

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FORTY-ONE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

Do you want to stay clear of the common cold? Eat garlic. Do you need to find a cure for a stomachache? Try drinking milk... No, wait that might make it worse... or is it just the opposite?

This home-remedy health information is not so easy to keep straight, nor is it always correct. Since the beginning of time, mankind has sought cures for what ails him, and sometimes the cure can seem worse than the illness. A toxic blend of mustard seed and oils smeared on your chest is supposed to help a congested lung but it can burn a hole through you at the same time. Then there is my personal favorite: rubbing a toad on a wart. That's right. We were told as kids that if you get a wart on your hand, the only cure is to rub a live toad on its surface. It sounds lovely, no?

Well, I am not in the home-brewed-nostrum business, so I will stop here. I have a great respect for those who understand homeopathic medicine and how to use it to help others, but I'm not clever enough to understand what is effective and what is just a *bubbe ma'ase* (although I can vouch for the curative effects of hot chicken soup).

There is, however, one cure for a really dangerous disease, a condition that can threaten your life both here and in the World to Come, that I can share with certainty. As I've said, slander should carry a health warning. There is no way it cannot hurt and destroy; its fungus spreads throughout one's system. King David knew this, for he suffered from the most virulent of strains. Here he gives one surefire recipe that can help keep this horror away from our doors.

I have called to You, Hashem. Hurry to me! Listen to my voice as I call to You. As mentioned, David was the victim of many slanderous attacks. Here he calls out to Hashem to hear his plea. David tells us that Hashem is there at all times and places, but we ask that He make His presence felt when we call out to Him.

How can we be worthy of this? What medicine can we take to make us more spiritually deserving?

Hashem, place a guard over my speech; watch over my expressions. Here is the first bit of recommended home remedy: ask Hashem to give you the strength to keep your own mouth pure and guarded. This is a vital yet often overlooked point. We deplore the scourge of evil talebearing, yet we don't accept that we are as guilty as the next man. David asks Hashem that his mouth be guarded and that his lips be controlled. You wouldn't leave your home unattended and open to all, yet we sometimes allow our words to tumble forth randomly with complete abandon. The psalmist is telling us that we must beg Hashem for His mercy so that we will always be aware of the damage

our mouths are capable of wreaking.

Do not bend my heart toward any evil, toward enacting any deeds of wickedness together with people who transgress, so I will not partake of their pleasures. To be safe from other people's lashon hara, we must work tirelessly to be incapable of speaking it. Our hearts have to be compassionate, understanding what evil words can reap. Sometimes we so want to belong to a group that we forget what our values should be. How many times do we seek to be "one of the crowd" and end up sharing or even creating the evil talk that is soul destroying? That coveted group doesn't always bring out the best in its members; their "pleasures" are a feast of evil.

When a righteous man strikes me that is an act of kindness. When he rebukes me, it does not knock my head; it is like a dash of the finest fragrant oil. As long as I am alive, my prayer is to be spared the evils [of the wicked]. We live in a world where good and evil can become very difficult to discern. Many who bear the trappings of righteousness are all too ready to spread lies "in the name of Hashem." What can one ask for in such difficult times? One can ask that the truly good should come to us as in a shock wave, striking our senses with their truth. Truth comes to us as a shock; its reality is so pristine that we often don't recognize it. Shock therapy awakens a person from the stupor that the lies lull us into. The Kotzker Rebbe worked his whole life to free truth from the bonds of the material lies that make up our self-seeking egos. To become truly aware of the damage our words can cause, we need an injection of kindness, the kindness of being able to acknowledge the truth.

May their judges be thrown off the cliff; then they will hear how pleasant my words are. There is always a time of reckoning; nothing goes unrecorded. When that time comes, the lies and deceit will lay broken on the rocks, thrown there by their own judges. Truth will be heard for what it is, pleasing and truly uplifting. When we live our lives trapped by the anger of vicious talk, we cannot raise our sights; we are too worn down. The time will come when this will pass, and the pleasantness of the truth will be seen.

My eyes are turned to You, Hashem, God. I have placed my trust in You; do not throw me aside. The psalmist now cries out that having invested his entire being in trying to keep away from evil talk and action, he asks Hashem not to allow his soul to be thrown aside.

Protect me from the clutches of the trap they set for me and from the snares of those who commit iniquities. Now that David has asked that he never be found speaking evil or part of a scandal-mongering group, he can ask that the words of entrapment spoken by others should not bring him any harm.

May the wicked ones fall together into their traps, while I pass by. And so we see how we can be saved from the spiritual scourge of evil talk. We must first strive to free ourselves from this enormous evil. It is terrible to be the victim of gossip, but we must search ourselves to see if we are not guilty of the same thing.

The wicked will fall, and we will walk above the fray but only if we accept the need for change

within ourselves.

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