CHAPTER 7, LAW 6(B) - TUNNEL VISION, PART II

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

All such people [discussed above] are [considered] speakers of lashon hara (malicious gossip) in whose neighborhood it is forbidden to dwell, and certainly [it is forbidden] to sit among them and listen to their words. The [heavenly] decree against our forefathers in the desert was sealed only on account of lashon hara.

Towards the end of last week's class, we began discussing the Rambam's final point -- that the generation of the desert did not merit entry into the Land of Israel on account of lashon hara (see Numbers 13-14). They accepted the wicked report of the Spies and as a result were barred from entering the Holy Land, instead being fated to die in the desert over the next forty years after which their children would at last merit to enter.

Last week we asked several very basic questions on the story. I'll offer a quick recap of them before we move on.

(1) Why was the sin of the spies considered "gossip" altogether? For the most part, they actually spoke **favorably** of the Land. Their complaint was not so much about the Land itself, but in their ability to conquer it from the giants who inhabited it. If so, why do the Torah and Sages primarily fault the Spies with lashon hara -- and not with something so much worse -- doubting G-d's ability to win their wars?

(2) During the earlier census taken of the Children of Israel, the tribe of Levi was counted separately from all the other tribes. The reason was because all those counted would be included in the decree to perish in the desert, and G-d did not want Levi included -- as they did not take part in the sin of the Golden Calf, and thus didn't deserve destruction. This, however, implies that being counted was the **grounds** for being implicated in the sin. But theoretically, had Levi been counted but not sinned, wouldn't the decree have been on the sinners and **not** on the counted -- being that not all the counted sinned?

(3) The duration of the punishment -- 40 years -- corresponded to the 40 days the spies spent traveling through the Land. Firstly, the sin of the nation was not the traveling, but accepting the report after. Why should they have all been punished for the amount of time it took the spies to travel? Second, even the spies technically did nothing wrong when they traveled. At worst they **planned** to offer a negative report after. But the Talmud tells us that G-d does not punish us for the planning to sin, only for the actual sinning. If so, why should the punishment -- of an entire nation --

correspond to the number of days a few of their number spent planning to do something wrong?

I believe the Sages elsewhere provide us with an important clue to understanding this episode. Immediately beforehand in the Torah is the story of Miriam's lashon hara against Moses (Numbers 12). Miriam was Moses' older sister. The Torah records how she complained to their brother Aaron about Moses' separating from his wife -- ostensibly in order that he be in a constant state of purity to receive prophecy from G-d. Miriam complained to Aaron: Aren't they prophets too? **They** never separated from their spouses; why did he? What makes him think he's so much better than they? G-d punished her with *tsara'as* (typically translated as leprosy), a spiritual disease in which white patches develop on a person's skin until he or she repents. Moses subsequently prayed that G-d heal her, which He did, although He decreed that she remain outside the camp seven day till her atonement was complete.

The Midrash asks: Why does the story of the Spies immediately follow the story of Miriam? It is an indictment of them: They saw what just happened to Miriam for speaking lashon hara and even so did not learn their lesson (Tanchuma 5, brought in Rashi to 13:2). We thus see an important parallel between Miriam's sin and Israel's. I would therefore like to begin by analyzing the sin of Miriam.

There is something very curious about the story of Miriam. Before G-d struck Miriam with *tsara'as*, He came down to have a little talk with her and Aaron. His words were as follows: "Hear now My words. If there is a prophet among you, in a vision I make Myself known to him, in a dream I speak to him. Not so My servant Moses. In all My house he is faithful. Mouth to mouth I speak with him, in a vision and not with riddles, and the picture of G-d he beholds. And why were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?" (12:6-8).

The basic sermon is very well taken. Moses is far, far greater than she and Aaron, for all their greatness. She should have known better than to question his behavior.

But something very basic is missing. Miriam's criticism of Moses was not only presumptuous; it was outright wrong. G-d spoke to Aaron and Miriam much more rarely. There was no reason for them to curtail ordinary married life. G-d could just as easily appear to them when they're in a state of purity. To Moses, by contrast, G-d spoke constantly. Moses had to always be ready for further communion.

This in fact was hinted to Aaron and Miriam in the manner in which G-d appeared to them -- "suddenly" (12:4), without warning. As the Sages comment, they began screaming "Water! Water!" for they were impure from marital relations (Rashi there). G-d thus hinted to Miriam a further objection against her words. Moses **did** have justification for separating from his wife.

Now this raises a curious issue. Had I been G-d (something I suppose we all like to imagine every so often), my address to Miriam would have been quite different: "You're **wrong!** I speak to you rarely and to Moses every day! He needs to be constantly pure. Your criticism is thus completed unfounded!"

Yet G-d only hinted this to her indirectly. His main lecture focused on Moses' greatness and the audacity of speaking against him. And this, although valid in its own right, seems to miss the point. It's true that Moses was greater than she. Yet had he **not** experienced constant prophecy, her criticism would have been founded, in spite of his greatness! And if he **did** experience constant prophecy, then her criticism was unjust even if he **weren't** greater than they! In other words, what G-d responded, though a valid point, seems irrelevant to the issue at hand!

Let me finally bring this issue to a head. All of this sheds light on the true evil of lashon hara. The issue is not whether my criticism is right or wrong. It may very well be correct. What is truly wrong, however, is judging another human being based on my own standards and perspective. The reason Miriam felt **qualified** to criticize Moses is because she failed to recognize his greatness. He's a prophet and she's a prophetess. He has no right acting any differently than she! **That** is the root of lashon hara. Once we impute our own standards on someone else, we will never see him in his differences favorably. If **I** do not do that why should he? Who does she think **she** is acting differently? The reason we do not accept others for who they are, even going so far as to speak against them, is because we fail to see them in their proper light.

And this, by the way, works both ways. In Miriam's case, she failed to see Moses' greatness -- and so she cut him down to her own standards -- and found fault. (Of course no doubt she knew he was greater, but she perhaps saw him as greater in degree, not altogether different in kind.) Often, however, we do the same in the opposite manner -- we fail to be accepting of others' shortcomings. We look down on them because they don't match up to our standards, failing to appreciate that all people are different in nature, abilities, background, and personal disposition.

Had, however, Miriam seen Moses in his true light, she would have realized that certainly he must have good reason for behaving differently -- whatever it may be. She might not know why, but she should have known that her own standards are no fair criteria for judging **anyone** else, let alone the likes of Moses. We should never be quick to criticize others just because they are not like us. That, in a nutshell, is where all the problems start.

With this, the entire story of the Spies comes into crystal clear -- and awe-inspiring -- focus. This simply stated, was their sin -- seeing a land as holy as Israel and failing to truly see it. We still have more ground to cover, so G-d willing we will finish this up next week. Stay tuned!

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