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*With
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ב"ה

Parshas Tazria

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Gossip and a Bar of Soap

Out of all of the hundreds of sins mentioned in the Torah, there seems to be one that rises to the top. There is one that seems to take center stage. There is one that seems to have a completely disproportionate centrality to it. The Torah seems to declare it the mother of all sins. That sin is lashon hara – gossip. The amount of focus and attention given to it relative to other aveiros is mind-bogglingly immense. So much so that it begs an explanation.

For example, out of all the negative mitzvos written in the entire Torah, none have more ink dedicated to them than the commandment of refraining from lashon hara. Almost two full parshios in the Torah discuss it. Over 100 pesukim elaborate on it. One transgresses more negative commandments simultaneously by speaking lashon hara than any other singular sin. On the holy day of Yom Kippur in the Kodosh HaKodashim, the very first thing the Kohen asks forgiveness for is the sin of lashon hara. The very first thing we ask Hashem for in our personal supplements at the end of Shemoneh Esrei is "*Elokai Netzor Leshoni Meira*" – Hashem should help protect our mouths from speaking bad. The Gemara in Maseches Pe'ah Yerushalmi says that lashon hara is as bad as all the other aveiros in the Torah. That same Yerushalmi says that one who speaks lashon hara, it's as if he doesn't believe in G-d. It says in Pesachim (118a) that one who speaks lashon hara is worthy to be thrown to the dogs. The entire generation of Jews that made it out of Egypt, who were some of the greatest Jews who ever lived, were all wiped out. Why? Because they listened to lashon hara about the land of Eretz Yisrael. The Gemara in Kiddushin (30a) says that the pasuk that is exactly in the middle of the Torah, the very halfway point, which implies extreme significance, is pasuk (13:33) in this parshah, which discusses lashon hara. The list of examples showing the criticality of this sin can go on.

Why does lashon hara take up such an extremely central and prominent spot on the mantle of sin? What is it about gossip that elected it king of iniquities? Aren't there other sinful traits that are also bad? Theft, dishonesty, stinginess, haughtiness, laziness. Some of these, one can argue, seem even worse! What is it about lashon hara that makes it reign supreme? Perhaps the following idea can shed some light.

Spiritual DNA

For many thousands of years, the human body was thought, by conventional wisdom, to be a random collection of parts "miraculously" working in sync to maintain the life of the body. It was then discovered that every human body has what is called Deoxyribonucleic Acid, or DNA, which is the letter-coding of the human body. Those letters determine the physiological makeup of man. Rather than random cells floating in our bodies, we are, in truth, the sum total of a hugely specific letter-coding that makes up our inner essence.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos says that the world was created with ten utterances. Even before the very genesis of the world, there were words in existence. They are the ultimate foundation upon which the world rests. "*Bereishis Bara Elokim Es*" – in the beginning, God created aleph to saf, the Hebrew alphabet. When Hashem created Adam and blew into him sparks of divinity, He elevated him above animals with the power of speech. The line of demarcation between man and beast is his ability to articulate his thoughts through words. Speech is more than mere communication. It is the very brickwork that builds our world. Words are what powers every thought and every idea, and enables them to transform our world. Words were created before the world was, for words are the very backbone of the world.

If the power of words applies to humans in general, all the more is it true when it comes to Jews. Immense spiritual ideas are expressed with words. The Aseres Hadibros, the Ten Commandments, shook the earth to its very core. The ultimate safeguard of our tradition are the words that carry it: the telling over the story of leaving Egypt, the reading of the megillah, the weekly Torah laining, the mother who whispers prayers by her child's bedside, the father who lovingly teaches his son the aleph bais, the thousands upon thousands of words of Torah that are uttered every second in every corner of the globe. What DNA is to humanity, holy words are to the Jew; they are the energy that powers our people.

When the words that come out of our mouths degrade and belittle, besmirch and provoke, they not only hurt the person under attack, they break down the bricks that are here to build the world. The words that are there to bind us together, ensuring the continuity of Judaism and its Torah, become poisoned when used to splinter and fragment. When

ill words come out of our mouths, pointing out the flaws of another, the very purpose of words backfires. We take the very tool Hashem placed into this world, for the purpose of showing care and love, to nurture and to teach, to sing and to communicate, to encourage and to inspire; and we selfishly use it to push our peers down and prop ourselves up.

The Window Within

But more than merely demonstrating a negative character trait, when we speak lashon hara, we are revealing our inner outlook of our fellow Jews. We aren't seeing this person as a cherished member of our holy nation; we see nothing more than a competitor in the game of life. Our speech reveals our outlook on Judaism in general. When destructive words fly out of our mouths, it is demonstrative of the rotten outlook we have towards one another. An outlook of fragmentation and divide, as opposed to togetherness and love. Such a divide reveals our collective disinterest in serving on Hashem's team. We declare that our fellow Jews aren't our holy brothers; they are our verbal punching bags, at times useful only for when we need to make others small for us to feel big.

The Hebrew word for tzaraas, the spiritually-charged skin disease that punishes lashon hara speakers, is nega. The Hebrew word for pleasure is oneg. The difference between the two words is the placement of the letter ayin. The word ayin means eyes. The difference between nega and oneg is merely where we place our eyesight. Do we look at our neighbors and see evil and bad, corruption and guilt, people who are mere competitors in the rat race of life? Or do we see pure, holy, loving Jews who, albeit imperfect, are all integral parts of the nation of Hashem? The way we use words determines if we live in the garden of oneg or the dungeon of nega.

Strange Dating Advice

There is a Gemara in Taanis (24a) that seems to give awfully strange dating advice. It says that if one finds a prospective spouse and sees that they have beautiful eyes, one need not check the rest of the body, for one can be assured it is likewise beautiful. Now, there is an obvious question. One does not need to go very far to find people who have beautiful eyes but unpleasant features or deformities. What exactly does the Gemara mean? The Kli Yakar (Bereishis 24, 14) explains that the Gemara is not referring to physical appearance. The Gemara means that if one comes across another person with a healthy, beautiful, positive outlook of others, no other character traits need to be examined, for this is the ultimate litmus test of piety. The Gemara unequivocally declares: "If one looks at others and sees good, marry her."

For when they look around, they don't merely see people; they see neshamos, they see worthy members of Hashem's team, strong and glorious soldiers in the army of God. Such people hold up the world.

The Soap Obsession

Martin Friedman was a simple, irreligious Jew who once went to Israel to visit his children living there. His son-in-law, a Syrian Jew, decided to bring him to get a blessing from Chacham Ovadia Yosef, the global leader of Sephardic Jewry at the time. They walked up the steps to the Yosef residence and waited on line like everyone else. Due to the throngs of people who came to catch a glimpse of Chacham Ovadia, it was expected that they would only get a few seconds with the holy sage.

When Martin walked into the room, Chacham Ovadia stopped what he was doing and froze. He got up and pointed to Martin and said, "You! I smell the scent of Gan Eden coming off of you!"

Martin wasn't sure what to do with himself. He just stood there.

The chacham asked him, "What is your zechut, your merit?"

Martin, who had to ask his son-in-law what a zechut is, responded that he didn't know what the holy rabbi was talking about.

Reb Ovadia was determined and repeated, "Tell me what your merit is. Why does the smell of Gan Eden emanate from you?"

Martin again looked at the Chief Rabbi and reiterated, "I am a simple man. I'm not even religious. I don't know what you are seeing."

Chacham Ovadia announced that everyone should leave the room. He sat down and brought Martin close to him and he again looked at him in the eye and said, "You have the smell of Gan Eden coming off of you, and I would like to know why."

Looking at Chacham Ovadia, Martin replied, "Perhaps it is the following. In the year 1945, after the war ended, Jews shared a collective sigh of relief as each survivor found his respective safe haven to begin life anew. My father, on the other hand, couldn't sleep. Night after night he would come downstairs in the middle of the night and cry.

"What's going to be with all the bars of soap?' he would weep. 'All those millions upon millions of Jewish bodies that were killed and made into bars of soap for the sadistic Germans to use. What will be with them? Who will

bury them? All those holy Jews sitting in German closets and bathrooms. All those beautiful, sweet Jewish children who not only were killed in a horrific fashion, but now have to clean the very bodies of the murderers who killed them! All those holy women who sacrificed themselves for the sake of G-d in Heaven who haven't gotten a proper Jewish burial.' He would cry, he would scream, he would shriek with all his might.

"One day he had enough. He came downstairs with a suitcase in his hand and turned to my mother and said, 'I am going to Europe, and I am hunting soap. And you,' he said, turning to me, 'are coming with me.' I was ten at the time.

"We went to Europe and we traveled from town to town, knocking on doors, asking if they had any German soap that we could buy. We went around in the sleet and in the rain. We walked along alleyways and through slums. We went by car, by train, by horse, and by boat. Not a town did we let by. My father was possessed. While the rest of our people were all searching for new life, my father and I were searching for death. Death in the form of small bars of soap. We would plead with people to sell us their German soap, and then my father and I would take a shovel, dig a hole, say a small prayer, and with tears rolling down our cheeks, we would bury those holy bars.

"Eventually we came to the last town on our map. We limped through. Cold. Tired. Starved. Exhausted. Out of money. We made it to the last house in the town and my father knocked on the door. A tall, burly German man opened the door and looked at us pathetic, disheveled-looking Jews.

"What do you want?' he asked.

"I would like your German bars of soap,' my father replied.

"The German looked at us with suspicion. 'I'll sell them to you for fifteen marks.'

"My father looked at him and said, 'We do not have any money, but we are asking you to do us a favor and give it to us anyway.'

"Absolutely not,' shot back the man.

"As he was about to close the door, I raised my voice and said, 'Sir, those bars are our friends, our family, our people. Lives lived in truth and integrity are in those bars. People who did nothing but bring goodness and light to the world are pressed into those bars; men and women who kept the world afloat with their kindness and love had their lives cut short and are in those very bars. We have been to every city and every town, every hamlet and every village, every

ghetto and every camp to ensure that those precious bars of soap get buried. See this shirt on my back? I will take it off and hand it to you in exchange for those bars of soap.'

"The German, albeit surprised, agreed, and we buried the last bars of soap in Europe. Exhausted and shirtless, I limped back to America and quietly lived the rest of my life."

Each of us has flaws. Some of us have many. But all of us have mountains we've climbed and heights we've soared. Temptations we've overcome and anger we've subsided. Kindness we've done and prayers we've uttered. An unassuming man, utterly unnoteworthy, one we would think is like anyone else riding the subway, can be credited with burying a literal continent's worth of Jewish bodies! If we would have holy vision, we would see the good in people. We would smell the scents of Gan Eden that their holy souls exude. We would only think to speak highly of them, never using our distinctly human power of speech to belittle and tear down. Each Jew is a cherished gem on God's crown. How destructively shortsighted to think otherwise.

Words are the very fuel of humanity. Sure, they can destroy, but they can build as well. If we are careful to use them well, we can rebuild G-d's palace on earth brick by brick, and His glory will reign with us yet again. May it be soon.