

Can Jews Slander Gentiles?

PARSHA INSIGHTS - CHUKAS BALAK (5759)

MYTH: LOSHON HORA ABOUT A NON-JEW IS FINE

“You sit, you speak against your brother; you slander your own mother’s son” (*Tehillim* [Psalms] 50:20). What does this verse have to do with today’s *parsha* [Torah portion]? Using commentaries, the *Midrash Rabba* 6:9 on *Ki Saitzai* associates this *pasuk* [verse] with an incident of *loshon hora* [evil gossip] in our weekly Torah reading.

The *Midrash* explains in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: If you have accustomed your tongue to speak against your brother who is NOT a member of your nation, you will eventually slander members of *Klal Yisroel* [the Jewish people]. That is the meaning of the verse in *Tehillim* - speaking against any sort of brother, even a non-Jewish one, will lead to evil gossip about fellow Jews. Where do we see it in today’s *parsha*?

The *Radal* clarifies as follows. The “brother” who is NOT a part of *Bnai Yisroel* [the Children of Israel] is Aisav, the nation descending from Yaacov *Avinu*’s [Jacob our forefather’s] brother. This is apparent in *Parshas Ki Saitzai* 23:8, where we are reminded of our relationship with Aisav. If you denigrate him, you will end up speaking *loshon hora* about an individual who IS part of your nation. To whom does the *Midrash* refer? The answer lies in today’s *parsha*, in 20:14 through 21:9.

Bnai Yisroel were forced to encircle the land of Edom, because the nation of Edom (another name for Aisav) did not allow us to enter their territory. As a result, we became impatient and spoke against Hashem and Moshe *Rabainu* [Moses our teacher], complaining about the difficult journey and perceived lack of satisfactory provisions. What is the message of the *Midrash*? First, the Jews condemned their “brother who is not part of *Bnai Yisroel*”— the nation of Aisav, because they forbade us to pass through their land. Soon after, the Torah records the slander uttered against Hashem and Moshe. One *loshon hora* led to the next. That is the meaning of the original *pasuk* [verse] we quoted from *Tehillim*. Evil gossip about your brother, Aisav, will result in similar harsh words against your own mother’s son - a fellow Jew.

The *Radal* therefore concludes that one may not needlessly convey negative information about a gentile. The exception, of course, is if the purpose is constructive, as in a case where the speaker wishes to save the listener from financial, physical, or emotional harm. In such cases, when certain conditions are met, the words are not considered *loshon hora*, whether said about a Jew or a non-Jew. True, we must mock idolatrous PRACTICES and paganistic LIFESTYLES, which are antithetical to Torah values. But the people themselves, as humans created in the image of Hashem, are not to be objects of derision and ridicule. This is proven from the *Midrash* regarding the nation of Aisav, according to the *Radal*.

Before engaging in useless, derogatory discussions of political candidates’ personal lives, or similar dialogues, we must be reminded of this *Midrash*. What does one gain from such conversations? Quite to the contrary. Our spiritual health will be enhanced if we consistently seek and accentuate people’s positive attributes. With Hashem’s help, our efforts will improve the quality of life in our universe.

By Rabbi Moshe Heigh

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