

## CHAPTER 2: MISHNA 15: PART 3

*by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky*

Before the last lesson of the Mishna, the Tanna injects an explanation of why one must be careful about his relationship with chachamim, and this itself has three elements: 1) Because their bite is like the bite of fox, 2) their sting is like the sting of a scorpion, and 3) their whisper -- or hiss -- is like that of a serpent. (The Maharal first explains the meaning of these three, and only afterwards does he explain the final lesson of the Mishna, which belongs to the previous group.)

If a Talmid Chacham has a (legitimate) hatred of someone (who behaved improperly towards him), the force of this hatred is called a "bite," for the action that an enemy attempts against his antagonist is called "neshicha" (biting). (See the famous Gemara, Pesachim 49b, where Rebbe Akiva declares that when he was an "am ha'aretz" (an ignorant person) his hatred of Torah scholars was so great that he used to boast "Who will deliver to me a talmid chacham, that I may bite him -- i.e. destroy him -- as would a donkey/dog", and the Maharsha's commentary there.) Rebbe Eliezer taught that [the hatred a talmid chacham has] is like the bite of a fox, for the fox's bite is the deepest of the animals, completely severing the entire limb. So, too, the destructive effect the talmid chacham's hatred has on his antagonist is not a partial effect but a complete one. The effect on the adversary is the result of the "sechel" of the talmid chacham (which is compelling and imperative), and "sechel" isn't something that can operate in any manner that is not complete and fully intact. (In essence, something can't be "somewhat" logical and compelling. It either IS, or it isn't. When we view something as only "somewhat logical" it is due to the limitation of our own "sechel" faculties in determining whether it really is or isn't.)

If the talmid chacham doesn't have a hatred for his antagonist, but has a legitimate complaint in his heart towards him, this would be termed a "sting" but not a "bite." It is to describe such a situation that the Tanna warns that the sting of talmid chacham is like the sting of a scorpion, less damaging than the bite of a fox, but still very dangerous.

Finally, the "whisper" or the "hiss" refers to a situation where the talmid chacham is simply angry at the individual. When a serpent is angry, he hisses, and a person who is angry reacts with a similar response. The Tanna is teaching that when a talmid chacham is angry at someone, even if it doesn't reach the level of hatred, the anger can be as dangerous as the hiss of a serpent, which could lead to the serpent biting the person. It is also dangerous.

(I am sure that many of you are troubled by the idea that a talmid chacham could have hatred for

someone, or be angry with someone -- especially in light of our knowledge that the Temple was destroyed because of "sinat chinam," baseless hatred, and what we wrote about anger in a recent shiur. This discomfort could be the result of an unrealistic and inaccurate view of how the world is supposed to operate. "Sinat chinam," baseless hatred, is exactly that -- hatred which is BASELESS. While we are familiar with Rav Kook's lesson (actually found in sources many decades before Rav Kook) that the rectification of "sinat chinam" is "ahavat chinam," it should be understood the ethical impact the idea has, rather than as an accurate conceptual understanding of hatred. A careful reading of the words of the Rabbis, which the Maharal posits is the only way to ever correctly understand their true meaning, shows that there can be legitimate hatred which has a base, and in fact THAT is the true opposite of "sinat chinam." "Chinam," which means "with no payment or recompense" is the adjective modifying "sinah." "Sinah" isn't a modifier of "chinam." So the opposite has to contrast with the "chinam" aspect of the hatred.

(This is quite clear in the Rabbinic discussions of the verses in the Torah relating to laws associated with people that one hates. A careful study of the places in the Torah where the word "sonei," enemy, is used shows that it usually implies someone who is being opposed by another. The opposition can certainly be personal and egocentric, which is certainly improper. But the Torah uses it in many places that legitimizes the hatred and opposition, depending upon circumstances. See the following sources: Vayikra 19:17 and the Rambam Ch. 6 Hilchot Dei'oth 5-7; Breishith 37:4; Shemoth 23:5 and T.B. Pesachim 113b; Devarim 4:42 and 19:4,6. There are others. What we are used to -- and it is why we have a negative reaction to the word "hatred" -- is uncontrolled and irrational hatred. But it is not simply an option but a RESPONSIBILITY of the talmid chacham to respond with anger and possibly even hatred when the Torah that he represents is being degraded or defamed. See T.B. Yoma 22b about the requirement of a talmid chacham to avenge any insult inflicted upon him. But any negative reaction that he has to a person or a situation must be JUSTIFIED, MEASURED AND CONTROLLED, devoid of any ego. This is very difficult, MUCH more difficult than simply ignoring the affront and pretending to a patient and forgiving person. This is strength of a true talmid chacham and person of highest ethical standard. The requirement of the Torah is that one know precisely what response is appropriate in a given situation, and that he be able to behave accordingly, sometimes with kindness and forgiveness, and sometimes with anger and vengeance.)

The Tanna now returns to the earlier theme, concluding the Mishna with the third directive on our relationship with chachamim. "All their words are like fiery coals" warning us not to violate their teachings, the Rabbinic commands. About the severity of violating these teachings, we are taught (Berachoth 4b) "One who transgresses the teachings of the Rabbis is liable for death." We are further taught (Eruvin 21b) "My son, take heed of the teachings of the Rabbis more than those of the Torah. For the Torah's laws are positive and negative commandments (and the result of transgression is simply that one has violated a prohibition or failed to fulfill a positive command), while one who transgresses the teachings of the Rabbis is liable for death. (A person usually violates a halacha for one of two reasons. He can have trouble with self-control. Or he can think this particular requirement

it isn't that important or binding. It is when a person violates Rabbinic decrees for the second reason that the we say he is liable for death. For he disparages and undermines one of the foundations of the Torah system -- Rabbinic authority.)

In summary, all the lessons of Rebbe Eliezer are taught in groups of threes. There are three lessons on how to perfect yourself in relation to your fellow man, to your own self and in relation to G-d. There are three lessons on how to behave towards Chachamim: Attach yourself to them, don't lose sight of the respect they deserve, and don't violate their decrees and prohibitions. And there are three consequences of behaving improperly towards them -- the "bite", the "sting" and the "hiss."

The class is taught by [Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky](#), Dean of [Darche Noam Institutions](#), Yeshivat Darche Noam/Shapell's and Midreshet Rachel for Women.

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