

GUARD YOUR TONGUE - IT'S HEALTHY

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

It happened in those days that Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and observed their burdens. And he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, of his brethren... So he killed the Egyptian man and hid him in the sand. He went out the next day, and behold, two Hebrew men were fighting. He said to the wicked one, "Why do you strike your fellow?" He answered, "Who appointed you as a dignitary, a ruler, and a judge over us? Do you propose to kill me, as you murdered the Egyptian?" Moshe was frightened, and he thought: Indeed the matter is known! (2:11-14)

Simply, Moshe's thoughts: *Achein noda ha-davar*/Indeed the matter is known, refer to the matter of his killing of the Mitzri/Egyptian. He now had reason to fear for his life, as the matter of the murder had become public knowledge.

Rashi, however, quotes a Midrash: Indeed the matter is known - Moshe had been questioning the matter of the exile: Why must the Hebrew nation suffer beneath the oppressive hands of the Egyptians? Now, however, that he heard that Jews would, at the slightest provocation, speak *Lashon Hara* (derogatory gossip) about one another [the two quarrellers threatened to report his killing of the Mitzri], the matter became known to him - This is why the Jews had to suffer!

How powerful, comments the Sefas Emes, is the lesson to us about the destructive power of *lashon hara*. After witnessing two Jews speaking *lashon hara*, there remained no question in Moshe Rabbeinu's mind as to the root cause of the Jewish suffering. Indeed, the matter was known!

The Ropshitzer Rav, in his sefer *Zera Kodesh* (parshas Bo) finds a *remez* (hint) to the concept of *shemiras ha-lashon* (guarding one's tongue) in the word *Mitzrayim* (Egypt) itself. The Torah *She-ba'al Peh* (the Oral Torah, or "Torah of the Mouth") begins with the letter Mem (the first word of the *Shishah Sidrei Mishnah*/Six Orders of the Mishnah is "*Mei-eimasai*"). The letter Mem, when placed at the beginning (or middle) of a word is called a "*Mem pesuchah*", an "open" Mem, because, when written, there is a space at the bottom of the letter. Likewise, Torah *She-ba'al Peh* ends with the letter Mem (the last word of *maseches Uktzin*, the last tractate of the Mishnah, is "*Shalom*"). The letter Mem, when placed at the end of a word, is called a "*Mem sesumah*", a "closed" Mem, because when written, the letter has no space whatsoever - it is entirely closed.

This is no coincidence. Chazal, our Sages, say (*Chullin* 89a), "What should be a person's craft in this world? To make himself as the mute [in order to refrain from speaking *lashon hara*]. One might think [that this pertains] even to speaking *divrei Torah*! No! Righteous words (i.e. words of Torah) you shall

speak!" The gift of speech was given to us not so that we should while away our time with idle chatter, and even worse, with gossip, but in order that we should be able to converse and interact with others in Torah study and character improvement. That's why the Oral Torah (the "Torah of the Mouth") begins with an "open Mem" - When you open your mouth it should be in order to speak words of Torah. And it concludes with a "closed Mem", as if to say, when you have finished learning, close your mouth, and go back to your "craft" of being as the mute.

But what happens, continued the Ropshitzer, if one opens his mouth to speak divrei Torah, and then the Yetzer Hara (the "evil inclination") mixes in and convinces him to speak unholy words - words of gossip and slander? Well, what happens when you put the letters Yetzer (Yud - Tzaddik - Reish) between the "open" and the "closed" Mem? It spells "Mitzrayim" - the Egyptian Exile!

The Vilna Gaon, the "Gra", writes that if a person finds himself in a situation where he has great desire to speak lashon hara and to gossip about someone, and he restrains and, so to speak, muzzles himself, this is much greater even than fasting and other types of physical suffering, which are known to effect forgiveness.

The previous Bobover Rebbe zt"l once noticed a student of his causing himself physical pain. When questioned, the student reluctantly admitted that he regularly did so, in order to repent for his sins. The Rebbe zt"l told him: "Do as I tell you, and you can stop hurting yourself, yet still achieve repentance from your sins: Hashem will test you, as he tests all of us, and put you into situations where it would be so easy, and satisfying, to gossip and speak negatively about your friends. When this happens, clamp down on your lips and say nothing. This is even greater than great amounts of physical suffering!"

The Bobover Rebbe, Shlita, explained with this the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (1:17), "Rabbi Shimon, the son of Rabban Gamliel, said: All my days I have grown up among the Sages, yet I have never found anything good for the body except silence." Mefarshim (commentators) question this. Certainly silence is good for the neshamah, for the soul. But why did Rabbi Shimon remark that he had not found good "for the body" except silence?

As we have seen, however, the silence which comes as a result of refraining from gossiping, even when it's really tempting to do so, replaces even the most severe forms of punishment that one may need to suffer in order to effect forgiveness for his sins. Thus, "silence" is indeed healthy not only for the neshamah, but even for the body! Indeed, perhaps we should begin promoting shemiras ha-lashon instead of all the other nutritional fads!

