

CHAPTER 7, LAW 3(C) - CYNICISM: THE JOY OF INEXISTENCE, PART III

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.

Up until this point, we spent a good deal of time explaining how gossiping is tantamount to denying G-d. In a word, it is because the chronic gossipmonger is refusing to accept G-d's purpose for mankind in this world. Our purpose is to recognize the talents G-d has granted us and use them to make the world a better place. The gossipmonger, however, refuses to see the greatness of man. He sees the worst in everyone and everything -- and invents it if he doesn't see it. And as a result, he fails to see man as a being capable of greatness. There is always some wickedness to uncover or ulterior motive to be found. And so, he gives up on himself as well. No one is really all that great and accomplished -- so what's the point trying myself? Speaking lashon hara (gossip) is thus the most anti-life and anti-G-d activity imaginable, refusing to accept the most basic purpose of our humanity.

Let me finally turn to the first quote the Rambam brings -- that a person who transgresses the three cardinal sins receives no share in the World to Come (if he has never repented) -- and that lashon hara corresponds to all three. (In Judaism we generally speak of three cardinal sins. I realize Christianity has a list of seven. I'm sure they're all bad too.) ;-) This statement too strikes us as rather extreme. Gossiping is nasty, but it isn't murder! And now we are told it equals all three cardinal sins combined!

Before going on, I should reiterate what I mentioned two weeks ago: There's gossip and there's gossip. At its worst, lashon hara is the defamation of another human being with the intent of turning his friends against him and ruining his life. Most of us are not as careful with our mouths as we should be. However, when we speak, we are generally not particularly intent on hurting another. We do so because it makes a good conversation item: "Did you hear what happened to so-and-so?" In fact, we often speak about those we love most, just that we're a little too open about, say, telling our friend about our spouse's or child's faults.

I would therefore venture that although again we are sometimes far too careless with our speech, I can't imagine G-d considers us to have denied His existence or to have violated any of the cardinal sins. But then again -- to repeat another comment I made in that past class -- we do not find the Sages anywhere making the distinction I just did -- differentiating between worse and "better" lashon hara. Even the most casual sort has that taste of the real thing. The mouth is a **very** dangerous thing to play around with. It is capable, perhaps more so than any other part of our bodies, of both wonderful good and horrific evil. We may not take any lapses in our speech lightly.

Returning to our previous question, how can lashon hara, even at its worst, be equated to all three of the cardinal sins? The answer I'd like to suggest is actually quite intriguing -- and unfortunately all too true.

Jewish thinkers divide the Torah's mitzvos (commandments) into three basic types. They are:

(a) Mitzvos between man and G-d: Resting on the Sabbath, fasting on Yom Kippur, keeping kosher, etc.

(b) Mitzvos between man and his fellow: Not stealing, honesty in business, honoring one's parents, returning lost items, etc. (Actually, some view honoring one's parents as a "bridge" mitzvah, as it is allegorical to honoring G-d.)

Most Jewish thinkers make mention of these two categories alone, as the Talmud and earlier sources make ample reference to them (see for example Mishna Yoma 8:9). Some, however (Maharal, Vilna Gaon, Maharsha), list a third, actually the most intriguing of all.

(c) Mitzvos between man and himself: Mitzvos whose primary focus is an individual's own personal development. This can actually be seen as a subset of the first two -- as all mitzvos can be categorized as either relating to man or G-d. However, certain mitzvos focus primarily inwards -- on man's character, defining what kind of human being he is. (Of course at the same time, **all** mitzvos develop us as individuals to varying degrees; there is thus much blurring of the boundaries here.) Into this category falls such mitzvos as Torah study -- the ultimate form of personal spiritual development, as well as other activities relating to improving our characters.

Against this basic backdrop, the severity of the three cardinal sins comes into crystal-clear focus. Each is the antithesis of one of the above categories. Murder is easy; we'll knock that one off first: That is of course the antithesis of mitzvos between man and his fellow. Idolatry is also straightforward enough, being the quintessential sin between man and his Creator. Incest / adultery is a bit more interesting. It's certainly sinning against one's partner, as well as her husband in the case in adultery. But when we think about it, at its root such behavior is truly sinning to oneself. It is the ultimate denial of a person's humanity, lowering himself to and defining himself as a body rather than a soul. I live for pleasures of the most selfish kind -- at the total expense of the wants and needs of others.

We can now appreciate why the Sages view lashon hara in so censorious a light -- and equate it to all three of the cardinal sins. It contains elements of all three types of sins -- and in no small measure.

First and foremost, it is one of the severest sins between man and man, defaming and ruining the reputation of another human being. In Judaism we don't go for that old expression "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Only little kids could possibly believe that. Names are a serious business, capable of ruining a person's life and self-worth far more so than a couple of bruises.

Second, speaking lashon hara sins terribly to G-d. Man is a being fashioned in G-d's image (Genesis 1:26-7). Degrading and putting a person down is not only an insult to the G-d who created him but lowers the image of G-d in this world. It belittles G-d's representative in this world, making G-d's presence that much less evident.

And lastly, lashon hara is one of most terrible sins a person can perpetrate against himself. As we explained in past weeks, putting down mankind is one of the strongest forms of denying our purpose in this world. Seeing the worst in man is an enormously powerful opium against self-growth. Rather than seeing the good of others -- obligating myself to improve in the process -- I put them down. I don't want to see the positive in man -- for if I'd admit they're so good I'd have to admit I'm not so good -- and I might even have to do something about it. Instead, I see them in their worst possible light and forget the whole darn thing, allowing myself to wallow in my usual cynicism and negativity. Last and not least, spending so much time finding fault in others is a great way of preoccupying your own mind, distracting you from the inconvenience of ever having to critically view yourself.

We have finally wrapped up some of the basic concepts of lashon hara, implied by the rabbinic statements the Rambam quotes here. One more unrelated important idea before I close -- which I'll try to make brief (not one of my better talents).

The Rambam (quoting Talmud Erchin 15b) states that lashon hara kills three -- the speaker, the listener, and the one spoken about. This we can well appreciate. The Rambam's conclusion, however, that the listener is worse than the speaker, requires explanation. Isn't the speaker the primary offender, the listener only passively abetting him in his fiendish deed? In fact, we all occasionally find ourselves on the listening end of our fellow's slanderous diatribes -- and often we wish we weren't there, just that we can find no easy way to interrupt (or at least avoid) our fellow's tirade.

The answer is that anyone who sins feels uneasy about it at the start. Any speaker or comedian who has stood up before an unfamiliar audience knows that uneasy feeling (myself included -- and being too-well prepared can make it even worse), wondering if his viewers are the sort to be receptive to his words and style. So too the gossipmonger. He too approaches his intended audience tentatively,

not knowing how well-taken his words will be. Thus, only when the listener appears agreeable and nods his approval (but not if he shows his disapproval), does the evil deed truly take effect. This in fact is the key ingredient to making the slander take hold in all its destructiveness -- in both the listener's mind and the speaker's. Thus, when it comes to lashon hara, aiding and abetting is actually the most serious aspect of the crime. May G-d protect us from this vile sin in all of its forms.

(The final idea above I heard from my teacher R. Yochanan Zweig. I believe I heard the basic approach to the three cardinal sins from him as well.)

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