

THE GOOD THE BAD AND THE UGLY

by Rabbi Dovid Green

In this weeks Parsha we are told many details relating to one who was suffering from a physical/spiritual ill called tzoraas. (If you can say "pizza", you can pronounce "tzoraas") Tzoraas was a lesion that appeared on the skin resulting from the sufferer's having transgressed the prohibition against speaking negatively of others. The affected area(s) whether on garments, an abode or the body of the person, had to be shown to a kohein who would then prescribe the form or correction needed for the type of lesion(s) that had appeared. The correction for the transgression involved distancing oneself from the community for a given amount of time.

One might think that we are fortunate in our day and age not to have to undergo such uncomfortable scrutiny for engaging in something as seemingly justified as negative speech. After all, we don't just wake up and decide to go around destroying the personal relationships and businesses of others through malicious slander! We have what we feel are good reasons to speak against someone else. What an imposition it must have been to have to, measure for measure, put all ones personal and business dealings on hold and leave the community, even temporarily, and then wait for ones ugly "spots" to heal.

Surprisingly, just the opposite is true. How fortunate we will be when the time will come when we will once again have a clear indication of a transgression such as that of lashon horah, slanderous speech. (True as well as false). How good it will be for us to seek direction as to how to go about undoing the problems caused by the negative remarks we make about others the smallest of which can cause untold and unforeseen harm.

Picture a person brought to Heaven after a long life of good deeds only to discover that the scales of judgment are heavily loaded down on the side of transgressions. The person will protest "But I gave charity, I kept a set time for Torah study and I observed the Sabbath and kosher laws faithfully!" What, at closer inspection is weighing down the "scales"? What is found is every word of negative speech spoken about others over an entire lifetime! The person is shown what pain and destruction it turns out were caused by those words, in the 20/20 hindsight only a divine court can supply. "Oh no!" cries the plaintiff. "If only I could have undergone the healing and forgiveness process as was available in the time of the Holy Temple, I'd be so much better off at this point"

What to do. One of the best ways to avoid speaking badly of others is not to refrain from speaking altogether. It's not to lie and say you think some bum is a great guy. It's to look at the "bum" and try

to see him in a positive light. Perhaps the circumstances led you to see another as a bum but the reality of the situation may have been completely different than what was originally perceived. It happens. We find situations like that very often in our lives. It sometimes takes a little diplomatic research to discover the positive reality but it's there. What does one do in the face of someone else's real intended but not life threatening negative behavior when there is no positive light to see the situation in?

The story is told of Rabbi Aryeh Levin that one of the many unfortunates he and his wife took into their home stole a precious article from the Levin household. The Rabbi saw what occurred and immediately pursued his wayward guest calling "I forgive you!" "I relinquish all ownership!" "It's yours!" "It's yours!" He didn't want the thief to have the transgression on his head for the rest of his life.

What Rabbi Levin did, and the beauty of it was that it was his first reaction, was he saw the thief not as a cunning robber who was out to rip off his family but as a very unfortunate poor person who had sadly fallen so low as to actually steal. He was mature enough not to take the transgressors actions personally. Someone robs you and you don't take it personally?! The thief didn't hate the Rabbi. He would have stolen from anyone who hosted him. If Rabbi Levin could have recovered the stolen item, he certainly would have done what was necessary to do so. He wasn't looking to be robbed or to give away his heirlooms. Judging others favorably in the face of the inevitable undeserving "slaps in the face" one receives from others does not mean to lie to yourself or turn the other cheek to let others slap the other side, in the case of our story, to offer the thief more of ones possessions...gratis. It means to put the negative occurrences aimed at us into perspective. Don't take it personally. Miserable people try to make others miserable. How sad. We can attempt to halt the ugly spiral of bad speech one on another if we'll learn to judge others favorably.

Good Shabbos!

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