

NOW THE MATTER IS KNOWN

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 356 - Turning Offender Over to the Secular Authorities. Good Shabbos!

Now The Matter Is Known

Following the incident when Moshe smote the Egyptian who was hitting a Jewish slave, Moshe tried to break up a fight between two Jews. The combatants taunted Moshe, "Are you going to kill us like you killed the Egyptian?" The pasuk [verse] then says, "And Moshe feared and he said, behold the matter is known" [Shemos 2:14]. According to the simple reading of the pasuk, the matter that was known was Moshe's act of killing the Egyptian.

The Medrash, however, sees this in a different light. Moshe had been wondering why the people of Israel were enslaved more than any other nation. What was their sin that caused all this suffering? At this juncture, after having heard the comment of the two Jews who were fighting, Moshe's reaction was "now I understand it!" Once he heard those words of accusation, he had discovered the reason for their fate: they had amongst them people who gossip, who speak Lashon HaRah. If so, how will they ever be worthy of redemption?

The Chofetz Chaim elaborates on this Medrash, in his Sefer Shmiras HaLashon. In Egypt, the Jewish people were pagan worshippers, just like the rest of society (halalu ovdei Avodah Zarah, v'halalu ovdei Avodah Zarah). They committed others sins in Egypt, as well. Eventually they sunk to the 49th out of 50 levels of impurity on the spiritual scale. One does not need a magnifying glass or a flashlight to discover their iniquities while in Egypt.

And yet, Moshe Rabbeinu had been stumped. He could not understand what sin they were committing that was so wrong that it caused them to suffer so, until he finally came to the conclusion that it must be the fact that they spoke Lashon Harah. The Chofetz Chaim explains that we learn from this Medrash that a person or a people can have a whole bundle of sins on their shoulders but the catalyst that brings punishment to the fore is the sin of gossiping.

The Chofetz Chaim quotes a Zohar that explains that a person who speaks Lashon Harah sets in

motion a force in Heaven that instigates against the perpetrators. Such is the power of Lashon Harah. When all other sins lie dormant, as it were, in Heaven, Lashon Harah "says" to G-d "You can't let them get away with this sin".

The logic behind this phenomenon is that gossip "forces G-d's Hand," so to speak. Normally, G-d has the option of either ignoring our faults or noticing them. However, when a person speaks Lashon Harah, he is, in effect, saying, "Look at the bad part of that person." The measure for measure aspect of Divine Justice, perforce, must then look at his actions in a negative light, as well. G-d will respond in kind. "If you focus on the negative, I will focus on the negative as well."

The Chofetz Chaim concludes that a person who continuously speaks Lashon Harah and arouses this instigation ('kitrug') in Heaven is responsible for bringing great misfortune upon himself. "Who knows how many people lost their wealth and how many people have died or been killed as a result of this type of chain-reaction."

This is very frightening. When a person speaks Lashon Harah he must take into account that he is not only hurting himself and not only hurting the person about whom he is speaking, but he can arouse Heavenly instigation against the entire community.

Unfortunately, there is no community today in America that is not distressed, shocked, and shaken to the core by tragedies that are becoming all too common. People are beside themselves. What does it mean? What is it all about? Why did it happen?

We do not have prophets among us to give us clear-cut guidance. But the Chofetz Chaim clearly states that it is the sin of tale bearing and gossip that arouses instigation in Heaven against us for our sins.

The irony is that it should not have to be like that. I am not a historian. I cannot quote numbers of how many people were learning in Yeshivos in Europe a hundred years ago. Nor do I know the numbers that were in the great Academies in Sura and Pumbedita or other Jewish communities in Talmudic times. But I venture to say, if we look at the number -- bli ayin hara -- of Jews that are sitting learning Torah today, all over the world -- our generation would fare very well, in historical terms. If you walk into the large Beis Medrash of the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, you can literally not be able to find a place to stand! In the Yeshiva in Lakewood, New Jersey, there are people sitting and learning in every nook and cranny. In our own city, one is very hard pressed to find an empty seat in the Beis Medrash in Ner Yisrael. It is like this all over the world. Mexico City has twelve different Kollelim. People are learning at unprecedented levels, not only in Yeshivas, but also in synagogues and in Batei Medrash all over the country.

So what is going on? What about the 'power of Torah'? Why isn't it protecting us? Why do we encounter so much suffering? The answer is because the power of Lashon Harah can undermine the power of Torah! If the same mouth that one uses to speak words of Torah and to utter words of prayer is used to speak Lashon Harah, the mouth becomes defiled. The words of Torah and prayer

that come out of the mouth are contaminated. The power of Torah and prayer become diluted.

At the beginning of the second section of Shmiras HaLashon, the Chofetz Chaim quotes a pasuk from Proverbs: "A person can become rich and he has nothing (left)" [Mishlei 13:7]. The Chofetz Chaim interprets this to mean that a person can be in business, making big sales. He can be raking in the money, so to speak, making deposit after deposit in the bank. But when it comes time to make an accounting and his expenses and his debits are taken into account, the bottom line may be that he has nothing left. "Yes I had a great year, but all the profits were wiped out."

The book of Mishlei consists entirely of parables. The Chofetz Chaim applies that pasuk to spiritual matters. A person can engage in performing mitzvos and good deeds his entire life. He can spend his days and night sitting and learning. But that same person might possess an evil tendency to speak bad about people. When such a person arrives in Heaven, he will see that he has nothing in his account! "What happened? I sat and learned my entire life. I finished Shas 4 times! I was honest. I gave charity. Where are my good deeds?" The Chofetz Chaim explained that Lashon Hara can do that.

This is why we beseech every day in our prayers, "G-d, save my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking calumny." It is only after requesting help regarding Lashon Hara that we request "Open my heart to your Torah." If a person will not guard his mouth, his Torah will not count! It is as simple as that.

I just would like to conclude with the following modern parable. This is a true story.

A few years ago, shortly after the Frand family entered the 'computer age,' my daughter was writing a term paper on Edgar Allan Poe. She was working on this term paper for six or eight weeks. It was her first major project using our word processor. One night, she was putting the finishing touches on the report. The report was due the next day. All of a sudden she rushed up from downstairs and with a petrified expression on her face said, "It's gone! It's gone!"

I asked, "What is gone?" She answered, "The report is gone! It is due tomorrow. It is eleven p.m. and it is gone!" I said, "It can't be."

We went downstairs and stood in front of the screen. She pushed this button. She pushed that button. The report did not appear. It was gone.

The panic and terror were unforgettable. The disappointment -- eight weeks of work just disappeared! The screen was blank!

Thank G-d, I had a friend who helped set up the computer. It was after eleven o'clock, but this was an emergency so I called him. I said, "You'll please excuse me, but my daughter is in a panic." He told her how to get out of Windows and into DOS. He told her what to do, step by step. The whole family was standing there in front of the screen. Finally, the report was recovered.

After 120, we will go to the Heavenly Court. It will be time to make our final accounting. We will say to G-d, "Okay bring up the record. Bring up all the years that I spent learning. Bring up all the time that I spent learning Torah and performing mitzvos. Bring it up, G-d. Let's see it on the screen."

The person who would always gossip will give out a shriek. He will yell, "IT'S GONE! IT'S NOT THERE! WHAT HAPPENED TO IT?" Multiply my daughter's reaction by the biggest multiple that exists. "The whole life, the whole Torah, all our prayers, all our good deeds -- they are gone!" And no one will be able to bring them back for us.

"There are those who become rich, but have nothing left." We are rich. We are accomplishing in learning. Look at the crowds in classes and study groups all over America. We are learning. But let us not lose it. All we must do is learn to close our mouths.

This is the intent of the statement of the Vilna Gaon: The main way to merit the World To Come is through guarding the mouth. This is more important than all of the Torah and other accomplishments. The mouth is Holy of Holies.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
Technical Assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#); Yerushalayim.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Shemos are provided below:

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