

# LASHON HARA PART 8

*by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen*

In the past weeks we have discussed the various laws of forbidden speech<sup>1</sup>. It is clear that this commandment is one of the most difficult to observe - most of us admit that we find it hard to avoid speaking lashon hara. Why is it that it is so difficult to avoid speaking negatively about other people?

On a superficial level, we speak so much that it is hard to avoid criticizing others. However, perhaps there is a deeper cause that lies at the root of much of the lashon hara spoken. As we have seen Jewish law acknowledges that we derive pleasure from speaking negatively about others - we see this in the laws of constructive speech: There are times when it is permissible and even required to speak lashon hara in order to prevent damage, however even this is forbidden if the speaker is pleased in his heart to cast the perpetrator in a bad light. This is difficult to understand - there are many sins for which there is an obvious physical temptation, such as forbidden relations, however there is no obvious physical pleasure derived by speaking lashon hara. Why is there such a drive to speak negatively about other people?

It seems that the root cause of the pleasure of speaking lashon hara is that it provides an artificial boost to our self-worth: If we feel a lack of self-worth there are two ways in which we can boost it - one is to get involved in constructive activities and improve our character. In this way we feel more fulfilled and positive about ourselves. However, there is another, easier option; We often tend to value ourselves in relation to others, consequently our self-image is often dependent upon how we compare to those around us. By criticizing them we knock them down, thereby we now see ourselves in a more favorable light in comparison. For example, if we feel lacking in a mida such as intelligence, by criticizing someone else in that exact same area can help us feel better about our own level of intelligence.

In this vein the Rabbis teach us that a person only criticizes others about a flaw that they themselves possess. They understood the psychological needs of people to feel good about themselves and that a prime way of trying to do so is by knocking down others in their very own areas of weakness.

Of course the rise in self-worth derived from speaking lashon hara is artificial and very short-lived. After a short while the speaker's true sense of inadequacy returns and he feels the need to criticize more in order to boost himself. Any person who has tried to refrain from lashon hara can testify that on the occasions when they held themselves they did not feel any lacking - on the contrary they felt better about themselves for doing the right thing.

With this understanding of the cause of lashon hara we can now begin to attack the root of the problem: If we see in ourselves the desire to disparage others then we should make an accounting of ourselves to discover its source. Very often, it may arise because of a lack of self-worth. But instead of putting down others, we can feel better about ourselves by improving ourselves and striving to be active and productive members of society. May we all be merit to purify our speech.

<sup>1</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion of the laws of lashon hara see, "A Lesson a Day."

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