

Lashon Hara' (Evil Speech or Gossip)

Some Thoughts

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In the past issues of *Chadashot* I have centered my thoughts in these short essays on theological or halakic issues. Sometimes, such topics can appear to be removed from the reality of our everyday lives, and read with investigative “glasses” rather than with an intention to obey G-d's word. Hopefully the discussions on the “L-rd's Table” enabled us to consider more personally what Yeshua expects of us in the act of “remembering”, and how this heightens our responsibility to celebrate Pesach.

In this short essay, however, while I want to emphasize a halakic issue, I hope it will be particularly relevant and applicable to all of our lives. I am convinced that as a congregation Beit Hallel faces a wonderful and strategic challenge, given to us by our Master. This challenge is simply our service to Him in these last days before Yeshua's return. I believe on the basis of prophecies like Zech 8:23 [“Thus says Adonai of hosts, In those days ten men from the nations of every language will grasp the corner of the garment (i.e., the tzitzit) of a Jew saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that G-d is with you’] that Messianic believers will be sought after by those seeking the truth, and given an opportunity to teach the truth of Yeshua's messiahship, and of the one true G-d, the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Many indicators, including the return of our people to the Land, the increasing tensions over middle east territory, the fight over the city of Yerushalaim, point to this being a strategic time in the expansion and growth of the kingdom of Yeshua. Add to this the increasing interest of the mainline churches regarding the jewishness of the Christian faith, and it is easy to see that Messianic congregations have a very important role to perform now and in the immediate future. I hope that we intend to accept the challenge that is before us, and prepare to serve our King as He desires.

With this in mind, my primary question for us all is this: what kinds of things will Satan attempt to put in our path in order to cause us to fail in the mission Yeshua has designed for us? I believe his strategies may be multifaceted, but I want to emphasize just one in this essay—לְשׁוֹן הָרָע, *lashon hara'*, “evil speech” or “slander”. Perhaps nothing tears apart the ability of a congregation to work together in service more than the sin of slander—speaking in a derogatory way against a brother or sister. Unfortunately, everyone of us must admit that in one way or another, we have engaged in this sin and to one extent or another have therefore weakened our corporate ability to fulfill the mission Yeshua has designed for us. A recommitment to not engage in *lashon hara'* will help strengthen us against Satan's schemes.

Lashon hara' was considered a great evil by the Sages. They taught that three persons are destroyed by *lashon hara'*, namely “he who relates the slander, he who accepts it, and he about whom it is told” (Ar. 15b). The punishment for *lashon hara'*, according to the Sages, was severe. Those who engage in slander “are immediately chastised by plagues” (ARN 19) and “rain is withheld from them” (Ta’an. 7b). Whoever makes derogatory remarks about deceased scholars is cast into Gehinnom (Ber. 19a). Furthermore, slanderers will not enjoy the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence, Sot. 42a) and a bearer of evil tales is considered as denying G-d (Ar. 15b). Whoever relates or accepts slander deserves to be cast to the dogs (Pes 118a) and stoned (Ar. 15b). It was Mar, son of Ravina, who concluded his daily prayers with “My G-d, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile”, a prayer which was added to the *Shemonie Esrei* in the subsequent Siddur.

These teachings of the Sages appear harsh until one considers the words of James in the Apostolic Writings in which he teaches that the ability to control the tongue is a genuine mark of spiritual maturity (2:1); that the tongue is like a fire, able to set an entire forest ablaze (2:5) and able to burn all the other members of the body, defiling them and even setting the course of life on fire. He boldly states that the slandering tongue is set on fire by hell itself (2:6). He calls the tongue “a restless evil and full of deadly poison” and chastens his readers with the thought that with the same tongue we

bless the L-rd and curse our fellow man who is created in His image (2:9). Clearly, James recognized that *lashon hara'* could easily be a factor for the demise of the cause of Messiah. He therefore warns the Messianic community in his time, as well as warning us.

If what I have suggested is true, that Beit Hallel stands at a strategic crossroads poised to fulfill a vital role in the expansion of Yeshua's kingdom, then I think we can count on it: Satan will urge us to engage in *lashon hara'* as a means of defeating us and making us less than effective in the service of our Messiah. How can we guard against this sin? How can we thwart the deceitful schemes of the evil one? How can we prepare so that we do not fall into this trap?

First, we must agree that *lashon hara'* is a sin, and commit ourselves to view it as such. *Lashon hara'* may easily be defined as speech about another person that will cause that person to be diminished or despised in the mind of those who listen. Thus, *lashon hara'* may be engaged in either by speaking slander or by listening to it. We must commit ourselves, therefore to not engaging in it, and gently but firmly refusing to listen to it. One may excuse oneself when such speech begins, or even warn the speaker: "I wouldn't want to be spoken of like this, so I don't want to participate in speaking about . . . in a negative way." This will be humbling, but if we all commit to guarding our tongues as James teaches, we will welcome the gentle reminder when we begin to slip into slanderous speech.

Secondly, we must commit ourselves to seeking the forgiveness of someone we have slandered. This is very difficult, but has a twofold benefit. It restores a path of fellowship between the slanderer and the one slandered, and it reminds the slanderer of the consequences of *lashon hara'*.

Thirdly, if we find ourselves in a situation where we can neither leave the room nor rebuke the speaker, we must commit ourselves not to believe the slanderous speech. We simply are not allowed to have the person who is being slandered diminished in our opinion or perspective. We must think of that person and act toward him or her as though the slander had never occurred.

Fourthly, we must commit ourselves to wholesome speech, and to building each other up in the faith. Speaking good of each other is an obvious offensive measure against *lashon hara'*. We must look for those qualities and actions in each other which can be the basis of our praise, and when speaking of one another we must do so with the intent of causing the person we talk about to be appreciated all the more by those who listen to our speech. One Sage taught that when you see someone else do something wrong (or hear about it), realize that G-d brought this before you because you have done something similar, and so *you* will repent. Do not judge him, judge yourself. Since you have done something of the same sort, you will not be arrogant in judging him, but will be busy correcting your own faults, not his. (*Jewish Spiritual Practice*, p. 220). Once the log is out of my eye, I will see more clearly to help my brother remove the splinter in his.

There are times when it is necessary to speak in a negative way about another person, but this must be reserved for issues where two or three witnesses are attempting to secure justice in regard to a crime committed, or where the welfare of the congregation requires a warning about a given individual. Even here, however, every effort must be made to find ways of warning without specifically demeaning someone else. So while there are legitimate cases where negative speech must occur, let us not make the exception a platform for *lashon hara'*. May HaShem strengthen us to love each other in word and deed, and not allow the trap of *lashon hara'* to diminish our effectiveness for Him!