Jewish Tribune – Metzora

**Lashon Hora – Bad or Broken Language?**

How many forms of “bad” speech can you think of?

Well of course there’s lashon hora. But actually, that is quite specific: negative speech which is true.

In truth, there are many other forms of “bad speech”. Here are some: rechilus (peddling negative information); avak lashon hora (speech which incites actual lashon hora); motzi shem ra (slander and spreading negative untruths about other people); sheker (lying); chanifa (flattery) etc. The list is long.

And yet, we only call truthful negative speech “lashon hora”. Surely all the other forms of bad speech listed above are also “bad speech” – namely, “lashon hora”?

I once heard a fascinating insight from Rabbi Hartman. He explained that the word **רע** is also connected to word **רעוע** (Ra-oo-ah) which means shaky or broken. For example, **כותל רעוע** refers to a shaky wall; the word **תרועה** refers to a broken blast of sound.

Speech is meant to build and strengthen relationships. Lashon hora is the antithesis of this. In fact, the word **לשון** is connected to the word **לש** which means to mix together. Speech is meant to bind and build. Lashon hora therefore breaks and weakens relationships.

As we read in last week’s parsha (Vayikra 13,46), the punishment for the person who speaks lashon hora and gets tzoraas is “**בדד ישב**”. He has to sit alone, outside of the camp.

Rashi explains:

**אמרו רבותינו מה נשתנה משאר טמאים לישב בדד?**

**הואיל והוא הבדיל בלשון הרעא בין איש לאשתו ובין איש לרעהו, אף הוא יבדל**

Why is the metzora treated differently to other tamei people? Because he caused division between a man and his wife and between a man and his friend, he too should be separated.

So, the word **רע** not only means bad, but broken. Interestingly, we find that the word **טוב**, the opposite of **רע**, also means **קיום**, to endure. For example, the Ramban (Bereishis 1;4) says on the words **וירא ה' את האור כי טוב,** that He wanted it to last - **שרצה בקיומו לעד**.

Moreover, the Gemoro (Bava Kama 54b) says that the reason the first luchos did not last was because it did not say the word **טוב** there. The second luchos did say **טוב** and therefore endured.

**בדברות הראשונות לא נאמר בהם טוב, ובדברות האחרונות נאמר בהם טוב**

So yes, there are many forms of “bad speech”. Rechilus; avak lashon hora; motzi shem ra; sheker; chanifa are all not good. But lashon hora is singled out because it has the additional and dangerous ability to cause division and break down relationships.

Lashon hora highlights truths but just focuses on the negative. If the speech involved lies or slander, there is often less damage, but when speech involves focusing on negative things which are true, that can be very damaging and strains even good relationships. It is therefore lashon hora which earns the dubious title of bad speech. Speech which is not just bad, but breaks and disunites.

The lesson is clear. Our speech should be used for what it was intended. To build and uplift. Particularly over Pesach. The Arizal famously says that Pesach is made up of the words Peh Sach – a mouth that talks. That is why there is much emphasis on speaking on Seder night.

But not just on Pesach, in everyday life and conversation too. As the Gemoro in Arachin (15b) says:

 מה תקנתו של מספרי לשון הרע? אם תלמיד חכם הוא יעסוק בתורה

What is the remedy for people who speak lashon hora? If he is learned, let him speak words of Torah. And let us all use the gift of speech to build, encourage and uplift.

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