

conception, but He is also a living King. He is as real as could be. He is no less alive and real than a human being standing right in front of us. And He is the Creator of the world. He is infinite.

If we would make everything we know about *Hashem* real and alive, it would bring about a tremendous change in our lives.

This point is the foundation and beginning of the Jewish faith. Our spiritual problems stem from the fact that we lack proper awareness of this.

When R. Yochanan ben Zakkai fell ill, his disciples came to visit him.... They said to him, "Our Rabbi, bless us!"

He said to them, "May it be His Will that you should fear Heaven like you fear human beings."

His disciples said to him, "Only that much?"

He replied, "If only [you would fear Heaven that much]! Think about it: when a person commits a sin, he says to himself, "I hope no one sees me."²

² Berachos 28b.

R. Yochanan ben Zakkai's blessing to his *talmidim* was that they should sense *Hashem's* presence as vividly as they sense a living, breathing human being.

There are many names and appellations that describe *Hashem*: צבאות, שדי, אלקים, הויה, and more. But all these descriptions apply only after we recognize that there is a live King. Only a person whose life is permeated by the awareness that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is real and alive can describe Him in such ways. Before attaining the awareness that He is real and living, we are not in a position to describe Him with the various holy Names that are ascribed to Him by the Torah.

This point is also what *bitachon* stands on. Placing one's trust in *Hashem* means recognizing that we have a Father in heaven Who loves us very much and takes care of all our needs. When *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* come, our Rabbis set up for us to recite the special prayer of *Avinu Malkeinu* over and over. Why? Because *Hashem* is our Father. ●



Don't Forget That Hashem Loves You

וַתִּשָּׂא כָּל הָעֵדָה וַיִּתְּנוּ אֶת קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכוּ הָעָם בְּלֵילָה הַהוּא: וַיִּלְנוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. (במדבר יד, א-ב)

The whole congregation raised their voice and the people cried on that night. All the people of Yisrael complained against Moshe and Aharon. (*Bemidbar* 14:1-2)

The *Meraglim* and their complaints against *Hashem* constitutes an awesome story. There is an important practical lesson for us to learn from it. In *Sefer Devarim*, the following is recounted,



after the Jewish people heard the Spies' report:

וּתְרַגְּנוּ בְּאֵהָלֵיכֶם וּתְאָמְרוּ בְּשׂוֹאֵת ה' אֲתָנוּ
וְהוֹצִיאָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם – You grumbled in
your tents and you said, “*Hashem* brought
us out of the land of Egypt because He
hates us.”¹

This is a shocking thing to say. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* brought us out of Egypt with open miracles. He split the Sea for us. He fed us *Man* and cared for all our needs in the Wilderness in a most wondrous and miraculous way. And why did He do all this – because He hates us?! That makes absolutely no sense.

This is why He carried us on eagles' wings to bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey?! And they said it after they saw samples with their eyes of the Land's amazing fruit. Why did *Hashem* do it? “To give us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us.”² That is so ridiculous.

They had such a terrible imagination!

And what about us? We do something similar every day. We live in a world that *Hashem* created for us. We have health, we have food, we have family... We have thousands of good things in our lives.

And then some little thing happens to us that we aren't happy about. For instance, a person runs at the last minute to take care of some business in the bank before it closes, he rushes up huffing and puffing, and sees the door lock right in front of him.

Sometimes it is a little more serious. A person might suffer a loss, whether it be a material one or a spiritual one, or he might fall ill.

And what conclusion does he immediately come to? *Hashem* doesn't love me...

We learn from this *parshah* not just how ridiculous and nonsensical it is to think this way, but also how dangerous it is.

“The whole congregation raised their voice and the people cried on that night.” *Chazal* say that the

night they cried was the ninth of *Av*. Because they cried needlessly on that night, *Hashem* designated it as a night of crying for generations. At that time began the decree for *Beis Hamikdash* to be destroyed and the Jewish people to be exiled.

Chazal say³ that this may be compared to a king who summoned a person for judgment, and the person was so distraught and despairing that he cursed himself that he will be judged to such-and-such a terrible punishment. The king said to him, “I sentence you to what you said. That which you said is what will happen to you.” The point of the allegory is that if you think the king is so wicked, if you imagine that he will do such-and-such to you, what you said will in fact happen to you.

Every morning, before reciting *Shema*, we say the blessing of *Ahavah Rabbah* (or *Ahavas Olam*): “You love us with a great (or eternal) love.” Then, in the *Shemoneh Esreh* prayer, we thank *Hashem* “for our lives that are delivered into Your hands, and for our souls that are deposited with You, and for Your miracles that are with us every day, and for Your wonders and good acts every evening, morning and noon.” Then, during the course of the day, when things happen, we tend to forget what we said, and instead think, “*Hashem* is angry with me.” At that point, we need a lot of mercy not to be treated as in the above-mentioned allegory about the king and the man summoned for judgment.

Furthermore, the “bad event” that happened to us is usually a very good thing that we simply failed to interpret correctly, as was the case with the *Meraglim*. They said:

הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֶתָּה אָרֶץ
אֲכָלֶת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הוּא – The land that we went
through, to spy it out, is a land that devours
its inhabitants.⁴

As Rashi explains, everywhere they went they saw funerals. *Hashem* thereby did them a great

1 *Devarim* 1:27.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Midrash Tanchuma, Shlach*12.

4 *Bemidbar* 13:32.

favor. It was so the Canaanites would be occupied with mourning for their dear departed relatives and would not notice the *Meraglim* walking around.

It is the same with us. Many times, things that we thought were terrible events actually turned out to be very good for us in the end. There are so many stories about things like this. We need to remember this message during the tough moments, and keep

in mind that *Hashem* loves us with a great and eternal love.

Nothing is more dangerous than forgetting that *Hashem* loves us. Someone who remembers *Hashem's* love at the difficult moments in his life will always be accompanied by His love, and all the troubles will turn out to be good events in disguise, and he will experience *yeshu'os* and great kindness from *Hashem*. ●



PARSHAH TOPIC

Think Good

וַיִּצְיֵאוּ דְבַת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אֹתָהּ וְגו' הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֹתָהּ אָרֶץ אֲכָלָת
יוֹשְׁבֵיהָ הִוא. (במדבר יג, לב)

They defamed the land that they spied out... “The land that we passed through to spy it out is a land that devours its inhabitants.” (*Bemidbar* 13:32)

“Devours its inhabitants” – [They said:] Every place we passed through, we found them burying the dead. However, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* did it for their good, so the Canaanites would be occupied with mourning and not pay attention to the Spies. (*Rashi*)

The King of Lashon Hara

This story of how the *Meraglim* defamed *Eretz Yisrael* teaches us an important principle about *lashon hara*.

Everything the Spies saw in the Land was done by *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* for their sake, for their good. *Hashem* busied the Canaanites with burying people so they won't notice the *Meraglim* walking around. How did the *Meraglim* interpret this? For the bad. They said it “is a land that devours its inhabitants.” In other words, it is a bad country where lots of people die. They did the same with

the wondrous fruit of *Eretz Yisrael*; they put a negative spin on it. They said פירותיה משונים, “Its fruit is abnormal,” as *Rashi* explains.

This is what *lashon hara* does. It focuses on the bad and ignores the good. We find this idea expressed elsewhere as well. For instance, *Chazal* say:

No one knew how to speak *lashon hara* like Haman did.¹

Haman was the king of *lashon hara*. *Chazal* explain what he said about the Jewish people.

¹ *Megilah* 13b.

מפורד – “Scattered.” The Jews are scattered among the nations of the world. מפורד – “Separated.” Lest you think there is some benefit from them, I tell you that they are like a פרידה, a mule, which does not reproduce. ודתייהם שונות מכל עם – “And their laws are different from those of all peoples.” They don’t eat our food and they don’t intermarry. ואת דתי המלך אינם עושים – “And they do not keep the king’s laws.” The whole year long they say, “Today it’s *Shabbos* [so we don’t work]; Today it’s *Pesach* [so we don’t work].” ולמלך אין – “And it is not worthwhile for the king to maintain them.” When they eat and drink, they show disrespect to the kingdom. Even if a fly would fall into the cup [of wine] of a Jew, he would throw out the fly and drink the cup. But if your highness, the king, would touch the cup [of wine] of a Jew, he would throw it down on the floor and not drink it.

Haman spoke disparagingly about the *mitzvos* that the Jewish people do, and *Chazal* define what he said as *lashon hara*.

Technically, everything he said was true. *Lashon hara* is, by definition, when one says the truth, [because speaking falsehood is defined as *motzi sheim ra*, slander]. Haman said ישנו עם אחד – “There is one people.” This is true. He said that this people is scattered and separated among the nations. True. He said that their laws are different from those of other peoples. Again true. He said they don’t keep the king’s laws. Very true: when a Jew is asked to do something on *Shabbos* or *Yom Tov*, he simply won’t do it. And when Haman said, “It is not worthwhile for the king to maintain them,” this was Haman’s conclusion. It was not the actual *lashon hara* on which his conclusion was based.

The thing that is hard to understand is why Haman’s comments are defined as *lashon hara* at all, implying that he spoke disparagingly. Ostensibly, everything he said about the Jews was praise. We are not embarrassed that we are “one

people.” Similarly, we readily admit that we are different from other peoples. We are not ashamed of that at all. On the contrary, we always hear our Rabbis tell us that a Jew needs to be different and separate from the general populace.

If so, where do we find an element of *lashon hara* in what Haman said? What brought *Chazal* to crown him as the king of *lashon hara*?

Perhaps it was Haman’s claim that every time a Jew is asked to do something, he has an excuse, and says it is *Shabbos* today or it is *Pesach* today? This is all true, and we are proud of it, too, that we have such wonderful holidays and that we feel we are בני חורין, free men. Where is the *lashon hara* in it?

Yet, *Chazal* clearly say that no one knew how to speak *lashon hara* as well as Haman did. The explanation is as follows.

Focus is Everything

Everyone in the world has good points and not-so-good points. The question is what we focus on. *Sefer Chovos Halevavos* describes the trait of humility, and explains that it entails seeing the other person as better than oneself:

If the other person was wiser than I am, I would say, “He fears G-d more than I do, thanks to his greater wisdom.” And if he has less wisdom than I do, I will say that his reckoning on the day of judgment will be lighter than mine, because I transgress knowingly, and he transgresses unknowingly.

If he is older than me, I say that he has more merits than I do, because he came to the world before me. And if he is younger than me, I say that his sins are less than mine.

If he is equal to me in age and wisdom, I say, “Perhaps his heart is more to G-d than my heart is, because I know the sins I have already committed, and I don’t

know his.” In this way, I always honor the other person and show deference to him.²

R. Yisrael Salanter asked how is it possible to live that way, with such thoughts? Is a person really expected to think that everyone is better than himself?

He answered by explaining that a certain thing, a certain point that you see in the other person, makes an impression on you, and you naturally focus on that point.

Let’s say you see someone do a misdeed. And this someone is greater in Torah learning than you are. So you naturally conclude that he commits misdeeds deliberately, but if you commit a misdeed, it is unintentional. Why do you come to such a conclusion? Because he is a big *talmid chacham* and it is inappropriate for him to act in such a way. But you are not so learned, so it’s not so terrible if you do these things. Thus you naturally conclude that you are better than him.

Now let’s switch the scenario. You meet someone who is less learned than you are. You naturally conclude that you are better than him, because you are a much greater *talmid chacham*.

What happened? Why did your outlook change to the opposite?

The answer is that when you are a greater *talmid chacham*, that is the point that makes an impression on you, so you naturally focus on it. You put the other factor on the side, that his sins are unintentional and yours are deliberate.

The following allegory illustrates this point beautifully. Ten people grab hold of an elephant, and each one says something different about the object he is holding on to. One grabbed hold of a leg and said, “It is a stick of wood.” Another grabbed hold of a tooth and said, “It is a sword.”

Who is right? They are all right. It’s just a question of what you look at.

This is how *lashon hara* works, [and, by contrast, this is how the trait of humility works]. Every person has good points and not-so-good points. The question is what you concentrate on, what you give more weight to.

David Hamelech’s Enemies

There is a wonderful example of this in *Tanach*.

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כָּל מְכָה יְבִסִי וְגוֹי
וְאֵת הַפְּסָחִים וְאֵת הָעֵרְוִים שָׁנְאֵי נַפְשׁ דָּוִד –
David said on that day, “Whoever strikes
a Jebusite... and the lame and the blind
hated by David’s soul.”³

The Commentators explain that in that period, the Philistines did not fear the Jewish people. Why? Because *Avraham Avinu* swore to Avimelech, the Philistines’ predecessor, that for four generations, Avraham’s descendants will not harm the Philistines. And there was an old man still alive who belonged to those four generations. As long as this man lived, the Philistines knew the Jewish people cannot harm them, so they allowed themselves to make fun of the Jewish people and their holy forefathers.

To this purpose they made two statues, one of a lame man, to belittle *Yaakov Avinu*, who limped after his encounter with Eisav’s ruling angel. The second statue was of a blind man, to belittle Yitzchak, whose eyes dimmed in his old age. About these statues it was said, “The lame and the blind hated by David’s soul.”

I don’t know why *David Hamelech* hated them, but I will tell you why I hate them.

I, too, learned *Chumash*, and even so, until I came to this verse in *Sefer Shmuel*, I never knew that Yaakov was lame and that Yitzchak was blind. I saw many blind people in the course of my life, and I also was aware of the teaching of *Chazal* that when Yitzchak was bound on the altar, at the *Akeidah*, the angels cried and their tears fell into

2 *Chovos Halevaavos* 6:10.

3 I *Shmuel* 5:8.

his eyes, and as a result, he became blind in his old age. I knew all this. But I never realized that *Yitzchak Avinu* could be described as a “blind man.” I simply never pictured him this way.

Similarly, I knew that Yaakov wrestled with the angel and came out limping on his thigh. But when I saw a lame person in the street, I never associated this with *Yaakov Avinu's* image.

Only when I learned this *pasuk*, that the *Plishtim* made fun of Yitzchak and Yaakov, Yitzchak because he was blind and Yaakov because he was lame – then I realized that this was indeed their nature, as seen from the perspective of the Philistines.

Now I ask you: weren't the *Plishtim* right? Yitzchak surely was blind, and Yaakov surely limped. But only those “hated by David's soul” would characterize Yitzchak and Yaakov that way, because it all depends on what you look at. You can look at *Yitzchak Avinu* or at *Yaakov Avinu* and say, “Astounding! He is one of the four legs of the *Merkavah*, the Heavenly Chariot!” Or you could look at Yaakov and say, “Oh, it's just a limping man,” and at Yitzchak and say, “It's just a blind man.” And no one can deny it is true.

This is *lashon hara*.

A Very Tidy Bridegroom

I will tell you a story that happened to me.

I once was acquainted with a certain *chasan* and *kallah*. The *chasan* was one of the cleanest and tidiest people I knew. I never saw a stain on

his clothing. He was also remarkably refined of nature.

The day before the wedding, the *kallah* came to me, crying. She doesn't know what to do, she just found out that the *chasan* is not what she thought...

What happened?

It turned out that the brother of the *kallah*, who was far from the Torah world, didn't want his sister to marry a *ben Torah*. So he came to his sister and told her, “Do you want to know what kind of person your *chasan* is? Come and I will show you how he eats!”

Do you get the story?

Every person, if you catch him in the middle of a physical activity such as eating, is not going to look very impressive at all. Anyone, no matter who he is, if you stand next to his kitchen window and watch him eat, will appear somewhat disgusting.

This brother was not lying. He simply pointed to the person's weak point and emphasized it, a point that most people have, if not all people. This typifies *lashon hara*.

Thus *Chazal* said Haman was the king of *lashon hara*. They meant that no one in the world knew as well as he did how to take the most beautiful thing there is and show its negative side. Speaking good means to see the good side. To see that the other person is wiser than me, or more refined of nature than me. *Lashon hara* means to grab hold of the weak point and say, “Look how disgusting!”

Let us learn to focus on the good in things we see and in people we encounter. ●

