

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 3:11

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We turn to the last of the "four types" and draw close to the end of the third of the four "Gates of Repentance". We'll spend some time now and in the classes to follow addressing "slanderers".

In truth, the term "slanderer" won't always work for the sort of person we'll be referring to in these next classes. For while the Hebrew term used here alludes to "slanderers", it also hearkens to individuals who utter profanities or criticize others sharply, as we'll discover later on. So, at bottom what we'll be discussing are people guilty of doing verbal harm.

We slander when we speak against each other-- even when what we say is utterly true! The Jewish Tradition is straightforward about that, with very little exception. We're expected to be as considerate of others' feelings and sense-of-self as we are of our own. And to go out of our way to avoid saying things against them. (The actual details of all this are rather complex, and beyond the scope of our work here; so the reader is advised to study the books of the holy Chofetz Chaim, many of which are in English translation.)

It's important--albeit discouraging-- to point out just how very widespread slander is in our day and age. And how minor a character flaw it's considered to be today, when it's anything but that from a spiritual and ethical perspective.

It should also be noted, sad to say, that whole *lives* and *careers* are rooted in slander, profanity, and sharp criticism. Anyone in search of spiritual excellence would certainly want to sensitize him- or herself to the great hurt and harm these traits do, and avoid them at all costs.

We'll touch first on slander per se. As Rabbeinu Yonah points out, our sages say that slanderers are like non-believers-- which is such a strong statement. But it's true for a couple of reasons.

First, because anyone who'd do as much physical, emotional, and spiritual harm as slanderers often do to the people they speak against, and who'd get nothing in return other than a vague sense of "one-ups-manship" and power, could only have come to that point by casting his faith to the wind.

And second, because slanderers mistakenly believe that they can say whatever they care to, just as long as they don't actually *do* anything harmful. But while it's certainly true that "sticks and stones may break my bones"-- it's utterly false to think that "words will never harm me". Since some of the greatest harm done to others has been instigated by slanderous remarks about them. And only a non-believer would think G-d doesn't consider a person's thoughts and words when He assesses his

or her being.

Of course this flies in the face of our notion of the inviolable freedom of speech. But while that freedom is certainly meaningful when it comes to fighting evil and injustice, it can do terrible harm to others who don't deserve that, and it's often used as a rank excuse to slander, demean, and defame others unjustly.

There are several other sorrowful things to be said about slanderers, according to Rabbeinu Yonah. They tend to slander again and again, day after day, one person after another; it's hard for them to do teshuva (to return to G-d) for what they've said and done, since they've gotten into a habit that's very hard to break because it overtakes a person's personality like an intoxicant; even if they do manage to do teshuva, their teshuva couldn't possibly be all-encompassing, for no one could ever fully undo the magnitude and reach of such sins (after all, slanderous words seem to take on long and far-reaching lives of their own, and can never be taken back); they might just move from verbal abuse to physical abuse (after all, cruelty is cruelty; and like a cancer, it might manifest itself in any organ at any time); and, anyone who'd flippantly demean others unjustifiably as slanderers do could easily come to demean G-d Himself, Heaven forbid, and sink into rank heresy.

And lastly, slanderers go on and on about the very real human failings we all suffer from rather than concentrate upon uplifting, edifying things. As Rabbeinu Yonah puts it, the only hope for such individuals would be to "not talk about nonsensical things, but to speak instead about Torah, wisdom, and ethics; about peace between people; about the best of others; about the value of good, and the loathsomeness of evil" and "to use their power of speech in the fervent search for truth."

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