

Parashat Behaalotecha, 5772, 2012:

The Evil of Lashon Harah (Slander)

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

“Remember what G-d did to Miriam on your way out of Egypt,” (*Sefer Devarim* 24:9) recounts Miriam’s punishment for slandering her younger brother, Moshe. The actual textual presentation of this event occurs in our *parasha*:

Miriam and Aaron began speaking against Moses because of the dark-skinned woman he had married. The woman that [Moses] had married was indeed dark-skinned. They [then went on to] say, “Is it to Moses exclusively that G-d speaks? Doesn't He also speak to us?” G-d heard it. Moses, however, was very humble, more so than any man on the face of the earth. G-d suddenly said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, “All three of you go out to the Communion Tent!” When the three of them went out, G-d descended in a pillar of cloud and stood at the Tent's entrance. He summoned Aaron and Miriam, and both of them went forth. [G-d] said, “Listen carefully to My words. If someone among you experiences divine prophecy, then when I make Myself known to him in a vision, I will speak to him in a dream. This is not true of My servant Moses, who is like a trusted servant throughout My house. With him I speak face to face, in a vision not containing allegory, so that he sees a true picture of G-d. How can you not be afraid to speak against My servant Moses?” G-d displayed anger against them and departed. When the cloud left its place over the Tent, Miriam was leprous, white like snow. When Aaron returned to Miriam [and saw] her leprous, Aaron said to Moses, “Please, my lord, do not hold a grudge against us for acting foolishly and sinning. Let [Miriam] not be like a stillborn child, who comes from the womb with half its flesh rotted away.” Moses cried out to G-d, “O G-d, please heal her!” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:1-13, translation, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*)

What caused Miriam, one of our seven great prophetesses, (*Talmud Bavli, Megilah* 14a) to speak *lashon harah* (slander) against her beloved brother? After all, she recognized him as the true leader of *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish People), that is, as *Moshe Rabbeinu* (Our teacher). While it certainly does not exonerate her behavior, it appears that she was swayed and overcome by her heartfelt emotions on behalf of her sister-in-law, Tziporah.

According to *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 87a*, Moshe had ceased to fulfill his conjugal obligations to his wife following the Revelation at Mount Sinai. This is something that he initially decided to do by himself. Afterwards, he received Hashem's approval for having done so. Rashi (1040-1105), based upon *Midrash Tanchumah* to Parashat Tzav (13), relates the manner by which Miriam realized what Moshe had done, and the consequent pain and suffering it caused Tziporah:

Miriam and Aaron spoke She spoke first, [and was, therefore, the one who was punished]. Therefore, Scripture mentions her first. How did she know that Moses had separated from his wife? R. Nathan says: Miriam was beside Zipporah when Moses was told that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp. When Zipporah heard this, she said, "Woe to their wives if they are required to prophesy, for they will separate from their wives just as my husband separated from me." From this, Miriam knew [about it] and told Aaron. (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, brackets my own)

Although, Miriam and Aharon had no intention of harming Moshe, they most surely did so. Their behavior led, perforce, to a diminution of Moshe's greatness in the eyes of the Jewish people. As Rashi explains: "Now if Miriam, who did not intend to disparage him [Moses] was punished, all the more so someone who [intentionally] disparages his fellow." Rashi's words should be viewed as a spiritual "wake-up" call to each of us. His conclusion is crystal clear: We must be particularly conscientious in our attempts to avoid speaking *lashon harah*.

Chazal (Our Sages of blessed memory) spoke about *lashon harah* throughout the Talmud. One page, however, is a mini-encyclopedia of their attitudes regarding this subject. *Talmud Bavli, Arakin 15b* presents numerous statements regarding this most heinous of *aveirot* (prohibitions). Allow me to share a few examples with you: "Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yossi ben Zimra: 'Anyone who speaks *lashon harah* is as if he has totally rejected G-d Himself (*kafar b'ikar*).'" Rav Chisda said in the name

of Mar Ukba that: “Anyone who speaks *lashon harah* is fitting to be put to death by stoning,” a punishment, it should be noted, that is shared by purposeful (i.e. knowledgeable) Shabbat violators. A second statement by Rav Chisda in the name of Mar Ukba is even more powerful: “Anyone who speaks *lashon harah* - *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed Be He) Himself declares: ‘He and I are unable to dwell in the same world!’” Perhaps it is the following statement from the Yeshiva of Rabbi Yishmael, however, that most succinctly summarizes the ultimate gravity of this sin: “It was taught in the Yeshiva of Rabbi Yishmael: ‘Anyone who speaks *lashon harah* magnifies his sins corresponding to the three [cardinal] sins of idol worship, illicit physical relations, and murder.’” (Translations my own) As *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 74a* teaches us: these three transgressions are deemed to be so horrendous that they may never be violated – even to save one’s life:

R. Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Jehozadak: By a majority vote, it was resolved in the upper chambers of the house of Nithza in Lydda that in every [other] law of the Torah, if a man is commanded: 'Transgress and suffer not death' he may transgress and not suffer death, excepting idolatry, incest, [which includes adultery] and murder. (Soncino Talmud translation)

Given these sources, it is crucial to recognize that the above passages in *Talmud Bavli, Arakin 15b*, are far more than sermonic statements meant to dissuade us from the grievous sin of speaking *lashon harah*. Instead, they have deep and abiding halachic (Jewish legal) significance. The Rambam (1135-1204) utilized this *daf* (folio), among a number of other sources, when he formulated his *piskei din* (halachic decisions) in this fundamental area of Jewish law. Given the vital nature of these *halachot* (laws), it is essential for us to briefly review them.

Maimonides places the laws regarding the prohibition of *lashon harah* in *Sefer Hama'ada* at the end of *Hilchot Deiot*. He summarizes the Talmudic discussion regarding this topic in a number of clearly and precisely stated *halachot*. The first *halacha* (law) deals with the general prohibition of tale-bearing (*rechilus*), of which *lashon harah* is a subset, as presented in *Sefer Vayikra* 19:16:

If one spreads tales about someone else, one is transgressing a negative commandment, for it is written, "You shall not go around as a tale-bearer amongst your people". Even though this sin is not punishable by flogging, it is nevertheless a great sin and can cause many Jewish deaths, which is why this commandment is mentioned next to that of, "...nor shall you stand aside when trouble befalls your fellow". Learn from what happened to Do'eg the Edomite. (This, and all following quotations from *Hilchot Deiot* are based upon O'Levy's translation as found at: <http://www.panix.com/~jlbaker/MadaD.html>, with my editorial changes to enhance readability.)

The Rambam's emphasis upon the juxtaposition of this prohibition to that of: "*Lo ta'amode al dam reiecha*," ("You should not stand idly by when your fellow Jew's life is in danger") speaks volumes. Quite simply, as he notes, *rechilus* kills people, both metaphorically and in reality.

The next *halacha* provides us with a definitional structure for understanding the terms "*rachil*" ("tale-bearer") and *baal lashon harah* (literally, "master of *slander*"). Herein, the Rambam stresses that both *rechilus* and *lashon harah* are, by definition, true. As he so clearly opines, however, this in no way gives permission for these damaging truths to be spread. He also notes that *lashon harah* is actually a greater sin than *rechilus*:

Who counts as a tale-bearer? One who carries matters from one [person] to another and says that so-and-so did such-and-such, or that he heard such-and-such regarding so-and-so is counted as a tale-bearer. Even though what he says is true, it [still] destroys the world. There is an even greater sin, that is under the heading of tale-bearing, namely, *slandering* (*lashon harah*). This refers to one who purposefully disparages his fellow Jew even if it is the truth... a master slanderer is one who sits and says that so-and-so did such-and-such, or that his ancestors were like that, or that he heard such-and-such about him, and relates bad things. Concerning this Scripture said "May the L-rd cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaks proud things." (Emphasis my own)

Lying (*motzai shame ra*), it should be noted, is also briefly mentioned by the Rambam in this halacha. Given the context, it appears that the content of this utterance, like *rechilus* and *lashon harah*, is disparaging of one's fellow Jew. It follows the same format of evil that is present in *rechilus* and *lashon harah*. *Motzai shame ra*, however, departs from the truth in its attempt to destroy the individual about whom it is spoken.

The Rambam's next *halacha* is a summary of some of the material found directly in the above-quoted passages in *Talmud Bavli, Arakin 15b*. It also contains a synopsis of the "anatomy" of *lashon harah* and the degrees of culpability of those involved in its transmission and reception:

The Sages said that there are three sins, which bring punishment to a person in this world and deprive him of a share in the World To Come. These sins are idolatry, adultery and murder, but slander (*lashon harah*) is above all. The Sages further said that slandering (*lashon harah*) is like denying G-d, for it is written, "Who have said, 'With our tongue we will prevail; our lips are our own; who is lord above us?'" The Sages further said that slandering kills three people: The one who speaks the slander, the one who receives it, and the one about whom it is spoken. The one who receives the slander commits a greater sin than the one who speaks it."

The following *halacha* focuses upon a category that *Chazal* and the Rambam label "*avak lashon harah*" ("indirect *lashon harah*"). While not said with the intent to do harm, this is, however, its result and, therefore, forbidden:

There are things which are similar to slandering. What does this mean? For example, one who says to someone else that he should be like him, or one who says that he has nothing to say about so-and-so and doesn't care what happens to him [are comparable to slanderers]. Similar things also count. Telling about someone else's goodness because one hates him is also similar to slandering, for it will cause the listeners to tell it [to other people] in a bad way. Concerning this Solomon said, "He who blesses his friend in a loud voice, rising early in the morning, shall have it counted as a curse to him," for out of good will come bad. Similarly, concerning slandering with laughter and frivolity and showing no hatred Solomon said in his wisdom, "As a madman who throws firebrands, arrows and death, so is a man who tricks his fellow and says, "But I was only joking!" Similarly, one who slanders by swindling, i.e. by telling to his surprise as if he doesn't

know that what he is saying is slandering and that when he is rebuked he says that he didn't know that it was slandering, or that so-and-so also does it [is also like a slanderer].

The final law in this series deals with the social-halachic ramifications of living and dealing with people who are engaged in speaking *lashon harah* on an ongoing basis. As one would suspect, the Rambam prohibits dwelling among such people. He also pointedly reminds us that the fate of the *Dor Hamidbar* (Generation of the Desert) was not sealed until they had listened to and accepted the *lashon harah* of the *Meraglim* (Spies): “It is forbidden to live in a neighborhood of tale-bearers, and how much more so sit with them and listen to what they say. Moreover, the Divine decree against our forefathers in the desert was sealed solely because of slander.”

May Hashem grant us the wisdom to be honest with ourselves when we examine our speech against the yardstick of these *halachot*. We must always be aware that if Miriam, the great prophetess could err, all the more so can we. May He grant us, as well, the *si'ata d'shamaya* (Divine protection) to help us strive for purity in our speech. If we can achieve this lofty goal, it will be one more way in which we can truly love and respect our fellow Jews. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

*** I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

**Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: @theRavZatzal and @Torahtech613.