

CHAPTER 7, LAW 3(B) - CYNICISM: THE JOY OF INEXISTENCE, PART II

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

The Sages said: '[For] three sins a person is punished (lit., 'it is collected from a person') in this world, and he has no share in the World to Come: idolatry, incest / adultery, and murder. And the spreading of evil gossip (lashon hara) is equivalent to all three.' The Sages said further: 'Anyone who speaks lashon hara, it is as if he has denied G-d, as it is stated, '[...those] who said, 'Because of our tongues we will overpower, our lips are with us, who is master over us?'' (Psalms 12:5). And the Sages said further, 'Three does lashon hara kill: the one who says it, the one who accepts it, and the one who is spoken about. And the acceptor more so than the speaker.

In this law the Rambam quotes a short selection of rabbinic statements regarding the severity of lashon hara, of gossiping. We began discussing them last week. Looking at the Rambam's second quote -- equating lashon hara to denying G-d, we asked how the Sages could have possibly made so sweeping a statement. True, gossiping is terrible and can destroy lives, but how could any sin be compared to the denial of G-d Himself?

The answer provides us a very basic understanding of the workings of the human mind. Last week we posed further: Why in fact **do** people speak lashon hara? At times of course it's because **he** hurt **me** very badly on some past occasion and so I yearn for sweet revenge. But as we know, some people are just chronic speakers of lashon hara. They always see bad in others -- in other individuals, in other ethnic groups, in other types of Jews (especially ones more religious than they), seemingly without provocation. Now what kind of pleasure do such people get in being so cynical? Why assume the worst? Why do some people have such a drive to see ugliness and failings in others? What do they gain from it?

As an interesting aside, the Talmud (Ta'anis 8a) states that in the End of Days, all the animals will approach the snake and ask it why it bites without eating, seemingly for no personal benefit of its own. (I recently heard that snakes -- unlike most all other creatures on this earth -- bite humans for no provocation whatsoever, even when they have no intention of eating them. And that has been their nature ever since Genesis (3:15) when G-d decreed enmity between the serpent and man.) The serpent will respond, "Well, why does the gossipmonger speak lashon hara with no benefit to him?"

Thus in truth, there **is** no real benefit to speaking lashon hara. **I** gain nothing from putting down another human being -- not in a physical nor in an emotional sense. Yet we need not look far to see

that character assassination is quite popular. People derive a sick joy from putting others down, from finding their flaws and broadcasting them far and wide. What is this sick pleasure and what is the psychology behind it?

Let us back up somewhat. What is man's purpose in this world? (Far enough back?) :-) In a word, we're here to improve ourselves: to perfect ourselves, and -- in our own small way -- to perfect the entire universe, giving glory to G-d's Name.

How is this done? In a simple sense through avoiding the bad and cleaving to the good. Do the positive commandments of the Torah and refrain from the negatives. But it really goes beyond this. The game plan is not simply, "Do this and don't do that." Yes, that's a rough outline for all of us, but it really goes much deeper. G-d made each of us different. We each have a unique mission and role to fulfill. Our job -- our personalized, individualized job -- is to look into ourselves, discover our unique talents and abilities, and use them toward perfecting the world. And likewise we must recognize our particular weaknesses which we must take special effort to overcome. (Or even better: to recognize how to sublimate those "weaknesses" towards G-d's cause. Anger, passion, guilt, stubbornness: they are all powerful forces if they would only be channeled toward the good.)

Thus, more profoundly, our purpose in this world is to find out just who we are and to recognize and harness all our talents toward sanctifying G-d's Name. It's a tall order. If we're determined and persistent we'll have gone a fraction of the way by the end of our lives.

And even more tragically, so many of us don't even reach that critical first step. Most of us really do not know who we are. We either never ask ourselves what is special about us, we spend our entire lives trying to pretend we're something else (for reasons of popularity and the like), or we subconsciously (or semi-consciously) deny our talents for fear that admitting our greatness would obligate us to actually **become** great.

Thus, the one most basic and critical mindset we must have to face life is a readiness to see the greatness and potential within ourselves. Every one of us has phenomenal abilities. We could achieve mightily before G-d. We could change the world. But we must be prepared to recognize those abilities within ourselves. And we must be prepared to act.

And this is where cynicism enters, in all its destructiveness. It is the most anti-life attitude imaginable. Look down on yourself; look down on others. Don't see potential for greatness. See the worst -- and assume it if you don't see it. One of the greatest positive forces in this world is competition. If I see others who are greater than I and who have achieved more, I can either use that as a goad to improve myself, or I can somehow see them in an abysmally bad light. Those ultra-Orthodox, they're not really any good. They're too extreme, they don't really live in this world, their piety is only on the outside, they go around thinking they're better than us, etc. etc. See the bad -- or invent it out of thin air if you don't actually see it.

And such an attitude fails on the most basic and crucial first step of self-fulfillment. Rather than

looking up to others and realizing how much I too could achieve, I put them down. Not only have I lost some very wonderful role models, but this colors my view of mankind as a whole. No one has really gotten it right. They're all deep down evil and corrupt. And so: what's the point even trying myself? Man is not great, not formed in the image of G-d. He cannot achieve. And last (but not at all least), I'm so busy looking at the faults of others, I never take the time to look inwards toward myself and see what might be wrong with me.

So as the serpent will rightly note, no natural pleasure results from being a gossipmonger. Such a worldview does not make my life any more pleasurable. In fact it makes life terribly dreary and depressing -- seeing only wickedness where I might have seen the good. But it allows me to wallow in a very different sort of pleasure: the joy of inexistence. I'd rather take it easy on myself and never own up to my humanity. I see a hopeless and evil world in which there is nothing to strive for. I want to tear down and destroy rather than see G-d's world for all its beauty and potential for greatness. I want to live in a world without G-d.

We have thus far explained how the Sages can equate lashon hara to the denial of G-d, as it flies in the face of the entire purpose G-d has for this world. This is a big topic and there is much more to write, yet for this week I'll just close with one further inference and save the rest G-d willing for next week.

In the statement we've been discussing, the language the Rabbis employed was actually very peculiar. When the Talmud said that lashon hara is tantamount to denying G-d, it didn't actually mention G-d by name. Literally translated, it stated that it is as if one has denied "the Primary [One]." Clearly, the intention was G-d. But why the unusual expression?

I believe the idea is along the lines we explained above. As we wrote, our purpose in this world is to recognize our talents and use them towards making the world a better place. In a deeper sense, however, the true idea is that we recognize the godliness within ourselves -- that we are beings in G-d's image. Our talents and abilities were handed to us by G-d, and as a result we must turn around and devote them to Him. This implies a G-d-centered world, in which all we are and all we were granted we direct back towards the G-d (the "Primary One") who granted them. The speaker of lashon hara, however, refuses to do this. He refuses to see the goodness of mankind and admit there are talents we must direct Godward. He makes himself and his own pleasures the center of his existence. Not only his mouth, but his entire life-focus is tragically misdirected. And as the Talmud states, a person such as he will never merit the Divine Presence (Sotah 42a).

Anyway, as we can see, the ideas here get ever more profound. One more class and I hope we will have mastered this topic -- and perhaps we'll learn to watch our mouths in the process!

Much of the basic approach presented above is based on the teachings of my teacher R. Yochanan Zweig.

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