

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

There are moments when long-dormant memories float back into your consciousness. They can be triggered by anything a word, an overheard comment. It makes no difference; it's there for the savoring.

Early this morning I had just such an experience. I was studying a new sefer someone had kindly sent me, and mention was made of water lilies. Bang! My memory bank hit me: Water lilies... Do you remember the water lilies? Sure you do summer camp, when we would go row boating and schlep out the water lilies.

Water lilies are lovely large flowers that sit amid huge green leaves on the surface of lakes. They seem to float upon the surface of their own volition, but they are actually anchored to the lake's bottom by a long stem that reaches to the deepest depths. When you pick a water lily, you get this long root in the bargain.

"Excuse me," you might ask, "but what does this botanical insight have to do with Tehillim?"

Good question, and the answer is in the root. Things can thrive and remain lovely on the surface only if they are well connected to their source. It makes no difference how far away it may be, but the connection must be there, or the beautiful flower withers and dies.

In our times, it is all too easy to acquire the appearance of all that is proper and good. But the veneer must match the core, and that core must be attached to our Source of true energy: Hashem. The Sfas Emes (1847-1905) tells us, "There are commandments that deal with the relationship between man and God, and there are commandments that deal with man's relationship to man. Laws regarding social relationships are just as important as the other laws given on Mount Sinai. What's more, by behaving with the utmost care toward others, one is able to understand the Torah's laws even better. And the more one understands, the more respect he has for his fellow man. This is a spiral that continues upward without end."

Can you hear what the tzaddik is saying? Understanding Torah is contingent upon respecting one's fellow man. The more you work on this, the more you understand. It is a symbiotic relationship; one aspect needs the other to flourish. And yet, and yet we see fine and upstanding folk become embroiled in vicious and malicious talk that can lead to the shedding of innocent blood.

I am not being melodramatic. I have been in communal work long enough to have witnessed such

horrific acts. People have actually been totally destroyed by rumor and insinuation and for what? So that those speakers of scandal could experience some perverse joy or power.

How can we be attached to our source of spirituality if we are able to destroy others with our tongue? This is a question that every generation has asked and every rav has had to grapple with. There are those who will allow themselves to use evil talk (and all such mutterings are evil) with a sense of righteousness. We all seek to make that which is reprehensible more palatable by bringing a dynamic of holiness into play. Soon the worst slander is used "leshem Shamayim," in the name of all that is holy and pure. It's as if Hashem can't run His world, God forbid, without our sticking in some sensational tidbits. The yetzer hara, the evil inclination, has so many ways to capture us, and the use of evil talk is one of his more exciting and soul-destroying ones.

Evil talk not only destroys the one spoken of, but it also corrupts the speaker and his listener. The long, nourishing root that attaches us to Hashem becomes rotten with each such act. The speaker becomes enamored by the sounds of his own wickedness, and soon the very reason for such actions is forgotten in the quest for ever more destructive talk.

There is an expression used in the military: the "fog of war." On a battleground, there is often chaos that is like a fog, a mist that denies the combatants all ability to discern what is really going on. Many times this is the case when people become embroiled in communal disputes, or even disputes closer to the family unit. We soon see what is called "collateral damage" (another military term), which is a euphemism for the destruction of innocent bystanders.

How often do we see this in our own unheroic lives! People get embroiled in a disagreement, and soon the rumors are flying thick and fast. Innocent people are dragged in, and all is seen as "fair" in a war that really has no purpose.

Friends, I have seen families broken, marriages crushed, and good lives made intolerable with just a few words of evil content.

David speaks openly about his own experiences as a victim of slander, which destroyed a whole city of innocent souls. He leaves us the fifty- second Psalm as a maskil, an instruction, so that we can learn from what he went through and see what angry jealousy reaps.

First, a small history lesson is in order.

David was forced to flee because of the jealousy of his father-in-law, Shaul. Starving and unarmed, David came to Nov, a city of kohanim and the place where the Tabernacle was then situated. He asked Achimelech the kohen for some bread and a sword. The kohen thought that David was on a mission for King Shaul and gave him whatever supplies he could. His deed was witnessed by Do'eg, who was in the city on a spiritual retreat in the Tabernacle. Achimelech's innocent act of kindness was reported back to Shaul in such a manner that the insecure king was certain it was a conspiracy. He ordered the entire city to be destroyed, a horrific act carried out only because of the treacherous

slander.

David writes of this account: *When Do'eg of Edom came to Shaul and said to him, "David has come to the house of Achimelech."* The lesson is boldly written, with no poetic devices. There is nothing left to doubt so that we know exactly what transpired.

Why do you take pride in the evil you did, you mighty one? [Don't you know that] God's kindness [to me] is ever present? Rumormongers feel proud of their seemingly powerful words. They get a charge of energy just by using their mouths for destruction. David reminds us that Hashem rules this world, and His kindness can transcend all plots of destruction.

Your tongue reveals thoughts of destruction; like a sharpened blade, it acts treacherously. David tells the slanderer: You may have talked yourself into thinking what you did was a good deed. This is wicked in itself.

You prefer doing evil to doing good, telling lies rather than speaking righteously. Beneath your veneer of righteousness, you love the power of your falsehood. Evil can come in many forms, and the scandalmonger loves them all.

You prefer destructive speech, insidious remarks. This is the heart of the problem those who act with deceit and speak words of hate actually relish the pain they cause.

God will break you, too, for all time; He will cut and rip you out of [your] tent and uproot you from the World to Come forevermore. Our Sages tell us that Do'eg is one of the few who forfeited any share in the World to Come. This is the worst punishment possible. This verse ends with the word selah, "forevermore," a word that literally means "rock," intimating a sense of solidness. This is what will become of such evildoers. Their punishment will not be just for the moment, but, like a pillar of stone, it will last forever.

We are all human and susceptible; we commit many unfortunate acts during our lifetime. But the act of destroying others through words would cut us off from the roots that keep us attached to our Source. Although it may not be apparent at the time, when one chooses to take this route, he will ultimately be lost. There can be no place for him in the land of the living, the land sustained by Hashem's living Torah, not for one who so corrupts the atmosphere.

May we all be spared from such evil, and, even more, may we stay well clear of being part of the problem to begin with.

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