

Good Shabbos Everyone. Shlomo HaMelech states "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." (Mishlei - Proverbs 18,21) This verse is self-explanatory. The commentator Orchos Tzadikim comments on this verse by saying "There is no limit to the amount of mitzvahs one can do with their mouth." (Gate of Lashon HaRah 25) The opposite is also true: there is no limit to the amount of evil one can cause with his mouth.

The Chofetz Chaim (Reb Yisroel Hacoen, 1838-1933) readily agreed when another prominent rabbi requested his help with a communal matter in another city in Poland. The participation of the renowned Chofetz Chaim was sure to add considerably to the success of the mission because of his high standing in the eyes of all his co-religionists.

In the course of their trip the two rabbis stopped at a roadside inn to partake of a meal. They were happy to eat at this establishment as a Jewish woman who was well respected for her high standards of kashrus ran it. The two rabbis were seated at a special table and accorded every mark of honor. After they had finished the meal the proprietress came to their table to inquire how they had enjoyed the food.

The Chofetz Chaim smiled politely and replied: "It was very tasty, and I enjoyed it very much. Thank you." The other rabbi answered: "The meal was very good, thank you. Only, if I might say, the soup might have used a bit more salt." Then the owner left the table the Chofetz Chaim turned to his companion, and in an anguished voice said: "Unbelievable! All my life I have avoided speaking or listening to lashon hara (slander about a fellow Jew), and here I am, going on a trip to perform a mitzva (commandment), and I have been put into a situation of having to hear you speak lashon hara! I deeply regret my involvement in this mission, for it cannot be a true mitzva. If it were, such a terrible thing would never have happened to me!"

The other rabbi was shocked and upset by the Chofetz Chaim's reaction. To him it seemed to be a perfectly innocent remark. "What was so terrible about my comment? I only mentioned that a little salt would help the food, which was otherwise very good." The Chofetz Chaim began to explain himself. "You certainly don't understand the power that words possess! Just see what a chain reaction your words have set off: I'm sure that the woman who owns the inn doesn't do her own cooking; she probably employs some poor person to do it, maybe even a widow who depends upon this job for her living.

"Because of your thoughtless comment the employee will be reprimanded for not adding enough salt to the food. She will try to defend herself before replying that she certainly did put in enough salt, which will be a lie. Then the owner will accuse her of lying, since she will certainly take your word over that of the poor cook. This exchange will lead to an argument and the owner will, in her anger, fire the poor cook, who will then have no income with which to support herself and her family. "And just think how many sins have been caused by one off-handed remark: You spoke lashon hara and caused others to hear it; you caused the owner of the inn to repeat the lashon hara; the poor cook was prompted to tell a lie; the owner caused pain to a poor person; your remark caused an argument. All of these are violations of the Torah!"

The rabbi, who had listened closely to the Chofetz Chaim's explanation, replied respectfully: "Reb Yisroel Meir, I simply can't help but feel that you are overreacting to the whole incident. My few casual words couldn't have created all that damage. I think that your scenario just isn't realistic."

The Chofetz Chaim rose from his seat, still in an agitated state, and said: "If you don't believe me, then follow me into the kitchen and you will see with your own eyes what has happened!" The two rabbis quietly entered the kitchen, and a sorry sight met their eyes. The proprietress was standing before an elderly woman and giving her a sharp tongue-lashing; while the woman stood there with tears streaming down her face.

The shocked rabbi ran up to the cook and begged her to forgive him for all the pain she was suffering. He then turned to the owner of the inn and pleaded with her to forgive him and to forget that he had ever made a comment. He had never intended that it be taken so seriously. The proprietress of the inn, who was really a kind person by nature, had never actually intended to dismiss her elderly employee and was happy to accede to the rabbi's request. She explained that she had merely wanted to impress upon the cook her responsibility to be more careful in the future. She assured the rabbi that the woman's job was secured and he had no grounds for worry. The rabbi turned to the Chofetz Chaim with an understanding look. He had certainly acquired a new profound respect for the awesome power of words.

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