

GIVING KLAL YISRAEL A "HIGH FIVE"

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Behaaloscha

Giving Klal Yisrael A "High Five"

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #596 - Sitting on Top of Seforim. Good Shabbos!

The beginning of Parshas Beha'aloscha contains the consecration of the Leviim. It now came time to separate the Levites and go through the process that would consecrate the Tribe of Levi with a special sanctity that would allow them to perform their special role in the Temple Service.

The Leviim were granted this special holiness and role in lieu of all the firstborn males who forfeited this privilege as a result of the sin of the Golden Calf. The pasuk says, "Then I assigned the Levites to be presented to Aaron and his sons from among the Children of Israel to perform the service of the Children of Israel in the Tent of Meeting and to provide atonement for the Children of Israel, so that there will not be a plague among the Children of Israel when the Children of Israel approach the Sanctuary." [Bamidbar 8:19].

Five times in the same pasuk [verse], the term "Bnei Yisrael" [Children of Israel] is mentioned. This is certainly note-worthy. Rashi cites a Medrash commenting on this stylistic redundancy: "To make known their dearness to G-d is mention of them by name stated repeatedly in a single pasuk according to the number of the five Chumashim of the Torah. Thus I have seen in Bereishis Rabbah."

Even if we grant that the purpose of this five-fold repetition is to express G-d's love for the Jewish people, we may still ask why a special note of that dearness is specifically made here? I saw an interesting answer to this question from the Shemen haTov: The special role assigned to the Levites in the Temple Service preempted the role of the firstborn in that service. This was an occasion that was ripe for jealousy and sibling rivalry.

Try this at home. Take what should have belonged to one child and give it to another. We know what is going to happen. "That's not fair!" This is an explosive situation. But despite the inherent strain and

stress that such a situation should trigger, there was no offense taken here. There was no negative reaction. Klal Yisrael said, "Fine, no problem. We are happy for the Leviim." It is this generosity of spirit that triggered the expression of dearness and admiration for the Jewish people, specifically here. "My beautiful children are as dear to Me as the Five Books of the Torah!"

Give Your Brother The Benefit of the Doubt

The end of Parshas Be'HaAloscha contains the incident in which Miriam spoke Lashon Hara [slander] about her brother Moshe Rabbeinu. Miriam objected to the way Moshe was treating his wife. As the pasuk tells us, Moshe Rabbeinu's status was different from that of all other prophets and therefore he could not be a regular family man. His relationship with his wife was therefore not the relationship that a normal man would have with his wife.

Miriam saw what she perceived to be neglect on Moshe Rabbeinu's part and she spoke critically of him to their brother Aharon. The Almighty heard this Lashon Hara and as a result Miriam contracted leprosy (tza'ra'as). This is one of the famous incidents of Lashon Hara in the Torah. There is a mitzvah to remember what the Almighty did to Miriam as punishment for this sin. The Chofetz Chaim interprets this to be a Biblical command to study the laws of Lashon Hara. We are commanded to constantly remember this incident so that we do not succumb to the same sin.

Next week's parasha begins with the story of the Spies. Rashi explains the juxtaposition of that story with the incident here involving Miriam because they both involve the sin of speech (lashon hara). The spies failed to take note and draw the appropriate moral lesson from the punishment that befell Miriam.

The Chofetz Chaim says that most occurrences of Lashon Hara happen because the violator did not give the benefit of doubt (lo danu l'kaf zechus) to the person about whom he spoke. The root of the problem thus does not start with one's mouth. The problem ultimately begins with a negative assessment. A person makes a judgment or assessment about someone and the problem is in the assessment. If, writes the Chofetz Chaim, people would always take the trouble of giving their fellow man the benefit of the doubt, Lashon Hara would not begin.

Two classic examples of this are the incident with Miriam and the incident with the spies. At its core, Miriam's fault was that she made an assumption about her brother. She did not give him the benefit of the doubt. She asked, "Why does he treat his wife differently than we treat our spouses?" Her assumption was that his level of prophecy was no different than that of her's and Aharon's. Her assumption jumped to a conclusion without giving Moshe the benefit of the doubt.

Rav Chaim Shmuelivitz points out that the punishment of the Spies for speaking Lashon Hara against Eretz Yisrael was "a year for each day" -- forty years corresponding to the forty days that the spies were in the Land of Israel. But that calculation is problematic. They did not speak Lashon Hara for 40 days. They only spoke Lashon Hara one day, the day they returned from their 40 day mission! The Lashon Hara that they spoke is covered in a handful of pasukim. At most, it could not have taken

more than 10 minutes to speak those words. So why were they punished with forty years f or forty days? The answer is that the punishment did not just come for the speaking of Lashon Hara -- it came for the negative judgment as well. The negative assessments and perceptions that they developed during the 40 days of travel in the Holy Land caused them to be punished 40 years for 40 days.

This, says the Chafetz Chaim, is where the battle lies. The battle lies in training ourselves not to jump to negative conclusions. Lashon Hara is not merely a crime of speech. It is a crime of perception. The distance between character assessment and character assassination is very small.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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