

THE GATES OF REPENTANCE, GATE 3:8

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We're about to embark on a fairly long discussion of issues that come up when we interact with others. For our interactions with others certainly effect our spiritual status, too. In that we can certainly be spiritually excellent or mediocre in that realm every bit as much as we can in our relations to G-d Almighty.

As such we'll start with a number of individuals who'd need to improve the ways they either perceive of others or conduct themselves with them if they're ever to grow full in their beings. Rabbeinu Yonah refers to them as the "Four Types" (the four offensive types par excellence): maligners, liars, flatterers, and slanderers.

It's clear, though, that these are character types that seem to be rather benign, actually. After all, they don't harm anyone physically, they don't rob or steal, and they don't threaten anyone. But as we'll see, they nonetheless subtly but decidedly demean others and slowly eat away at the fabric of their victims' dignity.

The truth be known, some of our more intelligent, well-read, otherwise accomplished friends and neighbors embody some or all of these traits. For it's assumed to be quite cosmopolitan, post-modern, sophisticated, and debonair to scoff at things, for example; to lie (which some of us see as merely "adding color", "dramatizing", or "accentuating"), to flatter (or, ingratiate yourself onto) someone, and to slander. The emotional and personal havoc wreaked by these traits is real nonetheless, despite the air of innocence given them by their perpetrators. And the Torah thus forbids these traits.

We'll concentrate on the first type this time: maligners. And we'll see that Rabbeinu Yonah tells of five different sorts.

The first sort is the kind of person who maligns and besmirches others' reputations. Not because he gains anything tangible by doing that himself (which is abysmal but at least understandable). Simply out of sheer arrogance and insolence. An example might be a musician, let's say, who picks away at, subtly puts down, and disparages other musicians' works all the time, even when it doesn't help his own reputation..

The second sort of maligner is something of a snob. He's the kind of person who has little respect for anyone of a lower stature than he, or who hasn't achieved some kind of honor, repute, or power. But someone would only malign such a person because he believes deep down that whatever success

a person enjoys is due to his own cunning and know-how. And that as far as he sees it anyone "unsuccessful" in those sorts of ways is neither cunning nor capable. But as people of faith and wisdom know only too well, our successes and failures ultimately hinge on G-d's will alone. For even the greatest among us sometimes fail or go unnoticed; and that often enough even a buffoon can shine by Divine Decree.

The third sort always makes a point of mocking things that others try to do (without necessarily denigrating the people who do them themselves). They wind up rejecting things ahead-of-time that are actually quite good and promising. Only because they think themselves wiser and more far-sighted than the rest of us that. And they thus stifle progress. But as Rabbeinu Yonah cites it, we're taught that "Everyone has his hour, and everything has its place" ("Pirke Avo" 4:3).

The fourth sort of maligner Rabbeinu Yonah focuses upon is the sort of person who always dwells on meaningless and worthless things. The truth be known, we wouldn't consider someone like that a "maligner" per se. But as Rabbeinu Yonah says later on, "By acting the way he does, he shows just how little value he places on mitzvot" and on Torah study. That's to say, the sort of person who'd occupy himself with trivia and be oblivious to the wisdom and stark depth of Torah and mitzvot in fact maligns them by default. Indeed anyone in search of spiritual excellence would be restless in his or her quest for the sort of wisdom and depth of being that Torah study and the mitzvah-life offers.

And the fifth sort of maligning is a consequence of the sort of levity and lightheartedness that comes from being intoxicated. Rabbeinu Yonah's contention is that aside from being negative, alcoholics are oftentimes rowdy and too talkative; and they thus deny themselves chances for wisdom. As such, those who are prone to this not only scoff at and denigrate others, and thus lapse into spiritual mediocrity when it comes to their interpersonal relations. They also denigrate *themselves*, and fail to find the good within them.

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