

# *Don't You Believe It!*

PARSHA INSIGHTS - TAZRIA METZORA (5759)

## **PLEASE HELP PREVENT EAR POLLUTION**

*Chazal* [our Sages] inform us that *tzoraas* [a leprous-like affliction], the supernatural disease described and analyzed in today's *parshiyos* [Torah portions], is caused by many factors, as we have discussed before. A significant transgression that brings *tzoraas* is *loshon hora* [evil gossip] (*Gemara Erchin* 15B). It is an appropriate time to review some of the laws of *loshon hora*. We will deal with listening to and believing evil gossip.

Is **speaking** *loshon hora* the only prohibition, or may one not even believe it? How about just hearing it without believing it? If forbidden, is the sin Scriptural (*min haTorah* [from the Torah]), or is it *d'rabanan* [a rabbinic] prohibition? Let us begin exploring the answers to these questions.

In *Sefer* [the book] *Chofetz Chaim* (prohibition 2 and section 6:1), it is explained that **believing *loshon hora* is forbidden from the Torah**. This *din* [law] is clear from the *Gemara Pesachim* 118A and *Maccos* 23A, based on the *pasuk* [verse] in *Parshas Mishpatim* 23:1. It means that someone who hears an evil report and accepts it as derogatory has transgressed a Torah prohibition. Whether he intentionally listened or just happened to hear the information, it is strictly forbidden to pass a negative judgement on someone based on what has been heard. There are very few and rare exceptions to this rule, as outlined by the *Chofetz Chaim*. If the listener researches the matter on his own, and he then discovers that the report is true **BASED ON WHAT HE HAS FOUND OR SEEN PERSONALLY**, not based on what he heard, it is no longer considered believing *loshon hora*. Rather, he is seeing it for himself.

Is this to say that whenever we hear derogatory words we must dismiss them as totally false, assuming that the speaker is lying? The *Chofetz Chaim* in the *B'air Maim Chaim* 6:1, based on Rabainu Yona, states that this is not so. If it is possible to believe the FACTS that were told, but to interpret them in a positive light, this may be done. In general, what is the proper approach? If the facts as stated will definitely create a negative impression of the person, the listener must ignore the report, or at least its derogatory aspects. If the same information can be analyzed further and interpreted for good, this is permissible.

Here is a simple example. "Shloimie did not show up for *davening* [prayers] in *shul* [synagogue] today!" The speaker meant to denigrate Shloimie by portraying him as lazy or delinquent. May the listener even believe that Shloimie failed to attend services? Must he convince himself that since this information is negative, it must be entirely false? We have shown that he MAY believe this fact, but he is required to interpret it positively. Shloimie was not feeling well, was occupied with a family emergency that could not wait, etc. Judging others favorably is an endless discussion. The point is that we are permitted to conclude that Shloimie did not come to *shul*, but we are **NOT PERMITTED** to render a negative judgement.

It has been established that **believing *loshon hora* is forbidden by the Torah**. What about **intentionally listening** to *loshon hora*, planning not to believe it? In 6:2, the *Chofetz Chaim* declares that the Torah bans such behavior also. There is an important distinction, however, between believing and hearing *loshon hora*. If the negative information is relevant to the listener, he is permitted to listen (but not yet accept it as absolutely true) for a practical benefit. Examples are prospective business partners, *shidduchim* [marital prospects], and employees. **WHEN ALL THE CONDITIONS ARE MET**, one may seek out and give ear to derogatory words, which he needs to hear. This is limited to the facts that might affect him by causing him potential monetary, emotional, spiritual, or physical harm. He is allowed to take precautions to protect himself based on the negative report. Still, he must not internalize what he has heard as genuine truth, unless he researches further and arrives at the realization through personal experience or the like. These *dinim* [laws] are quite complex at times. Perhaps we will discuss them at a later date. The requirement to meet all pertinent conditions cannot be stressed enough. Thorough study and review of the laws is essential.

The bottom line is that even listening to *loshon hora* on purpose is forbidden by Torah law. After lengthy analysis, the *Chofetz Chaim* proves this from the *Gemara* and *poskim* [authorities on Jewish law]. It is discussed in section 6, *B'air Maim Chaim* 2.

Furthermore, hearing (without believing) evil gossip by chance, not having planned to listen, carries a *rabbinic* prohibition. It is not the same caliber as intending to hear, and it is certainly not as serious as actually believing, but it still has to be avoided. In 6:5, the *Chofetz Chaim* outlines the rules for such situations.

Today's point is that *loshon hora* is lethal to our spiritual health. Every once in awhile, a reminder is needed about this matter. The *parshiyos* that talk about *tzoraas* awaken us to the "ailment" which was brought about by slander and gossip. At the time that *tzoraas* actually happened, the effects of *loshon hora* were much more obvious than they are today. Without visible signs and afflictions, we need to arouse ourselves with study of the laws and Torah lessons. Even in these days, the effects of *loshon hora* ARE often quite apparent. How many lives have been shattered by negative conversation? How many *shidduchim* have been broken up by damaging words, which need not have been uttered? How many people suffer anguish from the insults of others? Looking at the positive angle, how often can we brighten up someone's day with a friendly "Good Morning" or a few encouraging words? This is all true, but without *tzoraas*, it takes a bit more work for us to remain aware of the ramifications of *loshon hora*.

Our topic today has been listening to and believing *loshon hora*. Believing, or deliberately listening without believing - both are Torah prohibitions. When one accidentally overhears *loshon hora* and does not believe it, a *rabbinic* prohibition is transgressed in some cases. If he makes no effort to reprimand the speaker, change the topic, terminate the conversation, plug his ears, exit the premises, or defend the victim, whichever is most appropriate, he has not acted properly. (Indeed, there are circumstances where failure to object can involve even Torah violations.)

It is worthwhile to take this to heart before opening one's mouth. Are we prepared to cause OTHERS to sin because of our speech? One caught in a situation where *loshon hora* suddenly erupts is immediately put on the defensive. He must try to halt the statement, change the subject, leave the room, cover his ears, etc. (The *halachos* [laws] are extensive; we have merely made mention of them now.) Is it fair to put so much pressure on innocent bystanders? This can be likened to a smoker who blows his toxic fumes into the lungs of others, disregarding the health danger he is posing. If he will not cease, they are forced to take measures to protect themselves!

**While eating at a *Shabbos* [Sabbath] morning *kiddush* [sanctification of the meal], partaking of a festive *Shabbos* meal, chatting with friends at work or school, or at any social gathering, this is a lesson for all of us to remember.** May Hashem aid us in observing these *halachos* meticulously. This will clear the spiritual air we breathe, making the world a pleasant place in which to live.

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