

# LASHON HARAH -- MORE A PROBLEM OF THE EYE THAN OF THE MOUTH OR TONGUE

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

## Parshas Tazria

### Lashon HaRah -- More A Problem of the Eye Than Of The Mouth Or Tongue

In the past, we have discussed the Medrash about the peddler who came to town and announced "Who wants life? Who wants life?" Everyone gathered around him. Rather than sell them a magic elixir, he quoted the pasukim [verses], "Who is the man who desires life (mi halsh haChafetz Chaim), who loves days of seeing good? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit." [Tehillim 34:13-14].

We are all familiar with this pasuk [pasuk]. This is the expression the Chofetz Chaim used to entitle his sefer about the Laws of Lashon Harah (by which he himself was always thereafter known).

Rav Nissan Alpert once offered a profound insight on these pasukim. Rav Alpert asked where the question mark goes in the run on sentence which begins with the words "Who is the man who desires life"? In other words, where does the question end and where does the answer begin? Most of us would probably punctuate the pasukim (as done above) such that the question is "Who is the man who desires life, who loves days of seeing good?" and then the answer is "(The one who fulfills the practice...) Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit."

Rav Alpert says this is an incorrect parsing of the pasuk. Rav Alpert suggests that the answer to the question of "Who is the man who desires life?" begins with the words "Ohev Yomim Lir'os Tov". Meaning, if someone wants to live long, the ultimate secret to longevity is indeed guarding one's tongue from evil and lips from speaking deceit. But there is more to it than that. Part of the answer is "Loving days and seeing good." This means looking at life with a positive attitude. One should strive for a life of "lir'os tov" - trying to see the good in everything and everybody. The inevitable result of having a positive outlook on life will be that one guards his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit.

The key to refraining from speaking Lashon Harah is not so much in the mouth as it is in the eye.

When we see people and we perceive things, there are always multiple ways in which they can be viewed. When one has a negative attitude towards life and a negative attitude towards people, one has what is idiomatically called a "jaundiced eye". The result will be that such a person invariably speaks Lashon Harah.

A person who views things positively and who sees people and events in a positive light will speak less gossip and less slander. This is why "Ohev Yomim Lir'os Tov" [Loving days; seeing the good] is part of the answer, not part of the question.

We are all familiar with the story of the Meraglim [Spies] in Parshas Shelach. They were sent out to reconnoiter the land. They came back after their 40 day spy mission with a negative report and spoke Lashon Harah about Eretz Yisrael. As a result, the people were sentenced to 40 years of wandering in the wilderness without being able to enter the Land. In the words of the Torah, they were punished with "Yom L'Shanah; Yom L'Shanah". [A day for each year; a day for each year] [Bamidbar 14:34].

But the question can be asked: They did not speak Lashon Harah for 40 days. They only spoke Lashon Harah for one night, perhaps for just a matter of a few hours. What kind of "corresponding punishment" is it to say they were sentenced to a year of wandering for each day they sinned? Where is the justice in "Yom L'Shanah, Yom L'Shanah"?

The answer is that the problem was not just the few hours in which they presented their negative report. The problem was the entire 40 days in which they perceived Eretz Yisrael in a negative light because of their negative attitude, because they were not people who "loved days and saw the good".

For example, Chazal say that they reported that Eretz Yisrael was a "land which consumes its inhabitants" because wherever they travelled they saw funerals; people were burying their dead. However, there are two ways that such an observation could be viewed. One way is negatively: People are dropping dead all the time. It is a terrible land - Eretz Ocheles Yoshve'ha [a Land that consumes its inhabitants]. The other way is "Look, everyone is preoccupied with their burials. This must be because the Almighty is doing us a tremendous favor - distracting everyone with deaths and funerals so that we can proceed on our mission unnoticed and undisturbed. What an example of Divine Providence!"

This is a classic example of having two ways of interpreting the same facts - one way leading to the conclusion of "a land which consumes its inhabitants" and one way leading to the conclusion of "G-d's mercy upon us endures forever." What is the root of the problem? This is not a problem of the mouth or lips or tongue, it is a problem of the eye, a problem of perception.

This is emphasized by the punctuation Rav Alpert suggests for the pasukim in Tehillim: Question: Who is the man who desires life? Answer: The one who sees days that are beloved, who views matters in a positive fashion (ohev yomim, lir'os tov). One who sees the good side of things will be

guarded from speaking evil.

With this approach, we can understand - at least by way of allusion (remez) - a pasuk at the end of Parshas Tazria dealing with "Garment Leprosy" (tzaraas haBegd). The pasukim tell us that if the affliction remains the same size after one week's time, the Kohen must wash the garment and isolate it for another seven days. [Vayikra 13:53-54]

The next pasuk continues: "The Kohen shall look after the affliction has been washed, and behold! The affliction has not changed "es aino"... According to the simple interpretation of the pasuk (p'shuto shel mikra), the words "es Aino" mean "its appearance". But one can homiletically interpret (and this is said by the Imrei Shammai) that the meaning is the affliction did not change "es eino" - the eye = perception of the person who owns the afflicted garment. It was his negative perception that got him into the problem in the first place and as long as the "evil eye" persists, the problem of tzaraas will remain and as the Torah proclaims: Tameh hu - It shall be impure. It is all a matter of perception.

The Sefas Emes points out that the word Nega (which the Torah uses interchangeably with tzaraas), spelled nun gimmel ayin, has the exact same letters as the word oneg, spelled ayin nun gimmel. The only difference between them is where the letter ayin (which also means 'eye') is placed. Is the 'ayin' placed at the end of the word? Then it is Nega [affliction]! If the 'ayin' is placed at the beginning of the word, then it is Oneg [enjoyment]! If the 'eye' = ayin is in the right place, then Nega can turn into Oneg. It is all a matter of perception. Lashon Harah is not a disease of the mouth or tongue. It is a disease of the eye.

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