

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 3:12

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We'll return now to the pattern Rabbeinu Yonah established with the three earlier of the "four types" and cite different kinds of slanderers. There'll be six in all, but we'll concentrate on the first three here, whom we can in fact refer to as "slanderers". Then we'll go on to speak next time of the other three verbal abusers, if you will, whose traits will prove to be offshoots of slander.

The first and most offensive type of slanderer is someone who finds faults in others *that aren't there*, and perhaps insults them to their face.

Rabbeinu Yonah begins to go off on a short excursion now on *listening* to slander and taking it to heart. "When you accept slander" he asserts, "you become a partner in crime with, and share the fate of the person who offered it. Simply because people will say, 'Since *he* accepted it, it must be true'." The best thing to do when you come upon someone speaking against others (if you can't come right out and discourage it) is to show by your body language that you're displeased. The message will get across, and all the "fun" would be taken out of it.

Rabbeinu Yonah then makes a stunning statement about either offering or listening to slander. He implies that anyone guilty of either would have to be arrogant and contemptuous, for "truly humble people want others to be respected, and they're troubled when people are disparaged or shamed". That should certainly give us pause, and make us consider how self-centered we are so often, in fact. For there are few among us who don't enjoy "juicy tidbits of gossip".

We return to slandering per se. While a second kind of slanderer certainly speaks against others, he nonetheless avoids *lying* about them. But if you demean someone based on something that's true about him or her you often do more harm than lying about them. Simply because you'd have established your "honesty", so *everything* you say about your victim will be taken to heart.

The truth be known, though, it's important to demean truly bad people, if only to convince others not to do what they do. But some people, it seems, stretch that a bit. It's best to assume that, unless you know otherwise, as a rule people are basically "all right". You might take a truly bad person aside and speak to him or her directly. If that's too difficult, the next best thing would be to speak to his or her rabbi, teacher, counselor, confidant, etc.

And the third kind of slanderer not only demeans people-- he spreads rumors about them all over the place (we refer to such people as "rumor mongers"). As Rabbeinu Yonah puts it, it's just "impossible to estimate the damage done by spreading rumors". Who knows who accepted the

rumor and did something harmful to the victim, and who knows how far that went? And aren't many of us guilty of stirring up animosity within extended families by spreading rumors about one member or another?

Lastly we're told that giving away secrets is a form of slander, too. Because someone entrusted with a secret is expected to keep it to him- or herself and to not betray a confidence. After all, isn't "keeping mum" about something what a "secret" is all about? So when you divulge someone's secret, you demean him.

Rabbeinu Yonah then offers us this sage advice for our *own* protection. "Don't ever entrust your secret to a rumor-monger. For since he can't keep his lips from spreading rumors, you can't depend on him to keep your secret, even if you divulge it to him privately and in confidence."

The sensitive soul would want to take these words of Rabbeinu Yonah's to heart. "It's the way of the upright to cover over others' sins" he remarked, "and to praise people for the good things about them." Would that we could all live by that rule!

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