

### **Parshat Behaalotcha – Good v/s bad tongue**

I would like to speak with you today about the Mitzva which I think is the most difficult to fulfill. It is so difficult to fulfill that I am sure we transgress it so one but several times a day. This Mitzvah tries to prevent something which is so common for us, that instead of recognizing we are doing something bad, we tend to be self-indulgent and to justify our behavior: We say that it is not so wrong, that is human, and that saying is a sin it is actually an exaggeration.

For Judaism this prohibition is very important: It is so important that according to Jewish Law, when we disobey this commandment we are actually violating 31 Mitzvot of the Torah. We can see its importance also in the fact that from the long list of 43 sins that we read in Yom Kippur as part of the Vidui (the confession of sins), this prohibition is mentioned 12 times in different ways. According to the Rabbis in the Talmud, this transgression was the responsible of the destruction of the Temple and the Exile of our people for 2000 years. And finally, many Rabbis considered that doing it, it was like killing someone, or even worse, because in a murder the murdered kills one person, but in this case it can harm not only the victim but his/her all family and permanently.

Do you know about what sin I am talking about? Lashon Hará, which means literally “A bad tongue” and refers to speaking bad about someone or doing harm while we speak, and this is a subject that is part of our Parsha Behaalotcha.

Lashon Hara affects humanity since its origins and has evolved in different ways until today: As in the past, it is still present today, but the difference is that today we have many more ways to do it: We have cell phones that we can carry with us so we can speak wherever we want and whenever we want, we can say what we think in a text message, we can send an email where we can do Lashon Hara sending it to many people, and also we can use social media to do Lashon Hara and speak bad about someone. You can destroy the life of someone posting bad comments, pictures or videos in Facebook or YouTube.

Maybe one of the reasons why it is so easy to commit Lashon Hara is because we don't see immediately the consequences of our behavior: We do it but we don't see in that moment and that place the other person suffering. That is why the Rabbis compare Lashon Hara with shooting and arrow (They said “What you say in Roma will kill in Syria”).

The Torah says “Curse be the one who attacks his neighbor secretly”. And the Rabbis ask: “What does it mean “to attack secretly”? And they answer: This is Lashon Hara because we harm by distance, in an anonymous way.

But I think Lashon Hara, at the same time, shows our worst side. This is like the story of a woman who used to speak very bad about her neighbor. Every day she used to see the neighbor through the window hanging the clothes in the backyard, after washing them, but the clothes always were very dirty. “How messy she is” – Used to say the woman. Until one moment the window needed to be replaced, and she realized that the clothes were actually clean, and it was the window that was dirty!

This is what happens with Lashon Hara: It teaches that before speaking about others, we have to check ourselves to see how “clean” we are... That we cannot speak or think about other's flaws, because we also have ours.

Now, what is exactly Lashon Hara? Is it refers to gossip? Can it include, for example, telling something about someone which actually happened, and because it is true is permitted? Is this the same as changing the truth in order to harm somebody else?

The rabbis of the past were divided about how to exactly define what is Lashon Hara: Some of them include in the definition what is called “rechilut”. Rechilut means gossip and it refers to

repeating rumors, no matter if they are true or false, probably modifying or exaggerating what really happened, either being conscious or not conscious about that. Then there are Rabbis that use a broader definition. For them Lashon Hara is “the action of saying negative comments about someone, no matter if they are true or untrue”. And this is what we find in our Parsha, when Myrian and Aaron speak in a negative way about his brother Moses because of a wife he took (we are not really sure about who this woman was, but we are going to speak about that after the Kiddush).

And finally we have what is called “Hotzaat shem ra” which is defined as modifying the truth, consciously or unconsciously, with the consequence of doing harm to a person. This can apply not only to humans but also to an object or to a Country, because we will find the next week how the 10 spies did “hotzaat shem ra”, spoke bad about the Land of Israel, modifying the truth and causing the whole generation to die in the desert.

But even our Rabbis were divided about the exact definition and the limits of “Lashon Hara”, I think the message is that we have to try to be careful, and to try to avoid any type of speech that can harm the life of a human being, because our words are so powerful, that they have the potential of destroying lives, families, friendship and entire communities.

So now that we have reviewed some of the characteristics of Lashon Hara and we learnt about the consequences of doing it, I would like to share with you an invitation (And I don't do it from a place of arrogance, pretending that I am above this problem but recognizing that this is a challenge for everyone. The invitation is trying to transform this Mitzvah of not doing Lashon Hara, from being a negative commandment to a positive one: Why not to put the emphasis, not in what we don't have to do, but in what we should do?

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin proposes to incorporate a new type of Mitzvah which he calls “The commandment of Lashon Hatov” (The “good talk” or “good speech” ). Lashon Hatov doesn't mean that we don't have to avoid doing Lashon Hara (we certainly had to fight against it!) but it means adding to that internal fight the challenge of identifying good things to say, about the persons whom we are talking about.

So why not, when we are going to repeat a rumor, or when we are very close to say something bad about somebody else, to try to find a good quality about this person? Lashon Hatov, the good speech, it is not about giving compliments: It is about trying to choose in a regular basis not to pick up the negative things and picking up what is positive: For example, instead of complaining about how bad our children behaved today, we can say “Today it was a difficult day for them, but they are really good kids”. Or if we want to complain about how our boss spoke to us today, doing lashon hatov would mean trying to say: “Well, probably my boss didn't intend to do that, he is worried about his mother's health...”, or “You know, sometimes I also speak rudely when I am stressed”.

Now, doing Lashon Hatov won't always be easy. Probably in some situations we will feel that we have the right not to find the good quality of a person. Maybe we will be so upset that demanding from ourselves to do Lashon Hatov will be something impossible to accomplish, but fortunately those situations don't happen very frequently and probably with some time, patience and healing, we will be able to look for the good even when in the past it seemed to be an impossible thing to do.

Will we be able to do Lashon Hatov, to do the “good speech”? Will we be able to transform the negative in positive, and trying to build a better society, a better family and a better community? This is the challenge for this Shabat, so let's give it a try!

Shabbat Shalom!