

DON'T GOSSIP, LEARN TORAH!

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"This shall be the law of the Metzora..." [14:2]

The Metzora was afflicted with Tzora'as, a spiritual ailment that caused white blemishes to appear. It is often translated as leprosy, but was only superficially similar. It was not necessarily permanent, nor did it cause a person to waste away, but the blemishes indicated a severe spiritual defect.

In the Talmud (Erchin 15b), the Sages discuss Tzora'as, and Reish Lakish says: "This shall be the law of the Metzora -- This shall be the law of one who is Motzei Ra, who spreads evil tales." Gossip, evil speech, is what caused a person to become a Metzora. We see this in the case of Miriam, Moshe's sister, who spoke about Moshe and was afflicted with this disease for a short period.

The Kli Yakar writes that there is another connection between "Metzora" and "Motzei Ra," which can also mean to find evil: "because [G-d] found all the evil hidden within him, [and brought it] to the outside." If a person devoted his energies to finding evil within other people -- G-d found evil within him, and brought it out.

So we see from this that gossiping, speaking evil about others, is tremendously harmful. It is so harmful that in a more spiritual era, people were afflicted with a special disease just for this! [Why do we not have this ailment today? Perhaps because, unfortunately, we would all find ourselves with it...]

In the Talmud, Rebbe Chama the son of Rebbe Chanina says further: what is the reparation for one who speaks evil gossip? "If he is a scholar, then let him involve himself with Torah... if not, then let him lower himself." We must understand how the cure fits the sickness.

The second answer, actually, makes sense immediately. When a person speaks about flaws in others, it is always implicit that "I am better than that. I would not do that. I am superior to that person." We should recognize that we don't know the story behind anyone else's behavior. How does he know that he is so superior? Perhaps if he were placed in the same situation, he would have done far worse!

It is the first answer which is more difficult to comprehend. Studying Torah is always a good thing -- why does it have a special connection to speaking evil?

The answer is that the two are connected in a very profound way. The power of intelligent speech was granted to human beings alone. It is this that distinguishes between humans and animals. Our

intelligence, our capacity for thought, only becomes visible to others once we communicate, and it is this power which G-d granted us. Our intelligence is a "spiritual" power -- speech connects it to the physical world.

The one who speaks Lashon Hora, evil gossip, takes this special gift which G-d has given him, and uses it for evil. He takes the most spiritual power we have, one which the animals do not, and uses it for evil which no animal can duplicate. G-d gave him the ability to rise above the animals, and, as we discussed last week, he chose to use that power to lower himself beneath them.

What is Torah study? In short, it is the most positive, most spiritual use of that power of speech. It means taking that same power and using it for the greatest possible good. This is why Torah study counters the evil of gossip -- and in the process, Torah improves a person, makes him more humble, and teaches the evil of gossiping again in the future.

May we all merit to use our strengths and abilities for the good!

Good Shabbos,

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