

DEFAMATION

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

These are the chronicles of Yaakov: Yosef was 17 years old. As a lad, he would tend the sheep with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. Since his brothers [the sons of Leah] would make fun of them [the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah], Yosef brought his father a bad report about them [the children of Leah]. (Bereshith 37:2)

Yosef would report to his father whatever shortcomings he saw in the sons of Leah. Among other things, Yosef told his father that they had treated the handmaids' sons with contempt, calling them slaves. For this report, Yosef was later punished measure for measure by being sold into slavery.¹ Why did Yosef's actions warrant such a severe punishment? After all, he only told his father what he had seen. We must always bear in mind that the Torah establishes the guidelines for truth and falsehood, and we must not base our assessment of what is true on our own perception of a situation. Since the Torah forbids lashon hara (slander), even a true statement is considered sheker if it is slanderous.²

The Torah instructs us, "distance yourself from falsehood." Our Sages tell us that this includes avoiding listening to anything derogatory which may not be true.³ How can we listen to anything at all? - We won't know if it is true or not! The answer is that everyone should indeed try their best not to listen to any form of lashon hara, and must be especially on guard to avoid slander. Aside from the strong likelihood that it is false, slander can lead to tremendously harmful results.⁴ For this reason even when it is permitted to listen to lashon hara for a constructive purpose, one may only listen to it in order to guard oneself from potential harm. In all cases it is forbidden to accept what one is being told as the absolute truth.⁵

Just because we perceive something as true does not mean that it is not false. Since only God is well enough informed to judge a situation in its entirety, it is impossible for anyone to see every element involved in any incident. Therefore no human being can ever be privy to the "whole truth." This idea is in fact indicated in the letters of the word emeth (אמת), which is comprised of the first, middle, and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet.⁶ This indicates that only God can know the emeth since only He sees the beginning, the middle, and the end of the picture before Him.

1. Rashi on Bereshith 37:2. See the explanation in "The Punishment Fits the Crime" (page 101) that the idea behind "measure for measure" is that one who commits a crime should get the message about what he did wrong.

2. Eved HaMelech, Mishpatim 23:7.
3. Mechiltah ibid., Sha'arei Teshuvah 3:211; Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 74.
4. Niv Sefathayim 5:5.
5. Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Ch.6, 7.
6. Rashi, Shabbath 55a.

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