

Parashat Tazria

The Peddler's Lesson: Listen To Your Messages

There is a famous Medrash that tells of a peddler who came into a city and inquired "Who wants longevity? Who wants longevity?" Rav Yannai inquired of the peddler what he was selling. The peddler directed Rav Yannai to the pasuk in Tehillim: "Who is the man who desires life...? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit" [Tehillim 34:13-14]. Rav Yannai commented that he never understood the interpretation of this pasuk until this peddler taught him about it.

All the commentaries are bothered by an obvious question on this Medrash: how is it that Rav Yannai never understood the interpretation of a straightforward pair of pasukim [verses] in Tehillim, until a peddler explained it to him? It would seem that there is nothing subtle to understand here! What did the peddler see that Rav Yannai did not see?

The Shemen HaTov explains that certainly Rav Yannai understood that a person who desires life needs to guard his tongue. But Rav Yannai had understood that the only way to guard one's tongue from evil is to become a hermit. Rav Yannai thought that cleanliness of speech required being somewhat anti-social. Rav Yannai believed that mixing with society, having friends and engaging in conversation was a sure formula for NOT being able to live up to the standards of "Who is the man who desires life".

Rav Yannai was shocked that the PEDDLER was "selling" this verse. Peddlers are known for their 'gift of gab'. They travel from city to city and from house to house and have plenty to tell and plenty to share and plenty to say. In classic Hebrew literature, the peddler was always portrayed as a gossip. The very name of the profession (Rochel) is related to the word for tale-bearing (Rechilus).

Rav Yannai's revelation was not so much the interpretation of the pasuk but the teacher of the lesson: "If the peddler can tell me that a person such as he can be careful about Lashon HaRa (gossip), then my approach must change. I now realize that a person can intermix with society, talk, be sociable and still be careful not to speak Lashon HaRa."

Rabbi Layzer Levine, the father-in-law of Rabbi Berel Wein, grew up in the house of the Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Mayer Kagan. [Rabbi Kagan was the author of numerous works of Halacha and ethics, but is known by the name of his largest work on the laws of gossip, "Chofetz Chaim" ("desires life", from the passage in Psalms quoted above).] It is well-known that the Chofetz Chaim was himself the paradigm of someone who was careful not to speak Lashon HaRa. Therefore, we imagine that he was a person of very few words, who rarely spoke to those around him.

Rabbi Wein heard from his father-in-law that the opposite was true. The Chofetz Chaim was constantly talking! He was constantly engaged in conversation with people. And nonetheless, he was careful about Lashon HaRa.

That is what Rav Yannai learned from the peddler.

In addition, there is another lesson here. Many times in life we are bombarded with messages. Some of these messages are very important. Some of these messages may come from the most unlikely of sources. Even the lowly peddler can deliver a powerful message to the great Rav Yannai. However, we must listen for such messages. Someone like Rav Yannai, who is constantly open to messages, will constantly learn and constantly grow. “From all my teachers I have become wise” [Tehillim 119:99] person must have the ability to learn from every teacher and from every situation. The messages are out there. Our job is to remain awake enough to receive them.

Questions

1. If the main cause of Tzoraas is Loshon Horah, why does it not always appear on the lips or the tongue?
2. Why is the Metzora sentenced to solitary confinement?