

Good Shabbos Everyone. This week's parsha discusses the cleansing process of one who was stricken with tzora'as, a skin disease which struck those who spoke Lashon Horah - evil speech. The commentator Chofetz Chayim generally defines Lashon Horah as any true negative statement about a Jew. For example, "Yanky is lazy." Yanky may very well be lazy, but we are forbidden to relate this fact to others, barring certain limited exceptions. Speaking or listening to Lashon Horah is forbidden by the Torah; just as eating pork or stealing are also forbidden. Also in the general category of Lashon Horah is speech called Motzi Shem Ra. The Chofetz Chayim generally defines Motzi Shem Ra as any false negative statement about a Jew. This makes Motzi Shem Ra even more severe than Lashon Horah, because it involves falsities. An example of Motzi Shem Ra is: "Moshie abused his pet llama." In fact, the Sage Reish Lakish teaches us in the Talmud that the term "Motzi Shem Ra" is derived from the word Metzorah - the name of this week's parsha. (Erchin 15b)

The following true story about the famous S'dei Chemed - Reb Chizkiyahu Medini (1835-1908) gives us insight into the harms of Lashon Horah in general and Motzi Shem Ra in particular. Shortly after he was married, R' Chizkiyahu Medini, later known as the S'dei Chemed, was accepted into an exclusive kollel (a yeshivah for married men). A wealthy philanthropist, R' Zorach, had agreed to support a select group of exemplary Torah scholars, in order to ensure that his town maintained the highest level of Torah observance. A young man who lived in the neighborhood of the kollel had a deep hatred for those who studied Torah. He was a vicious man of evil intent and so he devised a malicious scheme to humiliate and disgrace the most prominent scholar of the group, R' Chizkiyahu.

The wealthy philanthropist, R' Zorach, had a maid who did the household chores. As part of her duties, the maid was required to tidy up the building where the kollel studied. She cleaned up very early in the morning, before anyone was due to arrive, so as not to disrupt the Torah learning. Only R' Chizkiyahu, who seemed to be learning all the time, was in the study hall when the maid arrived. The malicious schemer planned that one morning, as men entered the synagogue for Shacharis (morning) prayers, the maid would run out screaming, claiming that she'd been physically abused by R' Chizkiyahu. For this shameful hoax she was promised a goodly sum of money by the devious schemer.

On the chosen morning, as they had arranged, the maid came shrieking out of the synagogue much to the surprise and shock of the people about to enter. She claimed that while no one else was around, she was abused by the "vulgar" kollel student now sitting by himself in the synagogue. A commotion started, and as she continued her tirade, the young schemer began shouting that R' Chizkiyahu should be thrown out of the kollel, for not only was he a disgrace to the kollel, but to the community as well. He further demanded that R' Chizkiyahu be expelled immediately and never be allowed to come back. Many from the crowd joined the battle cry and soon there was a mob marching to the home of R' Zorach - the supporter of the kollel, to let him know what had transpired. When R' Zorach came home, he was told of the morning's events and he rushed over to the kollel. When he arrived he found no evidence of the earlier uproar; the students were learning diligently. He quietly walked up to the bimah (central platform) and looked around without saying a word. For half an hour he observed R' Chizkiyahu sitting and studying peacefully, totally oblivious to anything else but his learning. By now a small crowd of townspeople had gathered, muttering to each other while they waited and wondered what R' Zorach would do.

After a while R' Zorach announced, "The man R' Chizkiyahu is a holy person. I don't for a moment believe one word of the maid's vicious accusation. He stays in the kollel, if he will so honor us, and from this moment onward, my maid is fired! And anyone who discusses this matter shall not put a foot into my beis midrash - (shul and study hall)." For days afterwards, the incident was all anyone thought about - although hardly anyone spoke about it openly. The maid was paid by the instigator in secret for her role. Within a week of the incident, the instigator of the Lashon Horah against R' Chizkiyahu died suddenly. After a while, things quieted down, and people resumed their normal routine; everyone having drawn his own conclusions about the event. Although she no longer had a job, the maid lived well from the money she had been paid. In a few months, however, her money ran out and she needed a job. While she had worked for R' Zorach she had been well paid, but now she could not find employment. One early morning she came to the synagogue to talk to R' Chizkiyahu. "I need your help," she pleaded. "I have no more money and I need a job. You know that what I said about you was a lie. I am truly sorry that I accused you falsely. In truth, I did it because I was offered a large sum of money by the young man who died shortly afterwards, and I couldn't resist the temptation. The money is gone now, and I'm willing to go to R' Zorach to admit the truth. But I need you to intervene for me to get my job back. I am ashamed to have to come to you for help, but I am desperate. Please help me." R' Chizkiyahu was so shocked that he could hardly believe what he was hearing. With a clear mind he curbed his turbulent emotions and considered his options. On the one hand there had to be some people who believed that he was guilty of the crime he had been accused of. Thus it was a chillul Hashem (desecration of G-d's Name) for it to be known that a person learning in a kollel would behave in such an immoral manner. If he now revealed the maid's admission, that would certainly clear his name, but once again there would be a chillul Hashem for it to be known that one Jew could perpetrate such an act against another by scheming with the maid.

And so, the S'dei Chemed thought, what would Hashem gain? Either way there was a desecration of His Name, so why do something that would only bring everlasting shame and humiliation for the dead young man who had planned the hoax? Therefore, R' Chizkiyahu told the maid that he would try to help her in a different way. He knew of another wealthy individual who might need a maid for his home. If he could convince this man to hire her, she could have a job and the whole malicious plan of the past would not have to be revealed. And so R' Chizkiyahu approached the affluent man and convinced him to hire the maid. After he completed the story, the S'dei Chemed added, "... and when I walked out of that man's home, after he had agreed to hire the maid, I felt as if my mind had opened wide and Hashem had rewarded me with knowledge of kol haTorah kulah - the entire Torah, all because I was concerned only with Hashem's honor, and not with my own." (R' Pesach Krohn, The Maggid Speaks, p.58) Besides learning a lesson about the evils of Lashon Horah, we also see the midos - character traits of Torah scholars such as the S'dei Chemed, who was able to forgive the maid who had wronged him. It should be enough that the Torah forbids Lashon Horah. However, the Sages, wishing to emphasize the severity of this violation, have expressed in many places the evil of Lashon Horah. For example, the Sages tell us, "Anyone who speaks Lashon Horah and anyone listens and accepts Lashon Horah as being true... is fit to be thrown to the dogs." (Pesachim 118a) Also, "Anyone who speaks Lashon Horah should be killed by stoning." (Erchin 15b) And if this were not bad enough, the Sages go on to tell us: "Concerning one who speaks Lashon Horah, the Holy One blessed be He says, 'he and I cannot live [together] in this world.'" (Ibid.)

Let us be inspired by this week's discussion to dedicate and rededicate ourselves to avoiding speaking bad about others. A simple rule to remember which has helped many is: "*Don't mention mentschen (people).*" If we avoid talking about others, we will avoid most forms of Lashon Horah. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**