

SLANDERING PEOPLE

written by Chaim Kramer
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One utters a word: it only takes a minute, sometimes less. Before you know it, the remark is out and can *never* be retrieved. If something is said about someone else, even unintentionally, the damage has been done – and sometimes that damage is fatal. The slanderer has succeeded in separating two people who would otherwise have been at peace with each other. He has ruined their accord and tranquility. He has also destroyed his own peacefulness – perhaps forever.

Well, almost forever. the Zohar (III:47a) states: “The sin of slander is so severe, there is no repentance for it.” Though

this opinion is later reversed in the Zohar, it does give us an inkling of how seriously we should take the prohibition against slander. The Talmud takes this further: "Slander separates man from man, husband from wife. It is as if the slanderer sunders the Jews from God; akin to idolatry" (*Erkhein* 15ff). Rebbe Nachman relates all this to the fact that the person who slanders and spreads gossip destroys the chances for peace – both individual peace and universal peace (*Likutey Moharan* I, 14:12).

Rebbe Nachman teaches: Slander actually derives from imagination, the ability to fantasize. Both humans and animals have this faculty (albeit in different manifestations). But man was created to rise above imagination – to attain knowledge and intelligence. And the more one slanders, the more he descends into fantasy (*Likutey Moharan* I, 54:5).

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People readily judge others according to their actions, rather than by their actual motives. The slanderer only surmises the reason for the other person having behaved in a specific way. He doesn't *know* for certain. he judges with presumption, with his power of imagination, and not according to reality. He slanders to satisfy his imagination! The slanderer is thus compared to an animal. he reads into a person's actions something that may never have been there.

The first step in guarding your tongue would be to study the laws of *lashon hara* (slander). Undoubtedly the most thorough work on this topic is *Chofetz Chaim*, by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1840-1933); translated into English as *Guard Your Tongue* by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin.

A second step involves working to acquire the quality of humility (*Likutey Moharan* I, 197). When you think of yourself as insignificant, you will not be so quick to criticize and

slander others. When teaching about slander, my Rosh Yeshivah would say, “A person busy thinking about himself has no time to think of others” Quite simply, what he meant was that when a person thinks about himself – how distant he is from perfecting his personality improving himself and acquiring good qualities – he won’t spend his time and efforts attempting to belittle and bring dishonor to others.

A third step, naturally, is prayer. Practice a lot of *hitbodedut*, asking God to spare you from situations where slander may be spoken. If you find yourself in a group of people or with a person who speaks slander, quickly say, “God! Please save me from slander!” and try, quickly, to find a way out of the situation. If you can’t, make a determined effort to disbelieve the slander you are being told.

“A person’s mouth is like a millstone,” said Reb Avraham Chazan. “As long as one keeps a millstone grinding it produces what to eat. Keep your mouth grinding, keep speaking words of Torah and *hitbodedut*. Move your lips! Move your lips!” (*Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Rosen*). The power of speech is a gift which God gave exclusively to man. We must use it positively. Be determined never to misuse it. Flee from slander. Don’t say it. Don’t repeat it. Don’t even listen to it. Don’t have anything to do with it.

(From the book [Crossing the Narrow Bridge: A Practical Guide to Rebbe Nachman’s Teachings](#) – chapter 10 – PEACE)