

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Mordechai *ben Yedid a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Health Concerns

PARSHAS TAZRIA 5776

R' Yitzchak Zilberstein relates an episode involving a certain individual who required an operation. This man was considered to be in overall decent shape, but, as is wont to occur, a certain localized health matter warranted surgical intervention.

Keeping the Doctor Away...

It was what happened next that was most unusual. The man recovered nicely from his operation, only to discover... that he required another operation in a different part of his body. The doctors had found something else that needed immediate attention.

As mentioned, this was an otherwise healthy individual. But matters didn't conclude with the second operation either. As soon as that was done, the doctors, upon further examination, determined that he would need yet more operations to address his medical concerns!

The family was obviously distraught – and quite flummoxed. What was going on here? Why would a generally healthy individual suddenly require operation after operation? A relative of theirs, who happened to be a Gerrer *chassid*, suggested that they consult with the P'nei Menachem, Rebbe of Ger at that time. They accepted the advice, and a meeting was arranged.

As soon as the family members finished relating the strange tale to the Rebbe, he turned to them with the following question: "Tell me," he asked. "How are things at your Shabbos table? Is it conducted as it should be?"

Somewhat ashamedly, the family responded in a candid manner. "No," they admitted. "Things are not quite run in the most pristine fashion."

"Do you speak about other people at the meal?" the Rebbe pressed further.

"Yes," came the response. "We must admit that it is so."

"And do you end up dissecting people's characters at your Shabbos table?"

"We must confess to this practice as well. Many names are 'brought to the table' over the course of the meal; we dissect the character and deeds of each one."

"Well," the Rebbe concluded. "There's your answer. Please refrain from such discussions in the future; speak words of Torah instead. You will see that if you cease your 'dissections,' your father, as well, will no longer need to be 'dissected.'"

And so it was. The family shared the results of their meeting with their father, who agreed that the practice of taking people apart at the Shabbos table would have to stop. Soon thereafter, he himself no longer had to visit the operating table (*Barchi Nafshi, parshas Tetzaveh*).

Short- and Long-Term Effects

How was the Rebbe able to so quickly “diagnose” the issue? Indeed, the Gerrer Rebbe was a saintly figure, no doubt on the level of meriting some measure of *ru’ach hakodesh* (Divinely-inspired knowledge). But in this case, it could be that he simply relied on the open teachings of Chazal. In discussing the deleterious effects of *lashon hara* (evil gossip), our sages express the sentiment that the practice is even harmful to one’s physical body. This they derive from the *passuk* that states: וְחָבַל אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיךָ – אַל־תִּתֶּן אֶת־פִּיךָ לַחֲטִיָּא אֶת־בְּשָׂרְךָ... וְחָבַל אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיךָ – “Do not allow your mouth to cause losses to your flesh... and to ruin the work of your hands” (*Koheles* 5:5). The Medrash (*Koheles Rabbah* 5:3) offers its explanation of this verse: “R’ Huna interpreted the verse as referring to *lashon hara*. ‘Do not allow your mouth (to cause losses to your flesh)’ by speaking evil gossip... ‘(thereby) ruining the work of your hands’ – **this refers to organs and limbs of the slanderer’s body. Hashem will introduce disease and sickness into (these limbs), causing them to become lost to him.**”

Indeed, this is one of the major themes of the current *parshiyos*. They feature the severe condition known as *tzara’as*, which, as Chazal relate, comes on account of *lashon hara* (*cf. Arachin* 15b). Thus we have in stark relief, an extensive elaboration in the Torah – over the course of two *parshiyos* – of the physical debilitation wrought by the nefarious practice of evil gossip.

In this vein, the Mishnah in Avos (1:17) makes a somewhat enigmatic statement:

שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּנוֹ אוֹמֵר כָּל יָמַי גִּדְלַתִּי בֵּין הַחֲכָמִים, וְלֹא מָצָאתִי לְגוֹף טוֹב אֲלֵא שְׁתִּיקָה.

“Shimon, the son (of Rabban Gamliel) says: I have been raised my whole life amongst the sages; and I have found nothing better for the (welfare of one’s) body other than silence.”

There are a number of ways to understand Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel’s assertion, in terms of which type of silence (silence from which matters) he was referring to and in what way the body is affected. But the Medrash cited above actually relates this Mishnaic teaching to the matter of *tzara’as*. In its continuation, the Medrash discusses the case of Miriam, who was afflicted with this condition on account of having spoken negatively against her brother Moshe. In conclusion, the Medrash takes the somewhat unusual step of quoting the Mishnah: אָמַר רַבִּי סָמָא דְּמִילְתָּא מְשִׁיקָא כְּדִתְגִינּוּ תַמּוֹן בְּאַבוֹת שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּנוֹ אוֹמֵר כָּל יָמַי גִּדְלַתִּי בֵּין הַחֲכָמִים, וְלֹא מָצָאתִי לְגוֹף טוֹב אֲלֵא שְׁתִּיקָה – “Rebbi said: The antidote of this matter is silence, as we learned there in the Mishnah in Avos: ‘Shimon the son (of Rabban Gamliel) says: All my life I was raised amongst the sages, and I did not find anything better for one’s body than silence.’”

It almost goes without saying, of course, that the effects of *lashon hara* are not limited to this world. The Chafetz Chaim (*Shemiras Halashon I, ch. 3*) notes the teaching of the Yerushalmi concerning the recompense for this deed. It refers to *lashon hara* as something whereby one “eats the fruits” in this world, but the “principal” remains to be meted out in the World to Come (*cf. Mishnah Pe’ah* 1:1). And on the flip side, he quotes the well-known statement of the Vilna Gaon recounting the benefits of avoiding this transgression: “For every moment that a person restrains his mouth, he merits (a share of) the hidden, ethereal light (to an extent) that not even an angel or celestial being can fathom.”