

פרשת תזריע תש"ה Infected with לשון הרע

At the Thursday night shiur this week, before we began learning, one of the members of the shiur mentioned to me that he knew that I had been with Mrs. Weinstock, עליה השלום, before she passed away. He said, "You know, that must be a very difficult part of your job, and I don't envy you." I told him, "You know what? I can see why you'd think that it's difficult to be near people close to their death, but I honestly feel that I play an important role for people and families at a very difficult time in their lives. So, while it's a sad role to play, I don't find it all that difficult to do, because I know that it's important. But I'll tell you what does get to me, and what I do find hard. I find it most difficult dealing with the לשון הרע – the malicious and vicious slander that people perpetrate in our community. For some reason, so much of the לשון הרע finds its way to me." And, to be honest, this week has proved especially difficult for me.

I'm going to speak about a topic that has been raging in our community for just over a week now; one that I think is particularly sad for a number of reasons. Some time last week, a member of the Orthodox community submitted the names and addresses of each of the women running unlicensed day care businesses in Oak Park and Southfield to the appropriate government authorities. Each of these women received notice that they must shut down, apply for licensure and face the music.

This action raises a number of important issues that I don't want to talk about: the first issue is a הלכה called מסירה, which literally means, "Reporting." Halachah considers the submitting a Jew to the secular authorities to be one of the more hateful and distasteful behaviors that a Jew can engage in. The language is quite forceful against such behavior in almost any circumstance. It is important to state that this action was wrong -- at the very least, inappropriate -- and to many in our community unconscionable, and can only take place under careful rabbinic guidance. But I'm not going to speak about the halachos of Mesirah today. Rather, I will give a shiur over Pesach during the last days, to better explore how the laws of Mesirah apply in America today.

I also don't want to speak about unlicensed businesses in the Orthodox community. That's a problem that we should address, but this is clearly not the way to do it. Rather, today I want to speak of the secondary, communal results from this incident, and the לשון הרע that has been tearing our community apart as a result.

Since this incident took place, I've heard a number of conspiracy theories about who did it. We seem to have a need to talk about it; to speculate who the Oak Park "Deep Throat" is. People throw out names and theories: "Well, I know that so and so has a vendetta against the Goldmans, and they send their son to one of the caregivers, so it must be them. Oh, I know that the Greenbaums took their daughter out of one of those ladies -- so it has to be them." I'm sure that I haven't even heard a fraction of the gossip or the names. It must stop, and it must stop now. Forget about the rest of the community; every person in shul today must commit himself or herself that they will cease and desist. We're just not going to speculate any longer, for two reasons: First and foremost, it has no point, and the Torah forbids it. But, just as importantly, this rampant לשון הרע is tearing our community apart.

It cannot be a coincidental that the primary topic of פרשת תזריע deals with צרעת. צרעת is the physical disease that represents the manifestation of a spiritual deficiency. You don't just come down with צרעת. A person gets צרעת for a reason, as a message. The Midrash teaches us in many places that most often, God afflicts a person with צרעת because that person has spoken לשון הרע – slander, against his or her fellow man.

When a person gets צרעת, the Torah commands him to go to the כהן for evaluation. If the ailment turns out to be צרעת, he must leave the camp and sit on the outskirts of the community until the צרעת clears. Says the Torah: בדרך יושב מחוץ למחנה מושבו – "he must sit alone, his dwelling place outside of the camp." Why must he specifically sit alone? Says Rashi,

הואיל והוא הבדיל בלשון הרע בין איש לאשתו ובין איש לרעהו, אף הוא יבדיל
Because through his speech he separated between a man and his wife and between a person and his friend, so too he must be separated as well.

It's מדה כנגד מדה – tit for tat: you caused a split in the Jewish community; you broke up the unity of a family or friendship – so you must leave that community as well. But I saw a different, powerful reason why the slanderer must sit alone, outside the camp for speaking לשון הרע attributed to Rav Yisroel Lipkin of Salant.

In 1848, a cholera outbreak struck the city of Vilna and its outlying communities. Sadly, many lives were lost to this terrible disease.

As Jews often do in times of pain and difficulty, the Jewish community sought to understand why it had suffered such a terrible decree. So, as the Gemara teaches us, many people were מפשפש במעשיהם -- they analyzed their behavior to see where they might have fallen short in the eyes of God. Among those people, some decided that they should also examine the behavior of others to understand just which people and what sins were responsible for the cholera outbreak.

One day, one of the "Sin seekers" came to the home of Rabbi Lipkin of Salant to tell him that a certain person – and he named names – was engaging in reprehensible behavior that must be addressed, and it would be worthwhile for the rav to immediately involve himself to remove the terrible sin that was taking place.

Rav Yisroel listened to the man, as was his practice, with great patience. When the man finished his story, Rav Yisroel told him, "As you know, the Torah commands the מזורע – the leper – to leave the camp of Israel and sit alone. We all know that צרעת comes from הרע. But the prohibition of הרע לשון isn't just for spreading lies and falsehoods; rather, it's no less due to the fact that people seek out the sins and blemishes only of their fellow man. For this reason, we say to this gossip: If you're such an expert in finding sinful attitudes and behavior, leave the camp. Go meditate by yourself for a while, and in that way you'll be able to reveal the hidden sins not in your friend, but in yourself, that are in no way smaller than his."

For some reason, we have this inner need to speculate about "who did it?" Who turned them in? So we name names. We speculate and theorize, and ruin lives in the process. First and foremost, most of these theories, being that they're about different people, are simply false. So now what have you accomplished: "it must be Mrs. Schwartz. I saw her get into a fight with one of the babysitters once." So people stop calling Mr. Schwartz to fix their leaky faucets; or to do their taxes, or whatever he does for a living. For what? Because of a rumor! לשון הרע ruins lives. It really does kill people, and it ruins communities. A woman called me up and said to me that she can't take the suspicious environment our community has become; each person wondering about the other: is he the one? Did she turn those ladies in?

And what if you, by some dumb luck, happen to be right? Do you have the guts to confront the person and tell them that you think they made a mistake? No, that would take some courage and moral fortitude. It's easier to slander them behind their back, essentially doing exactly the very same thing that you found so abhorrent and reprehensible in the first place. If we're such experts at finding sin in others, perhaps we first need to look inward, and examine our own lives and our own behavior.

And this לשון הרע isn't just about personal attacks. Rather, it tears apart our community as well. People love – and I mean love – to speak negatively about the Vaad. Now, don't get me wrong – the Vaad certainly does have its problems. But give me a break. I was at a wedding this Sunday when someone came up to me and said, "I heard that Café 173 – the new restaurant on Woodward – can't open up because the Vaad won't give them hashgachah because they have a television." I laughed. It really was funny. At least that person had the courage to ask a member of the Vaad. But it's sad. You know, it's become a joke; an easy target. Any problem that goes on in any restaurant or caterer or store suddenly becomes the fault of the Vaad. Of course the Vaad makes mistakes. Everyone does. But so do caterers. And so do store owners. And sometimes people are just plain wrong and the Vaad has to act. But this community has become so habituated to blaming the Vaad and making it a joke that they've destroyed what could be a powerful force in our community.

Right now, our community has serious that we need to deal with: will the JCC in West Bloomfield remain kosher? What about Milk and Honey? What about this childcare issue? Wouldn't it be great if we had a community organization that could address these issues together? Sure it would, but we don't, because this community, through its own doing – through its own הרע לשון, has turned its Vaad into a joke.

So remember this: when you listen to a rumor about the Vaad, and especially when you pass it along, you're hurting yourself and your community. When you pass on a rumor about who turned in the babysitters, you're not just violating a commandment of the Torah. You're destroying people's lives.

At the end of every davener – every single עשרה נעשרה, after we're done with the main davener, we add an additional paragraph. אלקי – God, ושפתי מדבר מרמה, "guard my tongue from evil, and my lips from speaking deceitfully." Don't just say those words. Don't fly through them. We have to ponder them; to stop and think about what we're saying. We have to internalize them. And we have to commit ourselves – right here and now, to get hold of this הרע לשון epidemic before it tears our community even farther apart.