

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 11:8

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Sticks and stones may break my bones," goes the saying, "but words will never harm me". But as everyone knows, while words definitely won't break your bones, they can certainly break your spirit and ruin your life. For, who among us hasn't heard of people come undone and whole families devastated by remarks made about them or their loved ones?

But while we'd term that merely "bad-mouthing" or "disparaging" someone, the Torah refers to it as out-and-out toxic and malevolent language, lashon harah in Hebrew, and it takes it very, very seriously. It also points out that while "most people commit sins of theft, and some commit acts of promiscuity, everyone succumbs to some small measure of lashon harah" (Baba Basra 165a). So we'd obviously have to be aware of where we lapse into it.

There are degrees of it, to be sure, from out and out versions to the more subtle instances of it alluded to by the phrase "some small measure of lashon harah" cited above. An example of the latter would be citing the fact that a fire is always going in so-and-so's house (see Arachin 15a). For that could be a sly way of saying that the people there are always eating. Now, it could admittedly allude to the fact that there's always a place for the poor to eat there, as food is always available for them, but given the fact that the first meaning would be=2 odamaging, we'd need to avoid the comment altogether.

Another subtle -- and seemingly counter-intuitive -- instance of lashon harah would be to compliment someone in front of his enemies (Ibid. 16a). Why would that be a bad thing? Because his enemies would undoubtedly shoot right back with that person's faults and you would have predisposed them to doing that by your own remarks however well-intended.

At bottom, as Ramchal puts it, "the point is that ... anything that might be said either to someone's face or not that may result in damage or embarrassment to him is within the parameters of ... lashon harah". And we'd want to avoid it as much as we can.

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