at all, they only look and find the negative, nevertheless, this is what the baalei lashon hara are compared to, because the searching for the negative is the root of the aveira.

With this we can answer our questions that we began with. It is only the aveira of lashon hara that even the walking for it is part of the aveira. The reason is because seeking out the bad is the root and, perhaps, the main part of the aveira. We can now understand why the Meraglim should have learned from Miriam, because although she spoke about a person and they about land, nevertheless, the root of their aveira was much worse. Miriam wasn't at all searching for a shortcoming; she had meant leshem Shomayim. She was nevertheless punished for not fully judging properly, which, for her great madreiga, was considered an aveira. The Meraglim's aveira was much worse, they searched for the negative, and they should have learned from Miriam that such behavior is certainly punishable.

We can now also understand why the dor was punished according to the amount of the days traveled, because that was all part of the aveira, and, in fact, the root of the aveira.

The passuk says: מי האיש החפץ חיים אוהב ימים לראות טוב נצור לשונך מרע. Some mefarshim explain, the passuk is saying, מי האיש החפץ חיים אוהב ימים Who wants life?

לראות טוב You have to search for good!

This is just as we earlier explained, the root of the aveira is how we look at others!

To illustrate this, it's worth mentioning the following story, which I heard many times from the Rosh Yeshiva Hagaon Rav Shneur Kotler Zt"l, about my wife's great-grandfather, Hagaon Rav Issar Zalman Meltzer Zt"l (1870-1953), a great Talmid Chochom and Tzaddik. Rav Issar Zalman Meltzer was sitting in his home one Chol HaMoed, with his nephew Rav Dovid Finkel, and Rav Issar Zalman asked Rav Dovid Finkel to bring him a pencil and paper to write something down. This was very surprising, because Harav Isser Zalman wouldn't write anything on Chol Hamoed, not even his chidushei Torah. Rav Dovid Finkel questioned his mentor, "Rebbe, how can you write something down, it is Chol HaMoed?" Rav Issar Zalman responded that the issue is a matter of great urgency, "almost like a life and death issue".

Rav Dovid Finkel became all concerned and asked, "Rebbe, what's wrong? What is the matter with you?" Rav Issar Zalman brushed him off. "There is nothing really the matter. It is just that for me this is something almost akin to a life-or-death matter."

Rav Dovid Finkel brought the pencil and paper and Rav Issar Zalman wrote down a pasuk from Mishlei [4:25] "Let your eyes look ahead, and your eyes will direct your path."

Rav Dovid Finkel was perplexed. "This was the life-or-death matter — just to write down a pasuk that you already knew by heart?"

Rav Issar Zalman explained. “Hundreds and hundreds of Yidden come to visit me and wish me ‘Gut Yom Tov’ during the course of Chol HaMoed. Some of the people who come are not the most distinguished residents of Yerushalayim. Included among those, are many who I know that they have aveiros and evil traits, yet, I have to sit here, patiently, with person after person and smile. I may get tempted to think about some of the visitors’ faults, so I need something to hold me back. Every year, before Chol HaMoed, I write down this pasuk to remind me of its homiletic interpretation: ‘When your eyes look at someone else, turn your eyes inward’. (In other words ‘Do not look at HIS shortcomings, look at your own shortcomings’.) This is critically important to me, to have this pasuk sitting on my desk so that I will not criticize (mentally) those visitors. I absolutely need that. When people come in, I look at this pasuk and think to myself ‘Do not think about them; think about yourself’. This year, I forgot to write down the pasuk before Yom Tov. For me, it was vital to write down the pasuk — even on Chol HaMoed!”

Rav Issar Zalman felt that this behavior — of just thinking negatively of the faults of others — was truly akin to a matter of life or death!

We, perhaps, are not on the madreiga of Rav Issar Zalman, but we should learn from him the grave importance of not even thinking negatively of others!

Let’s conclude with a story about Hagaon Rav Eliezer Silver Zt”l, which was quoted by Harav Eliyahu Baruch Finkel Zt”l. One time, after World War II, Rav Eliezer Silver met a Yid who had left the path of Yiddishkeit, r”l. Rav Silver approached him to discuss it, and asked the fellow why he isn’t observant. The fellow explained as follows: that he lived through the concentration camps, and after witnessing one incident he decided that there’s no way he will remain religious. He said that there was only one individual in the camp who had a siddur, and everyone wanted to borrow the siddur. However, the individual would only lend the siddur to those that gave him their ration of food. So, I told myself if someone could be so cruel like that, then I’m not being religious. To that, Rav Silver responded, that true it was so cruel for that Yid to act like that, but how about looking at the other side of the story. Look how many Yidden were moiser nefesh and willing to give their ration of food, just to be able to daven from a siddur! If you want, you can see the amazing beautiful side of that very story, so why look at the negative?

This is in essence the lesson of shemiras halashon: Just focus on the abundance of positive, and not on the minimal negative!

Essay 2: Judging Favorably

Harav Avigdor Nebenzahl Shlit"a

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The episode of Yosef and his brothers as described for us in Parshas Vayeshev, is a very difficult one to discuss. Although we cannot fully comprehend the actions of the early generations and determine the precise nature of their sins, however, until this point we always knew who was the "good guy" and who was the "bad guy". When it came to Kayin and Hevel it was obvious who we should identify with. The same may be said regarding Avraham and Lot, Avraham and Amrafel, Yitzchak and Yishmael, Yaakov and Esav. Out of each of these pairs it was clear whose side we were on, and whose side we were not on. When it comes to Yosef and his brothers, this distinction between "good" and "bad" becomes more complex, for both sides of the dispute were tzaddikim gemurim! "Kulam ahuvim kulam berurim" "All are beloved, all are flawless", all were giants of the world. All of their names are inscribed on the shoulders and heart of the Kohen Gadol (see Shemos 28:12 and 28:29) "in order that that the Holy One Blessed is He, should see the names of the Tribes written before Him and give thought to their righteousness" (Rashi Shemos 28:12). Despite this, there is a terrible feud between them, senseless hatred, ganging up with intent to kill their own brother and in the end selling him into slavery! How can we begin to understand this?

The fact is that what transpired here is well beyond our comprehension, we have no grasp of these giants - not of their righteousness and not of their sins. However, given that this chapter is included in the Torah, we are obligated to study and analyze it, as best we can. We must realize, however, that our understanding will be limited and we cannot hope to comprehend matters fully.

At face value, the very idea of trying to kill such a tzaddik, and in the end sell him into slavery seems preposterous and terrible indeed. On the other hand, if Yosef truly deserved this punishment, how could he have done something so terrible as to deserve it?

The Torah tells us: "then they took him, and cast him into the pit ... and they sat to eat bread" (Bereishis 37:24-25). Why does the Torah need to tell us that they sat down to eat bread? The Torah wishes to provide us with some insight as to what precisely took place. The halacha states: "a Sanhedrin who carried out a death penalty cannot eat that entire day" (Sanhedrin 63a) (This is one of the many halachos derived from the pasuk "you shall not eat over the blood" (Vayikra 19:26)). What then gives them the right to sit and eat after having just sentenced their brother to death and having carried out the sentence by casting him into a pit filled with snakes and scorpions? The brothers clearly did not arrive at a halachic ruling that Yosef should be sentenced to death, for otherwise they would not have sat down to eat. Furthermore, following the brothers judging of Yosef, Yehuda arises saying: "What gain will there be if we kill our brother and cover up his blood, come let us sell him to the Ishmaelites - but let our hand not be upon him" (Bereishis 37:26-27). If Yosef was really guilty of a capital crime then the death penalty cannot be substituted with selling him to the Ishmaelites or any other punishment. The

Torah tells us: "you shall not accept ransom for the life of a murderer who is worthy of death" Bamidbar 35:31).

If, on the other hand, they felt that he was not deserving of the death penalty, what right did they have to throw him into the pit? Chazal, after all comment: "'The pit was empty no water was in it' (Bereishis 37:24), from the plain meaning of what is stated 'and the pit was empty' do I not know that no water was in it? Rather, what teaching does the Torah mean to convey when it states 'no water was in it'? Water was not in the pit, but snakes and scorpions were in it" (Shabbos 22a). Even had Yosef not met his death through the bite of a snake or the sting of a scorpion, he would have eventually died of starvation, G-d forbid! Without a clear "psak" of the Sanhedrin that a person must be killed, it is forbidden to kill that person.

The answer here is that the brothers were not sentencing Yosef to death for involvement in an ordinary capital crime. They were rather judging him as a "rodef", a person who is perceived as dangerous and liable to kill another person. The halacha permits killing such a person. However, the halacha mandates that should there be an alternate way of being saved from the situation then it would be forbidden to kill him (see Rambam Hilchos Rotzeach UShmiras HaNefesh 1:7). The "rodef" may only be killed when there is no other means of escape from him. It was for this reason that the moment Yehuda made the suggestion to sell Yosef into slavery as a means of ridding themselves of this "rodef", they all accepted his suggestion and agreed to follow his advice. If they can accomplish their goal of getting rid of him without actually killing him, then why kill him, rather sell him into slavery!

What brought the brothers to such a monstrous conclusion regarding Yosef? Although "Yosef would bring evil reports of them to their father" (Bereishis 37:2), is that reason to suspect him of planning some sinister plot? The brothers feared that history was repeating itself, that this was just another chapter in the story of the previous two generations. Avraham Avinu had many sons, yet only one of them was chosen as heir not only to the Holy Land but to continue Avraham's legacy as well - Yishmael and the sons of Ketura were shunted aside. The same thing happened in the following generation - of Yitzchak's two sons, only Yaakov was chosen to inherit Eretz Yisrael and to be the spiritual heir, Esav was cast aside. Although Esav shouted in protest (see Bereishis 27:34-38), it did not help him, it was Yaakov who received the Land of Israel and the entire spiritual legacy of Avraham Avinu, while Esav was told "your brother you shall serve" (ibid. 40).

Yosef's brothers felt that he too was planning to oust his brothers from the spiritual legacy of their three forefathers, leaving him alone to inherit, and to take for himself the blessing that Yaakov had received from his father: "Be a lord to your brothers" (ibid. 29). This would mean that at best case the brothers would be his slaves (as appears from the dreams he related to them), and in a worst case scenario they would be cast away from Eretz Yisrael to a faraway land, as Avraham had done to his sons from Ketura (see Bereishis 25:6, and Rashi there). The brothers thus viewed Yosef as a very dangerous "rodef" who "wished to take their lives - to remove them from this world, the Next World, or both" (Sforno Bereishis 37:18).

Their allegations, of course, were unfounded. Yosef meant no harm, the brothers may have hated him, but he harbored no hatred towards them, rather, he loved them. The reason Yosef brought these reports to his father regarding his brothers, was not to "persecute" them, but rather for their own good. Yosef mistakenly thought that his brothers were guilty of eating "eiver min hachai" (portions taken from a live animal) as well as other sins (see Rashi Bereishis 37:2 and Sifsei Chachamim there who explains what brought Yosef to this erroneous conclusion). He then felt compelled to report this to his father, not G-d forbid, to inflict harm upon them, but in order that Yaakov both in his role as their father as well as that of one of the Gedolei Hador (Yitzchak Avinu was still alive at this point) would set them on the proper path so that they would merit life in the Next World. However, as Yosef erred in his assessment of his brothers' actions, they erred in their assessment of Yosef's - they interpreted his behavior as a wish to persecute them and for this they felt they had the right to kill him.

The Mishna teaches us "judge every man in a favorable, meritorious light" (Pirke Avos 1:6). This was where Yosef and his brothers stumbled, if we are permitted to speak in such terms. Each side did not judge the other in a favorable light. Yosef should have said to himself: "if ten of the greatest sages decided that this food is not "eiver min hachai" then perhaps I am the one who is mistaken. Perhaps it is permissible to eat the meat in this fashion". Although he is not permitted to concede to their opinion without clear proof, he should at least have judged them in a more favorable manner. A possible course of action would have been to ask his father. If Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yehudah, and the other brothers feel that this is not "eiver min hachai" then perhaps they are correct. Our father is a Gadol Hador, let him rule for us. If he is not sure, we can ask our grandfather Yitzchak. He should not have rushed to accuse his brothers of eating "eiver min hachai" and then to inform his father of this in no uncertain terms.

The brothers too, should have judged Yosef favorably. Where did they get the idea that he was a "rodef"? Perhaps his intentions were quite the opposite, to prevent them from sinning so that they too would have a share in Eretz Yisrael and the entire spiritual legacy of the holy forefathers. Both sides, did not judge each other favorably, if we may speak in such terms.

The Rishonim tell us, that the requirement to judge others positively does not apply to evil people, not only are we not required to judge them favorably but we are required to grant them an unfavorable judgment (see Rambam and Rabeinu Yonah's commentary to this Mishna). However, unless we are aware that someone is a "rasha", we must assume that what he is doing is right and not as it appears. Even if he is acting improperly, we should assume that perhaps he was not given the same education as we have been given, for a Yid in Moscow cannot be as knowledgeable as one in Yerushalayim. We must always try our best to find the good in others. The brothers assumed that Yosef was a "rasha," and therefore had the right to judge him unfavorably, but what gave them the right to assume that he was a "rasha"?

Life would be so much better if we would learn to judge others favorably. This applies especially to married couples. Perhaps if people would interpret the actions of their spouse less negatively, there would be far less divorces than we are seeing today. When the husband comes home and finds his food burnt, why must he assume that his wife did

so intentionally, perhaps while the food was on the fire she went to answer the telephone or had to attend to a crying baby?

There are so many stories told regarding how people misjudged others, when they should have given them the benefit of the doubt. We can take this one step further, and add that a person may think that his neighbor is guilty of wrongdoing, when in reality the accuser is the guilty one, as the following story illustrates. A woman was waiting at the airport for her flight. She went to the newsstand and purchased a package of wafers to eat while she was waiting. As she was eating her wafers, she suddenly heard her name being called over the loudspeaker instructing her to come to the counter to straighten out some paperwork. Upon returning to her seat, to her horror, she noticed a man sitting there, a total stranger quite calmly eating her wafers! Inside she was very angry, but she decided to do her best to avoid publicly embarrassing him. What did she do? She sat herself down right next to him, and proceeded to eat the wafers from her package - the same one the man was helping himself to. Between them, they managed to finish off the entire package of wafers. Many hours later, on the plane, she opened her handbag only to discover a packet of wafers! She suddenly realized that in her haste to go the counter she must have placed the wafers in her bag. It was now clear, that it was not he who was eating from her wafers, but she was eating his! She had thought he was stealing from her, when in fact she was stealing from him. She could only imagine what must have been going through that man's mind when some strange woman sat herself down next to him and demolished his wafers, one after another. Perhaps he judged her favorably and assumed that she had spent her very last penny on the flight and had nothing left to eat, but could she not have at least asked for permission?

Life would be so much better if we could judge each other favorably. The following story took place here in the Old City of Yerushalayim: Two people once came to me. One man claimed that the other said to him "I will kill your wife!" The other man responded that he was speaking in question form - "Would I kill your wife?" This was simply a case where one did not understand the other's manner of speaking because they were raised in different cultures.

Chazal provide us with one of the ways of judging others positively: "do not judge your fellow man until you find yourself in his place, his situation" (Pirke Avos 2:5). My father z"l once explained that "his place" can at times be taken literally. We cannot compare a person raised in one environment with one raised in another. Thank G-d, we were raised in Eretz Yisrael, in Yerushalayim or one of many other wonderful cities, we cannot compare ourselves to a Yid raised in Moscow, where the value system is so different to ours. This was an example of: "do not judge your fellow man until you find yourself in his place" - literally "his place". In each place there are different opinions and different manners of speaking.

I often say that all of Chazal's adages regarding judging others favorably, and "do not judge your fellow man until you find yourself in his place, his situation", only apply when it is necessary to judge the other! For example, when a shidduch is suggested, he must know whether or not this is a suitable family for him to marry into. If someone suggests a chavruta for him, he also must inquire whether it is a good match. In such circumstances Chazal instructed us to do our utmost to judge the other favorably and to try to put ourselves in his place. When there is no pressing need to judge another, then

better not to judge him AT ALL, "the judge of all the earth He will do justice" (see Bereishis 18:25). Why must you be the judge? Rather do not judge at all!

Essay 3: A Frightening Idea of the Chovos Ha'Levovos

Rabbi Yissocher Frand Shlit"a

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The Midrash tells the story of a peddler who went from town to town in the vicinity of the city of Tzipori, selling his wares. He used to call out, "Who wants to buy the medicine of life?" Rav Yannai, the Talmudic sage, was sitting there, and he heard the peddler's sales-pitch. Rav Yannai said, "Sell me the medicine!" The peddler said, "You, and people like you, do not need what I am selling." Rav Yannai persisted and said, "But, nu – tell me. What are you selling?"

The Midrash continues that the peddler took out a volume of Tehillim and showed Rav Yannai the *pasuk* "Who is the man who wants life...? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good..." [Tehillim 34:13-15]. These famous *pesukim* from Psalms pose the question – what is best way to guarantee life? The *pasuk* suggests the answer: Watch your tongue!

The Midrash concludes that Rav Yannai proclaimed, "My entire life I have been reading these *pesukim* and did not understand what they were teaching, until this peddler came along and informed me as to their meaning."

The question is obvious: What did the peddler tell Rav Yannai that he did not previously understand? Certainly, Rav Yannai knew how to translate a *pasuk* in *Tanach*. The interpretation of these words is straightforward: "Who is the man who desires life? Guard your tongue from (speaking) evil." Rav Yannai claims that he never understood what the *pesukim* meant until now. How is that possible? What novel interpretation did the peddler provide?

The Shemen HaTov explains that certainly Rav Yannai understood that a person who desires life needs to guard his tongue. But Rav Yannai had understood that the only way to guard one's tongue from evil is to become a hermit. Rav Yannai thought that cleanliness of speech required being somewhat anti-social. Rav Yannai believed that mixing with society, having friends and engaging in conversation was a sure formula for NOT being able to live up to the standards of "Who is the man who desires life".

Rav Yannai was shocked that the PEDDLER was "selling" this verse. Peddlers are known for their 'gift of gab'. They travel from city to city and from house to house and have plenty to tell and plenty to share and plenty to say. In classic Hebrew literature, the peddler was always portrayed as a gossip. The very name of the profession (Rochel) is related to the word for tale-bearing (Rechilus).

Rav Yannai's revelation was not so much the interpretation of the *pasuk* but the teacher of the lesson: "If the peddler can tell me that a person such as he can be careful about Lashon HaRa (gossip), then my approach must change. I now realize that a person can intermix with society, talk, be sociable and still be careful not to speak Lashon HaRa."

Rabbi Layzer Levine, the father-in-law of Rabbi Berel Wein, grew up in the house of the Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Mayer Kagan. It is well-known that the Chofetz Chaim was himself the paradigm of someone who was careful not to speak Lashon HaRa. Therefore, we imagine that he was a person of very few words, who rarely spoke to those around him.

Rabbi Wein heard from his father-in-law that the opposite was true. The Chofetz Chaim was constantly talking! He was constantly engaged in conversation with people. And nonetheless, he was careful about Lashon HaRa.

That is what Rav Yannai learned from the peddler.

In addition, there is another lesson here. Many times in life we are bombarded with messages. Some of these messages are very important. Some of these messages may come from the most unlikely of sources. Even the lowly peddler can deliver a powerful message to the great Rav Yannai. However, we must listen for such messages. Someone like Rav Yannai, who is constantly open to messages, will constantly learn and constantly grow.

“From all my teachers I have become wise” [Tehillim 119:99]. A person must have the ability to learn from every teacher and from every situation. The messages are out there. Our job is to remain awake enough to receive them.

Now, let me share with you another approach of explaining the Midrash. The Kosnos Ohr references a very frightening passage in the *sefer Chovos Ha'Levovos* (“Duties of the Heart” by Reb Bachya ben Joseph ibn Paquda). The truth of the matter is that this idea is not only in the Chovos Ha'Levovos, but it also appears in the Sefer Maggid Meisharim (which relates conversations between a *Malach* and the Beis Yosef – Divine Revelations, as it were, communicated to Rav Yosef Karo by an Angel). Additionally, the same idea appears in the *sefer Marpeh Lashon* by Rav Raphael Hamburger Zt”l. It is a very frightening thought.

The Chovos Ha'Levovos writes in the “Gates of Acquisition” (Chapter 7) that when Reuven speaks *Lashon Ha'Rah* about Shimon, Reuven's (prior) *mitzvos* are transferred to Shimon and Shimon's (prior) sins are transferred to Reuven! Slanderers will find on the Day of Judgement that they will not be receiving reward for good deeds that they did do, and will—on the contrary—receive punishment for bad deeds which they did not do!

A person who had been a *Shomer Shabbos* his entire life will ascend to the World of Truth and he will suddenly discover that he is not receiving any credit for his Sabbath observance! On the other hand, he will be punished for sins that he never committed. When he will express astonishment at this apparent injustice, it will be explained to him that his spiritual rewards and punishments have been switched with those of so-and-so, against whom he spoke *Lashon Ha'Rah*.

The Chovos Ha'Levovos cites an incident involving someone about whom *Lashon Ha'Rah* was spoken. Shimon heard that Reuven spoke *Lashon Ha'Rah* about him. Shimon then sent Reuven a fruit basket as a present. Shimon told him: “You did me such a favor, so I feel that I need to repay it!” Reuven asked “What did I do for you?” Shimon responded, “You spoke *Lashon Ha'Rah* about me. Therefore, I received all of your

merits. That was a tremendous present! It is only right that I should send you a present in return.”

Like all great people in Jewish history who did something revolutionary, Rav Yosef Karo was attacked by people for his revolutionary accomplishment—the writing of the Shulchan Aruch. People spoke Lashon Ha’Rah against him. The *Malach* told the Beis Yosef (and this is recorded in the Maggid Meisharim) that he should not worry about the *Lashon Ha’Rah* because he would get the *zechusim* (merits) of the people who slandered him, and all of his *Aveiros* (sins) would be transferred to those other people!

Rav Raphael Hamburger, in his Sefer Marpeh Lashon, writes that many people will come to the World of Truth and find many positive *mitzvos* in “their ledger” that they never did. They will tell the “Gate Keepers,” we never did these *mitzvos*, and they will be told, “they were done by people who slandered you!”

The Kosnos Ohr says that this idea is the novelty that Rav Yannai did not understand. When Rav Yannai learned the *pasuk* in Tehillim “Who is the man who desires life...” he thought that this was speaking about (life in) this world. The epiphany that he had because of the peddler’s insight was that the *pasuk* is teaching, “If you want life in the next world, the best way to achieve that is by guarding your tongue from speaking evil. If you work your whole life—you meticulously do *mitzvos*, keep Shabbos, are a *baal chessed*, and (after 120 years) you want to reap the rewards for all your efforts, the only way to guarantee that the reward of this “good life” will be preserved for you is to guard your tongue from speaking evil. Otherwise—according to the Chovos Ha’Levovos - a person can lose his *mitzvos* and lose his reward. He can, Heaven forbid, wind up with *aveiros* that he did not do and with *mitzvos* that were lost!

This is the “chiddush” that Rav Yannai now learned.

The Chofetz Chaim brings this idea in the Sefer Shmiras Ha’Lashon Chapter 3. He writes this idea again in Volume 2; Chapter 8. There, in a footnote, the Chofetz Chaim brings, that many people at the end of Shemoneh Esrei recite a Biblical *pasuk* that begins with the first letter of their name and ends with the last letter of their name. Many Siddurim have a list of suggested *pesukim* for many different names. The Kitzur Shaloh writes that the reason we say such a *pasuk* is that on the Day of Judgement everyone will be asked his or her name. If someone forgets his name (as a result of the trauma of the death experience), at least he will remember the *pasuk*, which he has recited so many thousands of times in his life.

This is a curious shailah. Do you mean that I am going to forget my name? I forget many things these days, but I still remember my name! So, what does this mean?

The Chafetz Chaim explains: When someone goes to Heaven and suddenly, he is credited with a whole range of *mitzvos* that he well knows he never performed in his lifetime, he will recognize that this is Chaim ben Yosef’s *mitzvos* and these are Shmuel ben Shalom’s *mitzvos* and these are Dovid ben Tzvi’s *mitzvos*. He will have credited to his account hundreds—maybe thousands—of *mitzvos* from different people. They will call him Dovid ben Tzvi; they will call him Shmuel ben Shalom; they will call him Chaim ben Yosef. He will become so confused! “Who am I really?” The Shaloh,

therefore says, that if he has a *pasuk* containing the first and last letter of his name firmly engraved in his self-conscious, which is how he will remember his real name.

This is all based on the above-mentioned Chovos Ha'Levovos.

My point with all this is, to impress on the audience—and on myself—the severity of the transgression of speaking *Lashon Ha'Rah*. If this Chovos Ha'Levovos, Maggid Meisharim, and Marpeh Lashon do not put the fear of G-d into you, then what will! The specter of going up to the World of Truth and suddenly discovering that you have lost your hard-earned reward for doing *mitzvos*, is truly frightening!

The problem is, in my humble opinion, that this idea is **too** frightening. How can it be that a person works to accumulate Torah and *mitzvos* his whole life, and then they not be there for him in the World of Truth? It is too frightening.

Rav Dessler has a long essay (which I do not have time to go into now) explaining that this is not really what the Chovos Ha'Levovos means. He certainly does not take it at face value.

I would like to point out that we also see an inference (*diyuk*) in the *sefer* Marpeh Lashon from Rav Raphael Hamburger that might also limit this concept. He formulates this concept by adding two very important words. He says “we see that one who is **immersed**, Heaven forbid, in this evil practice...” This means we are talking about a person for whom this is his nature. He is what is called in *halacha* a **Ba'al Lashon Ha'Rah** (literally, a “**master** of slander”).

In my humble opinion, this Chovos Ha'Levovos, only applies to a person who is a **Ba'al Lashon Ha'Rah**—a person who is constantly speaking slander. I am not here to minimize the prohibition. However, if a person stumbles (as we all do from time to time in this most difficult area of observance), I do not know if the Chovovos Ha'Levovos really means to in fact say, “Well, you have lost all your *mitzvos* and you get all of his *aveiros*.”

They certainly meant this teaching to be a motivator for improvement in this area, but I believe it is too daunting to accept it totally on its face value. In my humble opinion, the words of Rav Raphael Hamburger, who brings this fundamental idea should be analyzed carefully for their nuance: It applies only to one who is “*mutbah*” (immersed), *Chas V'Shalom* in this evil character trait—a person who is constantly speaking bad about others with delight and enthusiasm, without having the slightest pangs of guilt or remorse. It is – I feel – only this “**Master of Slander**” (**Ba'al Lashon Ha'Rah**) about which this very dramatic theology of transfer of *mitzvos* and *aveiros* might apply.

Still, the take home message from all this is: “Don't speak *Lashon Ha'Rah* .”

Essay 4: Words Can Kill

By Rabbi Avi Weisenfeld Shlit"a

Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivas Beis Dovid

Recently, while I was traveling on a plane, trying to mind my own business, there were two people, call them seatmates of mine, right in my nose and I just couldn't avoid hearing their conversation. One of them told the other, "You know, I once had a tremendous court case involving hundreds of thousands of dollars, and I needed a top notch lawyer. So, I searched and searched for a capable lawyer. When I finally found someone capable, he told me that really he is very busy, but he will do me a favor and squeeze me in, as long as I would Zelle him \$25,000 upfront for an escrow account, for money towards paying for working on the case, to be received by the end of the day. Of course, I grabbed the chance, sent him the money, and sent him the necessary information about the case. Three days later, I got a call from the lawyer letting me know that the escrow account only has \$5,000 remaining, and if I don't add another \$15,000 soon, he will end working on the case. I asked him, how is it possible that so much money was used so fast; how much have you already done for my case so far that it should cost that much? To which he responded, "well let me explain you something, I charge per minute, and I made phone calls and sent emails on your behalf, ..." I tried protesting, "how can you do this to me?" And the lawyer firmly responded, "you know, we were just now on the phone for 24 minutes, and that's another \$3,000. You now only have \$2,000 left in your account." I didn't have much of a choice, so I paid him; but that is crazy expensive. Make the calculation, that's \$125 a minute!"

Of course, listening to that conversation, I was just as shocked as you are. But for our purpose, there is such a big lesson to learn from there. Imagine, if you were hiring and using such a lawyer, one thing is for sure, you would be so extremely careful not to spend an extra word when speaking with him. You would sit down before you call, and think well exactly what you want to tell him and how you want to say it.

We must understand that the same is true for lashon hara. Each word of lashon hara can cost us terrible punishment [ch"v], and we must spend time and effort to figure out how to avoid each word of it possible. We simply can't afford to do otherwise!

And I think, we should give another *mashal*, as well. Imagine there was a wire that carried in it all of the electricity that lights up New York City, and someone were to, ch"v, touch it, we don't want to even think what would happen to him. And, what would happen if there was a wire going to a single light bulb, and someone would touch that, what would happen to him? Maybe he would get a small electric shock, nothing more. So what do you see? When something has so much energy, and it's used the wrong way, it causes so much more destruction than when you are dealing with only minimal energy that is used the wrong way. So too, we can understand Chazal that tell us, that lashon hara causes much more destruction than any other aveira. We can understand the logic, it's because the energy and power that Hashem gave us to our mouths and our speech, is so

powerful, we can learn Torah and daven and accomplish tremendous with it, that so too, when used the wrong way, the destruction the mouth causes, is so catastrophic!

There is a story told of an old man, 80 years old, who walked into Shul and said that it's his first time since he was 8 years old that he has come to Shul. And he explained, that at a young age he was orphaned, and on the day of his mother's yahrzeit, he went to Shul to recite Kaddish. He felt a bit uncomfortable among unfamiliar adults; but he did it anyways, because he loved his mother. After davening, an old man approached him and asked why he was saying Kaddish. So he explained, that it was his mother's yahrzeit. "You have yahrzeit today?" the man said, "what's a yahrzeit without schnoptz and herring?" Hearing that, said the now old man, I got so deeply hurt, that I made up with myself, "I will never again step foot into a Shul." "And that's where I am today," he continued, "it's my first time in decades coming to Shul!"

We have to realize the impact that our words can have on others! Words can hurt, and words can kill!

We are all familiar with the story in the Gemara (Masechta Gittin), with Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. Many meforshim ask: why does the Gemara call it a story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, when it was really only about Bar Kamtza? Kamtza was just the name of the person who the host mixed him up with, so why call the whole story by the name of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza?

Listen to the fascinating answer of the Ein Yakov. He answers, that the Gemara is teaching us, "Look how one extra syllable, two letters, spoken, can destroy a whole world!" The only difference was the mention or lack of mention, of one syllable, and that created havoc! Because even one word can destroy!

We live in a world, of digital communication, with emails, texting, whats-app, [and what not] etc., and people write things that they would never say. Many statements take more courage to say it to another's face, or even to say it by phone, but with digital communication it goes right over. So nowadays, we have to watch our communication with others even more so, than ever before.

Let's now conclude with an unbelievable story. I don't know if it ever happened or not, but the lesson is worthwhile, regardless. There was once a wife that was constantly insulting and rebuking her husband. It got to the point that it was not just a nuisance; it was actually a bit abusive. It was very difficult for the husband to handle, so he went to his rav to seek advice. After hearing him out, his rav gave him an idea, as follows: he should go to the store and buy a hammer, some nails, and a big plank of wood. He should then, store it away in a place where his wife won't find it. Then, whenever his wife says a rebuke or negative comment to him, he should go there and bang in one nail. Doing this, he will let out some stress and calm down. It sounded like a great idea, and so he tried it. It actually felt good for him to let out some steam, so he kept it up. This went on for some time, that every time his wife said something nasty to him, he went to the hiding place, took the hammer, and banged in one nail.

One day, before Pesach, while his wife was cleaning for Pesach, she found his interesting objects. Puzzled with her discovery, she asked her husband for some explanation. He wasn't really excited to say anything about it, but when he saw he had no choice, he

explained that he was simply following the rav's advice how to deal with her comments to him.

"You mean I really hurt you with what I have said?" asked his wife. "You didn't have to go to the rav, you could have just told me to stop." "Please, please tell me, my dear husband, how can I rectify this," his wife pleaded.

"You know what," answered the innocent husband, "how about, that from now on, I will hide these treasures elsewhere, and for every time that you give me a compliment, I will pull one nail out of the plank of wood."

"Agreed," said the excited wife. And, that's exactly what they did.

A few months went by, and the wife turned to her husband, and said, "please, my dear, can you please show me where I'm up to?"

So, the two of them went to the dark corner in the cellar, where the husband had been hiding it, and the husband turned on a flashlight. They both looked at the plank of wood, and saw that the plank was empty of nails. "Isn't that amazing," proclaimed his wife. "Yes," responded the husband, "but let me show you something; look carefully and you will see that the holes are still there. The holes that you made, with the pain that you caused, will last in my body forever."

Whenever you pain someone verbally, you never know what you have done to them. You may have left a permanent scar on their emotions. You may never see it, you may never remember it, but it may never go away. We must be so careful with our fellow Yid, not to pain him in any way, and especially with our verbal comments. Let's never tell ourselves, that words are nothing, because words can really hurt!

Let's all, not just read this derasha, but rather, actually, put something into practice. Perhaps, I can suggest the following *kabbala*. Quite often, by being *dan lekaf zechus* one relieves himself from the yetzer hara to say lashon hara. There is nothing more derogatory in what you have seen or heard about your friend, once you are *dan lekaf zechus*. Similarly, by trying to understand others, and realizing that others may be more sensitive than us, we can avoid hurting others' feelings. So, let's all be *mekabel, bli neder*, that besides for learning our daily shemiras halashon, that we will all work on being *dan lekaf zechus* and try to be more sensitive and understanding of others. May Hashem give us all the *Siyata Deshmaya* to improve in these areas.

Essay 5: Every Yid Is A Great Star

Harav Avigdor Nebenzahl Shlit"va

Rav of the Old City of Yerushalayim

Chazal tell us: "Why is the section of the spies adjoined to the section of Miriam? Because she had been punished for evil talk, which she had spoken against her brother, and these wicked people saw and did not learn a lesson" Rashi Bamidbar 13:2). Although chronologically the episode of Miriam did precede the affair of the spies, we know that "The Torah's events were not recorded in chronological order" (Pesachim 6b). In Parshas Beha'aloscha, for example, the section discussing the Aron's journey: "Vayehi binsoa haaron" (Bamidbar 10:35), is not written in its proper location. Chazal tell us that this section is surrounded by inverted "nuns" because "The Torah made signs for this passage, in front of it and after, to say that this is not its place. But why was it written here? In order to make an interruption between one trouble and another" (Rashi Bamidbar 10:35 citing the Gemara in Shabbos 116a).

Accordingly if the Torah chose this juxtaposition of the incident with the spies together with that of Miriam there must be an additional reason for it. Chazal therefore explain that the Torah is criticizing the spies for not having derived a lesson from what happened to Miriam.

Superficially, this is very difficult to understand. What moral can we expect the spies to have learned from Miriam? Had the case been that Miriam spoke loshon hara against sticks and stones and was punished for it, we could have derived by means of a kal vachomer that if it is forbidden to speak loshon hara about sticks and stones then certainly we may not speak this way of a fellow Yid, how much more so a Talmid Chacham, and even more so of the greatest sage and prophet that ever lived! How does the fact that Miriam spoke loshon hara against the greatest sage and prophet teach us that we are forbidden to speak negatively about sticks and stones? What type of a kal vachomer is this? There are countless flaws in such logic! What then is the meaning of this criticism against the spies for not having learned a lesson from what happened to Miriam?

A further difficulty lies in the fact that the Torah commands us: "beware of a tzoraas affliction ... Remember what Hashem, your G-d, did to Miriam on the way, when you were leaving Mitzrayim" (Devarim 24:8-9) - "if you wish to take care that you not be stricken with tzoraas do not speak loshon hara, remember what was done to Miriam who spoke against her brother Moshe and was stricken with afflictions of tzoraas" (Rashi Devarim 24:9). This implies that not only should the spies have learned a lesson, but we too must realize the severity of speaking loshon hara from what happened to Miriam. (According to the Ramban "beware of a tzoraas affliction ..." is a positive commandment: "we are commanded to verbally remember to take to heart what Hashem did to Miriam when she spoke of her brother, despite her being a prophetess, as a means of distancing ourselves from speaking loshon hara" (Ramban's appendix to the Ramban's Sefer HaMitzvos - Mitzvas Asei 7). How can we learn from Miriam who spoke loshon hara

against Moshe Rabeinu that it is even forbidden to speak loshon hara against an ordinary Jew? Perhaps there is nothing wrong with speaking loshon hara against someone who is not on such a high level?

We can explain as follows: What does the A-lmighty say to Miriam and Aharon when He rebukes them? "... My servant Moshe; in My entire house he is trusted. Mouth to mouth do I speak to him, in a vision and not in riddles, and at the image of Hashem does he gaze" (Bamidbar 12:6-8). You should have understood that if I chose Moshe to be My messenger to take Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim, to give them the Torah, and to carry out the myriad other great things that he did, then it was obviously not for no reason but due to his special virtues (even if you do not know what they are). In that case "why did you not fear to speak against My servant Moshe" (ibid.).

The spies should have applied similar reasoning (following the incident of Miriam) - if this is the Land Hashem chose as the residing place of His Divine Presence to reside, if it was this Land He elected to give to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and to bring Klal Yisrael to, then there must be something special about this Land that we do not find elsewhere. We may not be able to discern precisely what these advantages are, but we should at least believe that they exist and not slander the Chosen Land as if it were some terrible place, G-d forbid.

The same applies to every Yid. Each Yid is a member of the Chosen people and he therefore must have virtues, because Hashem did not choose Am Yisrael as His nation for no reason. Hashem said to Avraham: "gaze now toward the Heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them ... so shall your offspring be" (Bereishis 15:5). The stars may appear to be miniscule but in truth they are vast. The same applies to Hashem's children, even when they appear small and insignificant they are in fact enormous. We must therefore take great care not to speak loshon hara against any Yid, even if we are unable to discern it, he is in fact very great, just as we are unable to discern the vastness of a star.

The spies fail by giving negative reports about Eretz Yisrael, on their heels come the "maapilim" with an attempt to rectify the sin of the spies: The spies, did not wish to make the ascent to Eretz Yisrael - we will go and this time with even greater self-sacrifice than was demanded of us earlier! If yesterday we did not desire to go to Eretz Yisrael even though the Aron of Hashem and Moshe Rabeinu were with us, today we will travel onward to Eretz Yisrael even without the benefit of being accompanied by Moshe Rabeinu and the Aron. Is this not the most reasonable way to rectify the sin - to go to the other extreme as the Rambam advises regarding negative character traits? (Hilchos Deos 2:2) The "maapilim" thus go to the other extreme. At first glance it would appear that we are dealing with great tzaddikim, as it says: "In the place where 'baalei tshuva' stand, the completely righteous do not stand" (Brachos 34b). Moshe, however, is not impressed with this form of tshuva and rebukes them in the Name of Hashem.

Why was Hashem angry with the "maapilim"? Why are they not considered as tzaddikim and baalei tshuva?

In my humble opinion, not only did they not rectify the sin of the spies but they in fact repeated it! What after all was the spies' sin? They did not understand that if Hashem

chose Eretz Yisrael and it was His desire to bring Bnei Yisrael there, then this proves that it is indeed a Land flowing with milk and honey and that it is possible to enter it.

What did the "maapilim" do at this point? They are also guilty of the same sin, but this time from the other side! They wish to make the journey to Eretz Yisrael when Hashem tells them not to go. If Hashem commands them not to go, there is no reason to go to Eretz Yisrael. The only advantage Eretz Yisrael has over other lands is that Hashem commanded us to go there. The moment the A-lmighty says not to go, there is no advantage to being there. The fact that they went on in spite of being commanded not to means that they have attached importance to something other than the word of Hashem. They did not understand that only the word of Hashem has any significance. Just as "not by bread alone does man live, rather by everything that emanates from the mouth of G-d does man live" (Devarim 8:3) - bread on its own has no value, its value stems from the fact that it is the will of Hashem that it nourish us. The "maapilim", therefore not only do not correct the sin of the spies they repeat it. The spies did not value Eretz Yisrael sufficiently and did not believe that it was possible to conquer it, in spite of knowing that it was Hashem's will that Bnei Yisrael be there. The "maapilim" were guilty of the opposite - they attributed independent value to Eretz Yisrael when they knew that Hashem did not wish for them to go there at this point in time. This is the reason for Hashem's great anger at them.

What we have said about Eretz Yisrael applies to the Mikdash as well. The Mikdash has no independent power of its own. The Torah tells us: "My Shabbos shall you observe and My Sanctuary shall you revere" (Vayikra 26:2). The Gemara comments: "One would have thought that a person have fear of the Sanctuary, thus the pasuk states 'You shall keep My Shabbos and revere My Sanctuary', the expression 'keep' was used in relation to the Shabbos, and in the same verse that of 'reverence' in relation to the Sanctuary, in order that the following comparison may be made: as in the case of 'keeping' used in the observance of the Shabbos, so in the case of 'reverence' used in relation to the Sanctuary, one is not to revere the Sanctuary but He who gave the commandment concerning the Sanctuary" (Yevamos 6a). Only when the will of Hashem is in the Mikdash, does the Mikdash have any effect. When the will of Hashem is missing, when you violate the precepts of the Torah, the Mikdash will not help you and Nebuchadnezzar will come and destroy it.

Chazal tell us that the wicked Tarnus Rufus asked R' Akiva regarding the Shabbos: "In what way is this day, different from other days?" (Sanhedrin 65b) - why do you honor the Shabbos more than the other days? What could R' Akiva answer him? He could have said that Shabbos is the day of the creation of the world, the day the Torah was given to the Jewish people, that the Shabbos is a taste of the Next World, there is so much to say regarding the Shabbos, yet R' Akiva does not give any of these answers. R' Akiva answers him with a question "in what way is this man different from other men?" (ibid.) - why do you deserve to be honored more than anyone else. Tarnus Rufus answers "Because my master desires it" (ibid.) (this is what the king wants, he appointed me his representative in the territory of Yehuda). R' Akiva responds "Shabbos too, because my Master desires it" (ibid.). Hashem commanded us to honor the Shabbos, had Hashem wished for us to honor Tuesdays, we would have done so. The A-lmighty, however, commanded us to honor the Seventh Day so that is what we do. Why did Hashem choose

the Seventh Day? "For in a six day period Hashem made heaven and earth, and on the Seventh day He rested and was refreshed" (Shemos 31:17). But for us the fact that Hashem wishes for us to honor the Shabbos is sufficient. We do not attribute any independent significance of its own to the Shabbos, we honor it only because Hashem commanded us to.

Eretz Yisrael, the Mikdash, the Shabbos - none of these have any significance of their own. Only when Hashem commands us to observe and honor them do they have any value. When Hashem does not command us regarding them, they have no value.

Shaul fights against Amalek but is guilty of leaving some of the animals alive. The prophet Shmuel says to him "and what is this sound of the sheep in my ears" (Shmuel I 15:14), Shaul responds: "I have brought them from the Amalekite, for the people took pity on the best of the sheep and cattle in order to bring them offerings to Hashem, your G-d" (ibid. 15). This appears to be a very noble intention. Shmuel, however, is not impressed with this answer at all. He says to Shaul: "does Hashem delight in elevation-offerings and feast-offerings as in obedience to the voice of Hashem? Behold - to obey is better than a choice offering, to be attentive than the fat of rams" (ibid. 22).

Shmuel goes even further, adding: "for rebelliousness is like the sin of sorcery, and verbosity is like the iniquity of idolatry" (ibid. 23). In other words, you are guilty of an infraction as severe as the sin of sorcery and the iniquity of idolatry.

Why does Shmuel choose to compare Shaul's sin to the sin of sorcery and to the iniquity of idolatry? Are there no other severe prohibitions in the Torah? Why does he not say that what Shaul did was the equivalent of desecrating the Shabbos or cursing one's father and mother?

It appears to me that we can explain this based on the point we have just discussed. People generally act according to the laws of nature. A person plants his field when he is expecting rain so that the wheat will grow. He then harvests it when the wheat appears sufficiently ripe and it is possible to cut it. From the perspective of nature this seems to be very logical. There are, however, two categories of people who do not act by logic alone. The first is the sorcerer. To him it is not the weather or the seasons that determine his actions, but rather whether a black cat or a white cat just passed before him or whether the stick he is holding is green or red.

Shmuel is telling Shaul: Hashem commanded you to kill the animals you brought from Amalek! He is not interested in you offering them as sacrifices! If in spite of this you offer them, then this shows that you believe that it is not the will of Hashem in the offering that is important, but the offering itself. You have thus made sorcery out of the offering. This is not an offering to Hashem but some form of witchcraft! - "for rebelliousness is like the sin of sorcery".

This is the purpose of the creation, to enable us to reach a clear understanding that "Ein Od Milvado" "there is none beside Him" (Devarim 4:35). To human eyes it may appear to the contrary that there are other forces working in the world - here it is Obama, there it is the IDF, here it is Abbas, etc. The truth, however is "there is none beside Him". We must recognize beyond any doubt that "He alone made, makes, and will make everything".

The spies were sent to scout out the Land and they failed in their mission, why? Moshe instructed them to see the Land, but not to follow what their eyes see: "do not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray" (Bamidbar 15:39). Of course we need our eyes, but the ultimate "posek", the one issuing the ruling must be one's intellect. We must understand that "Cities great and fortified to the heavens" (Devarim 1:28)) pale in comparison to the Creator of the Universe, we must be aware that the world is guided by Hashem alone. If we do so, we will certainly merit the redemption of the Jewish people, speedily in our day. Amen!

Essay 6: The ‘Eyes’ Have It All

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At the end of Parshas Tazria, when the Torah states the laws of the Tzaraas affliction affecting clothing, the pasuk [verse] says, “the Kohen shall look, after the affliction has been washed, and behold (if) the affliction has not changed its appearance (lo hafach es eino) and the affliction has not spread, it is contaminated, you shall burn it in fire...” [Vayikra 13:55].

Although the literal and straightforward interpretation of the expression “lo hafach es eino” means that the appearance of the affliction has not changed, the Chidushei HaRim (R. Yitzchak Meir of Ger [1799-1866]) cites a beautiful insight based on a Gemara [Eruchin 16a]. The Talmud mentions that Tzaraas is a punishment for seven specific sins. The most commonly known sin in this category is that of tale bearing (lashon haRa). However, the Talmud teaches that Tzaraas is also a punishment for “tzorus ha-ayin” [narrowness of the eye]. This term does not merely refer to stinginess and being tight-fisted. A person is described as “narrow of eye” if he never sees the positive. It is the opposite of generosity of spirit. It connotes someone who always sees evil. It is a stinginess that extends beyond one’s money to the way in which one views life in general.

If tzaraas is a punishment for “tzorus ha-ayin”, it would follow that the remedy which would cause the tzaraas to go away is repenting and changing from a ‘narrow eyed’ (tzar ayin) person to a ‘good eyed’ (tov ayin) person. In other words, change from being a disciple of Bilaam the wicked, who was a ‘narrow eyed’ person, to being a disciple of Avraham who was a generous person, possessing a ‘good eye’ [Avot 5:19].

If the tzaraas does not improve... If it stays the same size then the garment has no remedy. The garment remains impure and ultimately it must be burnt.

The Chidushei HaRim says that the expression “lo hafach es eino” has a double meaning. Certainly, on a simple level, the meaning of the phrase is that it did not change its appearance. But, the phrase also connotes the fact that the affliction did not change the ‘eye’ of the owner of the garment. In order to repent and to have his garment’s affliction remedied, his ‘eye’ must change – from being stingy of spirit to being generous of spirit.

In addition, the Chidushei HaRim says that the word “Nega” [affliction], which appears in this pasuk can actually be considered a rearrangement of the letters of the word “Oneg” [pleasure]. The difference between the word “Nega” and the word “Oneg” is just a matter of where the (letter) “ayin” is placed. (The letter “ayin” also connotes ‘eye’!) In these two words, the letters ‘Nun’ and ‘Gimmel’ are stationary. The only difference between the words is whether the ‘ayin’ is at the beginning or at the end. This alludes back to our theme that the difference between having an affliction and having pleasure is completely dependent on the placement of the ‘eye’. If a person has a ‘good eye’, with

the proper approach and the proper perspective on life – he will have ‘Oneg’. Otherwise he will be stuck with ‘Nega’.

If a person finds himself incapable of changing his perspective, he will wind up being forced to burn his clothes. “If the affliction has not changed its appearance (lo hafach es eino)... you shall burn it in fire...”

Many times, we have quoted the Midrash about the peddler who came into the city proclaiming “Who wants life? Who wants life?” People thought he was selling some kind of elixir of life. The Midrash says that Rav Yannai inquired about this elixir he was selling. The peddler read him the pasukim “Who is the man who desires life, who loves days, to see good? Guard your tongue from speaking evil and your lips from speaking calumny, depart from evil and do good, make peace and pursue it.” (Tehillim 34:13-14). In other words, one who wishes to live should avoid speaking Lashon HaRah. The Midrash says that Rav Yannai said he never understood this and now this peddler revealed to him this amazing secret for acquisition of Chayim (life) called Netzor Leshoncha Me’Rah (guard your tongue from speaking evil).

Everyone comments on this chiddush of the peddler, which is an open pasuk in Tehillim. We previously spoke out a thought from Rav Nissan Alpert, z”l, that is worth repeating. The chiddush of the peddler was not merely this pasuk itself, but how one punctuates the pasuk. When we read this pasuk, the opening phrase is a question: “Who is the person that wants to live a long time...?” Where does the question end and the answer begin?

The simple interpretation of the pasuk is that the question mark is placed after the words “Liros Tov” – Who is the person who wants to live (a long time), loving days and seeing good? The answer is “One who guards his tongue from speaking evil...” The peddler taught that this was not the correct way to read the pasuk. The question mark belongs after the words “Ha’Chafetz Chaim” — Who is the person who wants to live (a long time)? The answer begins with the words “Ohev Yamim Liros Tov” – Loving days, seeing good.

The secret to living a long life is to have a positive attitude. If a person looks positively at matters, and sees people and places and events in a good light, then obviously he will guard his tongue from speaking evil. He will not come to speak Lashon HaRah. One of the great myths of Lashon HaRah is that it starts with the mouth or the tongue. The true problem of Lashon HaRah does not begin with the MOUTH, it begins with the EYE.

If someone looks at people with an “evil eye” and sees only their dark side that will prompt the person to talk ill about them. However, if someone always sees the positive side of his neighbor, he will not come to speak Lashon HaRah. Perhaps he will see something that the person should not be doing, but he will think to himself, “Ah, but the person has so many good qualities...”

The truth of the matter is that Rabbeinu Yona in the Sha’arei Teshuva at the end of the third Sha’ar discusses different aspects of Lashon HaRah. He divides them into six different categories. He defines the last category (III:231) as a Nirgan. What is a Nirgan? He brings a pasuk in Mishlei (18:8), in which Shlomo HaMelech writes: “The words of the Nirgan are like blows, and they descend to the chambers.” A Nirgan, says Shlomo HaMelech, is a complainer. Rabbeinu Yona elaborates: A Nirgan is a person whose

lifestyle and pattern of behavior is to invariably complain and see the bad. He always has complaints about the words and actions of his friends. “And even though the friend did nothing against him, he interprets everything in a negative fashion and not in a positive manner.”

The root cause of Lashon HaRah is having the personality trait of being a Nirgan – the complainer. Nirgan brings a person to see the faults in people and things. That is the sickness. The sickness is not the mouth, the sickness is the eye and how the person perceives things.

This was the chiddush of the peddler. The way to read the pasuk is: “Who is the man who wants life?” – QUESTION MARK! And the answer is “Someone who loves his days, seeing only good” (Ohev Yamim Lir’os Tov). If someone sees the good, he will have a long life because he will be prevented from speaking Lashon HaRah.

Let’s now conclude with one final vort. We all know, that the affliction of tzaraas is not caused by a microbe or by impurities in the water supply. As we have mentioned, the Talmud tells us (Arachin 16a), that it is caused by any of seven sins. The most famous of these is lashon hara, improper speech. The one who was afflicted with tzaraas got a very subtle message from Heaven that he had better shape up and watch his mouth. Such a person would have to seek the assistance of a Kohein who would hopefully help him mend his erroneous ways.

Rav Nissan Alpert, zt”l, comments that when the Torah uses the term ‘Adam’ (as opposed to ‘Ish’) to denote a person, it connotes a degree of importance and prestige. Therefore it seems peculiar that in the parsha of Metzora, which deals with tzara’as, the Torah should begin by using the term ‘Adam’.

Rav Alpert concludes that the measure of a person — in terms of whether or not he is a distinguished person — is not dependent on whether or not he engages in Lashon Horah. A person can even be a distinguished person (“Adam Chashuv”) and yet engage in improper speech. What then separates the normal person who gossips from the “Adam Chashuv” who engages in Lashon Horah? The difference is the latter’s desire to change. A person can be a distinguished person, and yet stumble in the sin of Lashon Harah. However, as long as he retains a desire to improve himself in this area — he is still a distinguished person.

It is difficult to stop gossiping. The normal inclination is not to seek improvement or change in this area. “And he shall be brought to Aharon the Kohen” [Vayikra 13:2] means he has to force himself to go to the Kohen to seek remedy for his condition. He does not really want to go, but he goes anyway.

A distinguished person can succumb to Lashon Harah. It happens to the best of us. But that which separates the ‘Adam’ from the ‘Ish’ (the distinguished person from the ordinary person) is that the former does something about it. He forces himself to become better. He forces himself to seek out atonement. He drags himself to the Kohen.

Our obligation is to do what we can, our hishtadlus, and then we will be considered distinguished people!

References and Sources

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