

STICKS AND STONES

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read the parsha of Shlach. "Shlach [Send] for you men that they may spy out the Land of Canaan. [13:2]" Our parsha deals with the spies that were sent to Eretz Yisroel [the Land of Israel], their slanderous report and the disastrous consequences which resulted.

Last week's parsha concluded with Miriam speaking lashon harah [derogatory speech] against Moshe and her being punished. Rashi, quoting from the Medrash Tanchuma, asks why these two parshios were placed one next to the other. He explains that although Miriam was publicly punished for speaking against her brother, the spies, who had witnessed her punishment, didn't learn their lesson.

This idea seems to be in contradiction to the teaching of the Talmud. Rabi Elazar ben Prata said: Come and see the power of lashon harah! If those that slandered trees and stones were so severely punished, how much greater will the punishment be for one who speaks badly about his friend, - [Erchin 15A]

If the spy's slander on trees and stones was considered to be a less serious infraction than slandering people, then how could they be have been blamed for not learning a lesson from Miriam?

Rav Shlomo Ganzfried explains in the following manner. Some transgressions fall within the category of 'between man and man' while others are 'between man and Hashem.' Lashon harah is both. It causes anguish and harm to the person spoken about and at the same time belittles and degrades a creation of Hashem.

With that we have gained a clearer understanding of the above mentioned statement of the Talmud. If the spies who spoke about trees and stones, and therefore only sinned against Hashem, were punished so severely, one who speaks about a person, and thereby sins against both Hashem and man, will certainly be punished.

However, that applies when speaking against an ordinary person. Moshe, the most humble of all men, felt no pain or hurt when Miriam spoke against him. It was tantamount to speaking against trees and stones. Miriam's punishment showed that lashon harah is also a transgression against Hashem, regardless of any person being harmed. That is what the spies should have learned from Miriam but tragically didn't.

Rabbi Yisroel Ordman of the Telz Yeshiva of Lithuania offers another explanation. One must acquire the middah [attribute] of seeing the good in everything. A person who finds fault with things will ultimately find faults in people. A person who always tries to find the good in things will also find the good in people.

It is true--as the Talmud taught--speaking against people is worse than speaking against trees and stones. At the same time, the spies should have learned from Miriam the importance of seeking virtues rather than faults.

A few days ago I paid a condolence call to relatives of mine who live in the Mea Shearim neighborhood of Yerushalayim. I once sat down and worked out with them exactly how we're related. He and my grandmother, a"n, shared the same great grandfather. The wife/mother had been ill for a while and had passed away. The time I spent there visiting brought back a rush of memories.

The fact that they we were only distantly related and the fact that they lived in the very strictly orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim had caused me to be very hesitant to visit them when I was first a student in Israel about twenty years ago. A first cousin of mine, who was a bit more observant than I, was also in Israel that year. He had already visited them and kept relaying messages that they wanted me to come but I, thinking that I would feel uncomfortable there, kept making excuses. On Sukkos, I finally gave my cousin the green light that I would go with him to visit them.

The reception that I received was incredible. My aunt happily brought out cake and drinks for us. We all sat down to talk and catch up on family news. The message of warmth and acceptance just radiated out from them. Don't change for us! Your hairstyle might be different, your kippah [head covering] might be different, your style of dress might be different, but we love and accept you as you are and want you to feel comfortable and visit as often as you like.

I took them up on that clear, unspoken message and visited very often. The Shabbos's that I spent there were otherworldly. An incredible serenity, beauty and warmth descend on the neighborhood each Shabbos and it is felt particularly in their home. I would sit at the Shabbos table in my relatively modern dress next to my uncle with his long white beard and payos [side curls] reaching down to his colorful Shabbos robe. All of my cousins were there with their long, dark coats and payos. I often thought that the picture would serve as a perfect cognitive development test for children to determine what doesn't belong in the picture. Anyone would certainly have pointed to me and said, "What's he doing there!" But I felt perfectly comfortable. They saw virtues--not faults.

After the meal my uncle and I would go for a walk. "Shabbat ba'rechov! [Even the streets observe the Shabbos!]" he would say to me as we walked in the middle of the car-less, tranquil, holy streets. We were quite a scene. He walking elegantly in his long black coat, long white beard and payos, with his hands clasped behind his back. Myself with a then popular middle part, small knitted kippah with my (English) name on it, white shirt, cotton pants and loafers, my hands stuck into my pockets. We were

a pretty surprising sight but my uncle always seemed proud to walk with me.

These were the memories that flooded back as I consoled my uncle and cousins in the house that would no longer be graced by her presence.

The spies saw faults and as a result, that generation did not merit entering Eretz Yisroel [the Land of Israel]. She was a person who saw virtues in things and people. In these days when our merits to remain in Eretz Yisroel are being weighed in the heavens, the merits that such a person contributed will be sorely missed and must be replaced...

Good Shabbos,
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