

That Dog Insulted My Ancestor

PARSHA INSIGHTS - MATOS & MAS'AI (5757)

CAUTION: LOSHON HORA MAY LEAD TO BARKING

Here is an astonishing story about the *Vilna Gaon* (Rav Eliyahu of Vilna), otherwise known as the *Gra*. Initially, it appears to have no connection with this week's Torah portion, but soon it will become quite clear that it is based on a *pasuk* [verse] in *Mattos*. The story is printed in the very end of the *Chofetz Chaim's sefer* [book] *Shaim Olam*.

How serious is the sin of a person who informs on a Jew before the gentiles! The *Chofetz Chaim* remarks that his transgression is too great to bear, and he is likened to an *apikores* [heretic]. He is compared to one who denies the very tenets of our faith, such as the authenticity of Torah and the truth of *techiyas hamaisim* [the resurrection of the dead]. For such a person, *Gehinnom* is his destination and permanent place of residence. The *kabbalists* [masters of the esoteric teachings of Torah], have stated that such a *ba'al loshon hora* [master of evil gossip] will often return to this world after death, reincarnated in the form of a barking dog.

The *Chofetz Chaim* records that he heard a story about the *Gra*, which supports this assertion. The *Vilna Gaon* accepted a self-imposed *galus* [exile]. Many *gedolim* [great Torah scholars] did this in order to humble themselves and be anonymous for certain periods of time. It definitely deflates the ego when one usually recognized as a spiritual leader and giant goes unnoticed. Imagine walking into a room and nobody stands up or even realizes he has entered, since they do not recognize him! Not that these *gedolim* had problems of conceitedness. Rather, they constantly strove to enhance their *midos* [character traits], undertaking practices and self-disciplinary actions to further their closeness to Hashem. One way to "be alone with Hashem" for awhile is to leave one's community and go unnoticed for a given amount of time.

During his travels, the *Gra* once hired a Jewish wagon driver. While pulling the wagon that seated the *Gaon* and the driver, the horse veered off the road into a privately owned garden. The gentile owner viewed this mishap from afar, and he ran to the wagon, intending to strike the *Gra*, whom he considered blameworthy. In telling the story, the *Gra* reported that he was very tempted to defend himself by stating that he was not at fault; it was the driver who had not directed his animal properly. However, he withstood this urge and remained silent.

In reviewing the incident, the *Gra* later said that if he had answered the non-Jew in the manner he considered, thereby defending himself, he would have entered the category of "*malshin*" [one who informs on a Jew] in front of a *goy* [non-Jew]. This is to say that even if the wagon driver HAD been liable for the damage his horse caused, his only requirement would be to compensate monetarily for the loss. A beating from the gentile was certainly unlawful, so if the *Gra* would have caused that driver to get beaten, it would be considered *malshinus* [an unjustified report on a Jew] - one which causes cruel and unlawful punishment.

To emphasize the gravity of the sin of *malshinus* [informing], the *Vilna Gaon* added a startling comment. He remarked that if he had been guilty of being a *malshin* [informer], he would likely have to return to this world through the process of transmigration. In what form would he be forced to reappear? A barking dog, of course! The *Gaon* added something else, more shocking than what preceded. All his Torah (and we know how much Torah that was - he wasn't called THE GAON for nothing) and *mitzvos* [good deeds] would not even help him avoid this awful fate. The *Chofetz Chaim* says that all this was told to him by Harav Yehoshua (author of *Chosen Yehoshua*), who heard it from the *Av Bais Din* [Elder of the Jewish court] of Minsk, who in turn heard it from his *rebbe* [rabbi/teacher] - Rav Chaim of Volozhin, close disciple of the *Gra* himself. The conclusion of the *Chofetz Chaim* is: "...from all this, a person should know how to be careful from matters like this all of his days".

The anecdote is fascinating and inspiring, but where does the Torah hint that a serious *ba'al loshon hora* might return to this world as a barking dog? The *Peleh Yoetz*, a classic *sefer* [book] on *mussar* [self-improvement], points out that the last *pasuk* of *Parshas Mattos* indicates this. "Even for sins which appear minor, and many neglect them, like *loshon hora* - the person is reincarnated as a barking dog. The allusion to this is (the last *pasuk* of *Mattos*) '...and he called it *Novach*' - the word 'lah' - 'it' - is spelled לָהּ *lamid hey*, which stands for *loshon hora*."

Here is the *pshat* [plain meaning] in the *Peleh Yoetz*. In *Perek Lamid Bais* [chapter 32], the *shevatim* [tribes] of Gad, Reuven, and half of Menashe were possessing land east of the *Yardain* [Jordan]. Novach was from *Shaivet* [the tribe of] Menashe. In *Pasuk Mem Bais* [verse 42], the Torah informs us that Novach conquered a place called Knas, and he called it Novach after himself. The words of the Torah are “*vayikra LAH Novach bishmo*” [called it “*Novach*” after himself]. If you focus on the two words “*lah Novach*”, the hint becomes clear. “*Lah*” is spelled “*lamid hey*”. This stands for *loshon hora*. What is the next word? *Novach*, which is the exact root which means barking. So, *lamid hey* - *loshon hora* - leads to *novach* - barking. Thus, says the *Peleh Yoetz*, basing his comments on the books of *kabalah* [study of the esoteric], we are warned to avoid *loshon hora*, which could sometimes lead to being reincarnated as a dog.

This is not difficult to comprehend, since *Chazal* [our Sages] say that all Hashem’s rewards and punishments are somehow measure for measure, although we don’t always see it clearly. This person abused the faculty of speech; as a result, he will come back without the ability to talk. Since he used his voice to denigrate others, the noise coming from his throat will be the annoying bark of a dog. Because he did not sanctify his power of speech, which distinguishes humans from animals, he will be reincarnated as an animal. We know that the level of existence called “*medaber*” [those who talk] refers to humans; he lowered himself, by not using speech appropriately, to the notch below this - “*chai*” [animal life]. Furthermore, the dog sometimes symbolizes shamelessness and cruelty. The fearless, brazen nation of Amalek is compared to a *kelev* [dog]; see *Rashi* on *Beshalach*, *Perek Yud Zayin*, *Pasuk Ches* [17:8]. Also take note of the *Iyun Yaacov* on *Sotah* 49. The *Gemara* there states that in the time before *Moshiach* [Messiah] arrives, “the face of the generation will be like the face of a dog”. *Iyun Yaacov* clarifies for us that people will be “*az ponim*” [shameless], the way dogs sometimes are.

All this shows that the *ba'al loshon hora*, who exhibits cruelty with his condemning words, and who abuses the power of speech, resembles the *kelev* - the dog. That could be why the *kabalists* derive from our *pasuk* - “*LAH NOVACH*” - that the habitual, destructive speaker of *loshon hora* runs the risk of returning as a barking dog. Even the *Vilna Gaon*, genius of Torah and master of piety, feared this fate if he were not careful with his holy tongue. May we remember to speak only positively about people, using our mouths to promote peace and spread Torah in the world.

By Rabbi Moshe Heigh

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