

# Speaking of the Devil

- Basil Herring.

"But rabbi, how can it possibly be wrong to tell the truth about people, everyone one does it all the time, and anyway the Torah itself does not forbid it."

I recall it as if it happened yesterday. I was fresh out of Yeshiva, a young rabbi filled with enthusiasm and commitment to "do the Lord's work," and I had just settled into my first position as a small town rabbi. One of the members of the synagogue was an older gentleman who owned the local kosher bakery. Not only did he make the challahs for the whole town, he actually went around every Friday from home to home, and institution to institution, proudly delivering the "work of his hands." Which was of course a wonderful service to the community. Except for one thing: at each stop he would assiduously gather, and then with religious fervor, disseminate, the week's rumors, small talk, hearsay, petty scandals, chatter, slander, and plain old "he said, she said." After several anguished months of observing this behavior, I could take it no longer, and finally decided to risk his wrath. So I made up my mind that on his next delivery I would tell him that his words and actions were hurtful and wrong. But when I explained the evils of *loshen hara*, the laws against gossip, he looked at me as if he had been struck by thunder, and then said "but rabbi, how can it possibly be wrong to tell the truth about people, everyone one does it all the time, and anyway the Torah itself does not forbid it." And from that moment, that fellow could never look me in the face, so angry was he at me for depriving him of his most pleasurable activity.

This memory came to mind this week, in reading a wonderful analysis in our parshah, by R. Menachem Leibtag of Jerusalem, distributed via the Internet. For finally, these many years later, it is clear to me just why that small town baker was dead wrong; but more importantly, why it is so important, indeed crucial, that each of us appreciate what the Torah, in our parshah, teaches us on the subject of listening to---as well as repeating, idle talk, gossip, and hearsay, even, and perhaps especially, when it is true. Not just for us individually, and within our families, but for us as a community, as a people, as a nation.

Be very careful to keep the laws concerning *tzara'at*, or leprosy, and do exactly as the *kohanim* and *leviyim* will instruct you. Remember what God did to Miriam, on your journey when you left Egypt. (Devarim 24:8-9)

In explaining these cryptic verses, it is Rashi who reminds us of the familiar story in *Beha'alotecha* that describes how God punished Miriam for putting her brother Moshe in an unfavorable light as a role model for other prophets, saying that he was a less than fully attentive husband and father, as he was too preoccupied with his public and prophetic duties. For this, says Rashi, quoting the midrash, Miriam was afflicted with *tzara'at*, forcing the camp of Israel to postpone its travels for a whole week while she recovered.

But Rabbi Leibtag asks the following excellent question: why does the Torah here commit the literary equivalent of *lashon hara* against Miriam by repeating the story of her bad behavior? Why not just tell us straight out, saying for example, *lo tedaber ra be'rei-echa*, "you should not speak negatively about your fellow?" A most wonderful, and repercussive, answer, says Rabbi Leibtag, is to be found in the commentary of the Ramban. And this what it says:

When the Torah says "Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam," this in my opinion, actually constitutes a positive commandment, just like "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" or "remember this day in which you came out of Egypt," or "remember what Amalek did to you," all of which are mitzvot of the Torah. This too, therefore is an explicit prohibition against speaking negatively about others. It was commanded by way of a positive obligation that we remember the severe punishment which God inflicted upon the righteous prophetess Miriam who spoke only about her brother, upon whom she had earlier bestowed great mercy, and whom she loved as herself. And she spoke nothing wrong to his face, but only in privacy, between herself and her holy brother Aaron. Yet all her good deeds were of no avail. We should know that if we will speak against our fellow human beings, we will not be saved either!

And then the Ramban clinches his argument, saying

How is it possible that, concerning lashon ha-ra, gossip, which is as serious as murder, there should not be a real negative commandment against it in the Torah, or at least a negative one derived from a positive one? I therefore say that this verse in fact contains a great prohibition to refrain from lashon hara both in public and in private, whether one's intention is to hurt or to shame or with no intent to harm at all. This is indeed one of 613 commandments, even though some have not included it among them.

What the Ramban teaches us here, is that the Torah indeed takes negative, defamatory, talk with utmost seriousness, whether what is thus spoken be true or false. And rather than just tell us it is wrong, the Torah demonstrates in the clearest possible fashion just how invidious and corrupting is the crime: that even one so righteous, so compassionate, so loving, so positively motivated, as the sainted Miriam in her relations with her brother, whose intent was nothing but constructive, so as to benefit him, his family, and the entire people of Israel --- even she could not resist the temptation to speak of another person in inappropriate manner, and as a result had to undergo painful physical punishment, which ultimately affected the entire people Israel whom she had sought to benefit. If she in all her righteousness succumbed, how careful must we be, we who are so far beneath her level in our dealings with our fellows!

And indeed, I believe, that all of us can agree on the importance of the matter. Open any Jewish newspaper, and you find yourself exposed to harsh, derogatory words. Attend communal meetings, and a significant portion of the available time, energy and thought is spent in either condemning other groups or responding to their attacks and criticisms. Subscribe to Jewish newsletters or Internet postings and discussion groups, and you are more likely than not to encounter case after case, time after time, detailed descriptions of everyone else's alleged errors, mistakes, and base motives. If we follow the debate over the so-called "pluralism issue," with all its invective, and verbal sparring, it is difficult to avoid the impression that many of these groups are more excited about condemning others than to about clarifying what they themselves believe in and stand for. Indeed it is the rare exception when one or another protagonist in the Jewish culture wars of our time passes up an opportunity to jump all over the opposition, as if the pugilistic TV Crossfire program has become the preferred mode of Jewish discourse in our time. And less you think that I exaggerate, take as a case in point, a feature in last week's Jewish Week, which so angered me that I was moved for once to write a letter to the Editor. As you surely know, the widely read paper contains a regular feature by one of its reporters, titled "Passing Judgment," which prominently gives a thumbs up and thumbs down each and every week to one or another feature of Jewish life in the news. It is a feature which to my mind

encapsulates much of what is wrong with Jewish life today, often summarily criticizing, rejecting, dismissing, and passing unsubstantiated and dismissive judgment on a variety of Jewish individuals and groups in the news. First, the feature gleefully welcomed with its raised thumb, what it excitedly anticipated as the breakup of the Religious Zionist movement in Israel, so that in case there were not already enough political parties in Israel's splintered polity, there could now be a few more. But then it got to what really excited it: an opportunity to impugn the motives, belittle the courage, and deny any positive achievements of those whom it labeled "feminist Orthodox rabbis," whatever that oxymoron might imply. Their crime: opposing a new Beit Din that has undertaken an initiative to annul marriages involving recalcitrant spouses. Thus it excoriated these rabbis, of which I happen not to be one, saying "after 30 years of talkfests, they haven't freed one agunah."

Now there can be no question that the fate of agunot, those women chained mercilessly to failed marriages, because of the Torah's requirement, in this very parshah, that a divorce be freely initiated by the husband as well as freely accepted by the wife, is a terrible tragedy that cries out for redress and amelioration. Blackmailed and exploited by cruel, and often abusive husbands, women such as these, and there are hundreds of them, deserve not just pity but every honest effort to free them and their children from their plight, so that they can remarry and resume the blessings of full family life. And I can assure you, from personal experience, as an Board member of the Beth Din of America, that there are many rabbis as well as laymen, feminist or otherwise, who are not just seeking ways to release such women from their plight, but who have also been successful on numerous occasions in effecting a kosher "get" to terminate such marriages, and at the same time to prevent their future children from the incalculable stigma of mamzerut, or illegitimacy. Dismissive pronouncements by the Jewish Week represent an unfair and false accusation, precisely against those who should be applauded and encouraged to go further in their efforts on behalf of such women. Instead, they are sadly subjected to unjust ridicule, and rejection, by the very people who need them most. But of course, the Ramban would understand what is involved here: it is a self-righteous ploy to criticize and cut down leaders of the Jewish community, by those who justify themselves via misguided rationalizations that they act to benefit wronged women. How sad, that such loshen hara should find a place in a newspaper that so often claims to regret Jewish communal antagonisms.

But communal tensions aside, there is a more personal side to the matter of loshen hara. I refer of course to how we in our personal lives talk about others. Listen to the following true story: The sainted Chafetz Chayim, author of the classic work on lashon hara, once walked into a synagogue in his town of Radin. While the people were waiting for services to begin, he overheard some of them ridiculing the town simpleton. The poor fellow was usually the subject of such derision, and it upset the rabbi deeply. Unable to take it any more, the rabbi approached one of the men and said "why do you joke about that unfortunate man?" "He is really dumb," came the reply. "Can you imagine, he told us that he just came back from Aisheshuk (about 20 miles from Radin), and all he brought back was some tabak (snuff). Isn't it foolish, to make such a long trip, and come back with so little?" The Chafetz Chayim thought for a moment, and then gently spoke the following words: "My dear man, you should be concerned about yourself instead. Your neshamah (soul) came down from Heaven, and made a much longer trip down here to this earth. If you continue in your ways, then after 120 years, when your neshamah returns to Heaven, it will bring back a lot less than this fellow did!"

Let us be honest: most of the time, the real reason so many of us speak loshen hara, spouting negativity about relatives, friends, neighbors, or colleagues and associates, is so that we can feel a little better about our own hidden failings. By pointing out their assorted foibles, we feel better about our own inadequacies, implying as we do that no one after all is such a tzaddik, so we ourselves can't be all that bad. Loshen hara, ultimately, no matter what we say, is not about the imperfections of others, but about our own selves, and how, in our own deep-seated insecurity and low self-esteem, whether we realize it or not, we view our own weaknesses, errors, and failings, and attempt to cover them up or justify them. If only we would realize that cutting down the honor and dignity of others really does little of lasting value to elevate our own standing; that pointing out what we imagine to be their faux pas does nothing so much as diminish our own standing before God and man. And, as the Ramban points out, whatever the other person's failing so salaciously described, be it petty or profound, pales into insignificance when placed at the regrettable side of the very act of loshen hara itself, an act which the Torah absolutely forbids, and which, on in the rabbinic view of things, is the moral and spiritual equivalent of murder, and character assassination. So next time when tempted to share in a piece of "dirt", truthful though it may be, let us all keep in mind what in effect our words say about our own selves, and the loss of dignity and respect that they might incur, not for them but for ourselves, in the eyes of those whose respect and admiration we might dearly long to earn.

If we will do that, with courage and honesty, especially in these days of Ellul when we are bidden to be less critical of others and more so of ourselves, called upon to look deep inside in search of self-improvement before God and man, then, rest assured, we will be blessed to enjoy a family and Jewish community, society and world, which will be that much less the victim of slander and libel, a world in which God Himself will overlook and dismiss our own faults as we stand before Him, the Judge of all the earth, in the days and weeks to come, upon us and all Israel our brethren, Amen!