

CHAPTER 7, LAW 3(A) - CYNICISM: THE JOY OF INEXISTENCE, PART I

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 further said: '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, 'Lashon hara kills three: the one who says it, the one who accepts it, and the one who is spoken about. And the accepter more so than the speaker."

Last week the Rambam introduced the prohibition of lashon hara -- of spreading malicious gossip about one's fellow, in particular when the facts are true. (As last week, we'll use the Hebrew term below.) This week the Rambam quotes a small selection of rabbinic statements regarding the scope and severity of lashon hara, painting a clear image precisely how evil the prohibition is. Below I would like to examine these statements more closely. Not only are they sobering in their own right, but I believe if we understand them properly we will gain important insights into the precise evil of lashon hara.

An important side point which bears mention regards the Rambam's first statement -- that violators of cardinal sins receive no share in the hereafter. The commentators make it clear that this is only without repentance. Certainly man may repent all his sins -- till his last moments on earth, and by so doing merit a share in the World to Come. The Rambam himself, in his Laws of Repentance (3:14), after listing categories of heretics and the like who receive no share in the afterlife, states as follows:

"When is it the case that all of these [people] have no share in the World to Come? When they die without repentance. But if [such a person] repents from his wickedness and dies as a repenter ('ba'al teshuva' -- lit., 'master of repentance'), he is among the ones who receive [a share in] the World to Come. For you have nothing which stands in the way of teshuva. Even if one denied G-d all his days and at the end repents, he has a portion, as it is stated, 'Peace! Peace! to the far one and the near one, says G-d, and I will heal him' (Isaiah 57:19)."

The Rambam there continues that even if such people regretted their actions in the inner recesses of their hearts and at the last moments of their lives, their repentance is to some extent efficacious. It really is a world of love. G-d did not create us just to punish us or make our lives difficult, but so that

we'd cleave to Him and merit His closeness. No one, no matter how sinful he has been and regardless of his age and track record is "doomed". G-d waits till the very last moment for our devotion.

I'd like to now begin by examining the second statement of the Rambam. I feel it holds the key to understanding the others. The Rambam states (quoting Talmud Erchin 15b) that speaking lashon hara is akin to denying G-d. Now this statement seems extreme. We recognize, of course, that great damage can be done with loose lips, yet how in the world can any action, no matter how heinous, in any way approximate atheism? We all sin, sometimes seriously. Yet none of us could imagine in the darkest recesses of our hearts that G-d does not exist. (The Theory of Evolution? Don't make me laugh.) If so, how could the Talmud even venture such a comparison?

A straightforward explanation is actually implied by the Rambam himself elsewhere (Laws of Tumas Tsara'as 16:10). He explains that people who speak lashon hara do not content themselves with speaking about the lowly. Their cynicism then turns to the righteous, then to the prophets, in whose words they cast aspersions. Ultimately, such people will speak ill of G-d Himself, denying His goodness or justness. Thus, with such sins, one thing leads to another until the gossip in some way denies G-d.

I believe, however, a much deeper idea is implied here. The Rambam is equating lashon hara to some of the most vile sins in existence. I don't believe his point is merely in how bad things can eventually get. He sees great evil in the sin itself, not only in what it may lead to. (There is also a compelling grammatical reason (which I won't get into) why I believe the Rambam here intends much more.)

Let me offer an important qualification before I go on. All of us are guilty of lashon hara on occasion. (Pardon me if I just insulted you -- I'd hate to be guilty of lashon hara while writing this class...) We all from time to time speak about things which should not be discussed. For the most part, though, most of us are not doing so to crush and malign another human being. Lashon hara at its worst is the defamation of another person, attempting to ruin his reputation and perhaps his life. Very rarely do we sin with such malicious intent. Usually we'll blurt out things which happen to be good conversation items or which get us a little attention. Sometimes we'll even speak sympathetically about someone else's personal problems which should not be unjustly spread. Wrong this certainly is, but we're hardly speaking of the vicious libeling of another human being -- especially because we're often speaking about the ones we love most.

Based on this, I would be inclined to comment that when the Sages made such condemnatory statements about lashon hara, they weren't talking about **us**. (Criticism is never about **us** of course.) They were referring to lashon hara at its worst, something the mediocre likes of us rarely transgress.

There may be truth to this, yet at the same time we do not find the Talmud or later authorities making such distinctions -- between the bad and the bad. I suspect that the Sages rightly did not

want us thinking in terms of "better" and "worse" gossip. Every act of unbridled speech has a taste of the most serious type -- and is certainly the sort of speech the victim would not want spread about him at all. We must treat all lapses in our speech with absolute vigilance -- as my grandfather OBM used to say, "Think twice before saying something -- and then don't say it!" A mouth is a tough thing to control. We must maintain absolute control over how we use it.

All of the above being said, I'd like to return to our question regarding heresy. Even at its absolute worst, how can lashon hara be equated to the denial of the Almighty?

Let us now begin to examine the psychology of the gossipmonger. I'm about to run out of space and will G-d-willing pick this up next week, but I'd like to establish some of the basic groundwork before we close. As we explained, at its worst, lashon hara implies the using of one's speech to destroy another human being -- to ruin his career, his relationships, and his life. But why would someone have a drive to do such? Of course some of the time it's because **he** hurt **me** very deeply on some past occasion, and I long for sweet revenge. But much more often we find people who are just negative and cynical towards virtually everyone, who never see the good and always assume the worst. I have no reason to hate him, yet I see nothing but bad in him and communicate my negative impressions to everyone who will listen. Why would someone view others so negatively without any real provocation?

The answer provides a profound insight into the workings of the human mind. I'll save it for next week, :-) but I'll conclude with the following open thought. Our mission in this world is to develop ourselves spiritually and improve. G-d created us with great potential for goodness, but it is a potential we must develop. Now the most powerful opposing force to personal growth is cynicism -- seeing the worst in mankind -- and somehow concluding from there that there is really no point trying ourselves. We will develop this idea further G-d willing next week.

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