

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt”l

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Parshios Tazria – Metzarah

“AND THESE ARE THE RULES OF THE METZORA...” (VAYIKRA 14:2)

One cannot claim that no one will know

THE MIDRASH (Devarim Rabbah 6:10) quotes a verse in Koheles (5:5) where Shlomo HaMelech discusses the sin of *loshon hara* and its consequences: “Don’t let your mouth sin against your body...” When one speaks *loshon hara*, the Midrash explains, he begins a chain reaction that causes his possessions and eventually his body to be punished with *tzara’as* – a spiritual disease with physical manifestations. The Midrash continues to explain that one cannot claim that no one will know that he spoke evil – Hashem sends an angel who listens and reports every word that one says. “If you do not believe [this],” the Midrash tells us, remember that Miriam spoke *loshon hara* and she was punished for her slight indiscretion.

How will the story of Miriam change his attitude?

We must assume that the Midrash is speaking to a believer in Hashem and the Torah. Otherwise, it would be purposeless for the Midrash to quote verses from Koheles and from other sources. A heretic would just shrug them all off. If, however, we are talking to a Jew who has *emunah* in Hashem, how can the Midrash give the final advice, “If you do not believe [that you will get *tzara’as*]”? How can this faithful Jew, who accepts Hashem’s existence and the Divine origin of the Torah we quote to him, not believe that Hashem will punish him for his sins? Furthermore, if he does, in fact, lack this this fundamental belief in reward and punishment, how will the story of Miriam change his attitude? Why would this incident be more effective than the verses we already quoted to him about *tzara’as*?

We need only focus on an illustration, an example

The Midrash is revealing an eye-opening insight to us about the vulnerability of the human mind. Apparently, even if we are complete *ma’aminim* – believers – we can be swept up in the “temporary insanity” of the sin of *loshon hara*. This “madness” can create a hole in the solid wall of our *emunah* and cause us to disregard and momentarily forget the most basic concepts; ideas that we would never question were we not in the grips of the desire to speak *loshon hara*. This “amnesia” allows to speak evil of our friends and show no concern for the severe punishment that awaits us.

Nevertheless, there is an amazing remedy provided by the Torah. This “temporary insanity” can be easily cured, using one of the key tools of *mussar*: using *tziyur chushi*, or vivid imagery. We need only focus on an illustration, an example of the punishment. Picturing in our minds – as vividly as possible – the story of Miriam, can snap us back to reality. This technique is so potent because a visual image speaks to the emotions, the most powerful forces in determining our actions. Even one being blinded and confused by the passions of sin, who has denied basic principles of our faith, can be redirected onto the right path by the potent medicine of visualization.

May we realize our greatness but also our frailties, and never let down our guard against the *yetzer hara*. Let us utilize the effective techniques of *mussar*, especially vivid imagery, to awaken and mobilize our emotions to fight the power of the passions, so that we emerge triumphant in our battles for spiritual growth and perfection.