



NEFESH SHIMSHON

DIVREI TORAH ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA AND HOLIDAYS FROM
THE TEACHINGS OF **RABBEINU SHIMSHON DOVID PINCUS ZT"l**

THIS PUBLICATION IS DEDICATED TO THE HATZLACHAH AND ZECHUS OF נחמה ויעקב בן רחל נחמה. MAY THEY GROW TO BE TALMIDEI CHACHAMIM AND OVDEI HASHEM.

PEARLS OF WISDOM FROM THE PARSHAH

Checking Out the Land

וּמָה הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הוּא יֹשֵׁב בָּהּ הַטּוֹבָה הוּא אִם רָעָה. (במדבר יג, יט)

And how is the Land that they live in, if it is good or bad? (*Bemidbar* 13:19)

Why did the *Meraglim* need to know if the Land was good or bad?

It makes sense that they were sent to see if the people living in *Eretz Canaan* were strong or weak. Before going to conquer a country, you need to develop a military strategy, and that depends to a great extent on the defense capabilities of the enemy. It is true that they went *al pi Hashem*, but the whole idea was to do it according to *derech hateva*, according to natural means, as the Ramban explains.

But why did the *Meraglim* need to check out how good the land itself was? That doesn't seem to have anything to do with military strategy or other necessary preparations. It's not like they were just going to conquer one country or another, and if this specific country is not up

to their standards, they will take a different one instead. They knew exactly which country they were going to. This is the land that *Hashem* is giving them; there was no question about that. So why did they need to know at this juncture how qualitative the land was? When they get there, everyone will see for themselves exactly what it is like.

We can answer this question based on *Chazal's* teaching¹ that when the Jewish people would come up to *Beis Hamikdash* for the *Regalim*, for the pilgrimage festivals, the *kohanim* would push aside the curtain hiding the *Kodesh Hakodoshim* so the people could see the *Keruvim* on top of the *Aron Hakodesh*, which embraced one another. The *kohanim* would then say to them:

¹ Yoma 54a.

See how much *Hashem* loves you.²

The two *Keruvim* in embrace represented *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and the Jewish people.

And they would show the people the *Lechem Hapanim* as well.³

This is why *Hashem* wished to show the people in the *Midbar*, by means of the *Meraglim's* report, the nature of *Eretz Yisrael*. Our Land is the place for true connection between us and *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. Only there can we achieve the intimate relationship that we are meant to have with Him. So the people wanted to know the extent of *Hashem's* love for them, by hearing about what kind of a land He is giving them.

However, this brings us to an important question. This question is in fact asked by the *Rishonim*. The *Meraglim* went to see “if it is good or bad.” What kind of a question is this? It says clearly in *Chumash*:

וּלְהַעֲלֵתוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ הַהוּא אֶל אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה
וּיְרַחֲבָה – To bring them up from that land
[of Egypt] to a good and expansive land.⁴

They already knew it is a good land. *Hashem* told them that expressly. The *Rikanti* writes that he has no answer to this question according to

peshat, according to the simple meaning of the text.

We could answer the question based on the Torah's account in *Chumash Bereishis* that “Yaakov was very afraid”⁵ before meeting Eisav, despite *Hashem's* promise to protect him. Why was he afraid? Because maybe a sin he committed will cause *Hashem's* protection to be removed from him.⁶

Along these lines, *Moshe Rabbeinu* was concerned that after *Cheit Ha'eigel*, the Land might have gone downhill. When *Hashem* promised them *Eretz Yisrael*, it surely was a good land, as *Hashem* said it was. But maybe something happened after that.

As an example of how the nature of the land can change, *Chazal* say that after Rabban Gamliel placed a ban on R. Eliezer for failing to concede to the view of the majority of Sages, the world was smitten, “A third in the olives, a third in the wheat and a third in the barley.”⁷

Thus *Moshe Rabbeinu* sent the *Meraglim* to see if *Eretz Yisrael* was still a good land like it was before, and according to this, he will be able to know the extent of *Hashem's* love for them. ●

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid* 22a.

4 *Shemos* 3:10.

5 *Bereishis* 32:8.

6 See *Berachos* 4a.

7 *Bava Metzia* 59a.

לְעִילּוֹי נִשְׁמָת

מוֹדֵד מוֹשֶׁה בֶּן אֱלִיעֶזֶר הַמְבוֹרָגָד ז"ל
וּמוֹדֵד בְּרוּךְ זֶאֵב בֶּן נִפְתָּלִי קְרָאוֹס ז"ל

נִדְבַת נִכְדֵיהֶם ~ עֲטַרְת זָקִים בְּנֵי בָנִים וְהַפָּאֶרֶת בָּנִים אֲבוֹתָם

Shabbos is At the Top

וַיְהִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִדְבָּר וַיִּמְצְאוּ אִישׁ מְקַשֵּׁשׁ עֵצִים בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וּגְוִי וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה
מוֹת יוֹמָת הָאִישׁ רְגוּם אֹתוֹ בְּאֲבָנִים כָּל הָעֵדָה. (במדבר טו, לב-לה)

The people of Yisrael were in the Wilderness, and they found a man gathering wood on the day of *Shabbos*. *Hashem* said to Moshe, the man shall be put to death. The entire congregation shall stone him with stones. (*Bemidbar* 15:32-35)

It is surprising how strictly the Torah treats the matter of *Shabbos* observance. Unlike any other *mitzvah* in the Torah, the severest punishment applies to the tiniest infringement of its laws. Here in the *parshah* we have a case of someone who just picked up a few pieces of wood in the field, and was imprisoned for this until they could clarify the proper punishment for his sin. In the end, he was found liable for *sekilah*, stoning, which is the severest punishment of all.

Let's say someone would burn a whole *Sefer Torah*, *chas v'shalom*. He thereby destroyed *Hashem's* holy Name hundreds and hundreds of times. But he is not liable for the death penalty. Let's say someone eats pork, *chas v'shalom*. He thereby renders his whole soul impure. But he is not liable for the death penalty. Even if someone commits murder, *chas v'shalom*, he is not liable for the same severity of punishment that a *Shabbos* desecrator is. A murderer is liable for death by the sword, whereas someone who does even the lightest work on *Shabbos*, such as turning on a light or skimming the cream off of milk, is liable for stoning, which is the toughest punishment there is.

Why is every little detail of *Shabbos* observance, at least as regards the thirty-nine types of Biblical melachos, treated with such awesome severity?

The following metaphor answers the question. Let's say a person has a wounded arm or leg, and the doctor determines that he needs an operation

in order to heal it. If the surgeon isn't careful and makes the incision an inch or two from the right spot, this could cause significant injury to the patient, but it won't cost him his life.

Now let's say it is an open-heart operation, or brain surgery. In these most of sensitive places, on which one's very life depends, even the smallest error can end in tragedy. Because these are the centers of the body's functioning. They are the core.

This is how it is with *Shabbos kodesh*. It is the heart and the center of all *kedushah*. It is the source of all blessing. The *Shechinah* rests upon it, and it is where a Jewish soul draws its lifeforce from.

So if a person damages *Shabbos*, even if it is a very small infraction, it causes internal injury in the core of his heart and soul, and results in tragedy. It injures the person's *kedushah* and his essential nature as a Jew and his *emunah*. The resulting wound is so great that *Chazal* describe a public *Shabbos* desecrator as being like a non-Jew as regards many *halachos*.

And the reverse is true, as well. If a person keeps *Shabbos* meticulously, he is attached to the source and fountain of *kedushah* and *chayim*, because *Shabbos* resembles *Olam Haba*, which is eternal life with endless *kedushah* and *berachah*. All blessings and all types of sanctity come to rest upon him in his lifetime, as *Chazal* say:

Whoever treats *Shabbos* with pleasure is granted a boundless inheritance.¹ ●

1 *Shabbos* 118b.



Think Good

וַיִּצְיֵאוּ דַבַּת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אֹתָהּ וְגו' הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֹתָהּ אֶרֶץ אֲכָלֶת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הוּא. (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*. He 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.

¹ *Megilah* 13b.

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?

² *Chovos Halevavos* 6:10.

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.

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 Lame and Blind Enemies

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

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כָּל מַכֵּה יְבִסִי וְגוֹי
וְאֵת הַפְּסָחִים וְאֵת הָעֹרִים שְׁנְאֵי 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 their

³ I *Shmuel* 5:8.

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 of 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 statutes 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 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 saw 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*.

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