

FORGIVING LASHON HARA

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

This is a personal story of my experience with *lashon hara* (לִשׁוֹן הָרַע; literally, evil tongue)—that is, what’s commonly referred to as gossip, which is forbidden (Leviticus 19:16 and 25:17)—and the effect it had on Magidah Khulda bat Sarah’s and my life together.

Many years ago I had a close friend, before Khulda and I became a couple and were married. After Khulda and I got together, my friend and I began spending less time together, and he became jealous of my relationship with Khulda. We knew this to be true because he actually told us so on one occasion.

At the time, Khulda and I were working on a project together as congregational community organizers, and my friend wrote a letter full of *lashon hara* to my employer. In the letter he said a number of very damaging and malicious things about us, which, incidentally, were not true. My employer was a major figure in the world of community organizing, with extensive statewide and national contacts, and he spread the *lashon hara* to others who could affect our ability to work as professional organizers.

Khulda and I had organized the project, which had brought together 16 congregations, representing virtually every faith tradition, to begin working together on a variety of community problems that their members were facing—drugs and gangs, lack of affordable housing, high suicide rates, etc. The project collapsed, with all of its extraordinary potential lost, ultimately because of the *lashon hara* about us. Needless to say, we lost our jobs and, as a consequence, we lost our home. Our reputations were permanently besmirched.

Undoubtedly, according to the teachings of the Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kegan, 1839-1933), my friend had not satisfied the conditions that would have had to be met to justify his *lashon hara*—to wit: (1) that he had firsthand knowledge that the negative information about us was true; (2) that he had sought to correct the wrong by private communication with us; (3) that he did not exaggerate in reporting the negative information; and that (4) there was a realistic expectation that publicizing the negative information would solve the problem or, at least prevent further damage.

At the time we were incredibly hurt and angry about what this friend had done, although we were

prepared to forgive him if he would apologize and make amends.

Traditionally, *teshuvah* (repentance) for speaking *lashon hara* entails five steps:

- Regretting the misdeed;
- Confessing the misdeed privately to God;
- Making a commitment not to repeat the misdeed in the future;
- Making amends or repaying the damages caused by the misdeed; and
- Asking forgiveness for the misdeed.

Making amends requires that the speaker go to all those who heard his *lashon hara* and explain to them that what he said was incorrect. Moreover, asking to be forgiven entails making an apology. Yosef Ben Shlomo Hakohen points out: “We need to remember that an apology should be an apology and not a disguised justification of the original action which caused pain. It should not be, ‘Well I am sorry that you were hurt, but the action which hurt you was justified.’ That is not a real apology. We need to remember that if an apology is to be accepted by the heart of the wounded person, the apology must come from the heart. The apology should be a sincere expression of regret for the hurt caused, and it should also be an acknowledgement that the hurtful action was wrong. And an apology should include a promise to be more sensitive and understanding in the future.”

The worst of our situation was that my friend refused to acknowledge his behavior, never mind expressing regret, apologizing, or making amends, even though we made it clear to him that his *lashon hara* had caused extraordinarily damaging consequences for us. But he wouldn’t budge, so we were adamant—no apology and no amends, so no forgiveness. In the back of my mind I assumed that eventually he would come around, that I didn’t have to extend myself beyond what I had already done. But then, tragically, he died, barely into his middle age.

I realized instantly that, regardless of whether I was in the right, I would have to carry this unfinished business around in my heart and head for the rest of my life. It’s said that there are three victims of *lashon hara*: The person who does the *lashon hara*, the person who is the object of the *lashon hara*, and the people who listen to the *lashon hara*. But what’s usually not talked about is who gets victimized when forgiveness is not forthcoming.

Of course, it goes without saying that forgiveness is only due to the individual who seeks it with an acknowledgment of wrongdoing and willingness to make amends. Although in the case of *lashon hara*, we are not obligated to extend forgiveness even in those circumstances, because the damage can never be completely repaired.

There is a traditional story that illustrates this point: A man went about his town telling malicious lies about the rabbi. Later, he realized the wrong he had done, and began to feel remorse. He went to the rabbi and begged his forgiveness, saying he would do anything he could to make amends. The rabbi told the man, "Take a feather pillow, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the winds." The man thought this was a strange request, but it was a simple enough task, and he did it gladly. When he returned to tell the rabbi that he had done it, the rabbi said, "Now, go and gather the feathers. Because you can no more make amends for the damage your words have done than you can recollect the feathers."

But if, given the willingness of the speaker of *lashon hara* to meet all the requirements for *teshuvah*, forgiveness is still withheld, then again there are three victims: the person who did the *lashon hara*, the person who was the object of the *lashon hara*, and the community in which the *lashon hara* took place.

The poison of injury from *lashon hara* that is not forgiven spreads everywhere within a community. The conflict immediately widens, because almost everyone in the community who knows the parties takes sides. So, before long, it isn't just the original parties who come to synagogue with a knot in their stomachs, but the whole congregation, in a manner of speaking, begins to carry that knot. And given this likely eventuality, maybe the principle of *lifnim meshurat hadin* (לפנים משורת הדין), going beyond the letter of the law, should be applied here; that given the stakes, it's not enough to tell ourselves that we're not obligated to grant forgiveness under these circumstances.

So the question I ask myself now when I'm in that situation, when I'm the victim of *lashon hara*, is this: Should I forgive someone who is asking to be forgiven and wants to make amends or, if not, why not?

I answer that question by asking myself some other questions:

- Are people who injure me or those I love so evil that they can never redeem themselves with me, no matter what apology and amends they make? (No, I answer, they're not that evil and I'm not that fragile or important.)

- Am I justified in withholding forgiveness because I've never injured anyone, so I don't expect to ever need forgiveness myself? (No, that's certainly not the case.)
- Is my hurt and anger more significant than communal *shalom bayit*, the peace of the congregational community? (No, and it pains me to see other people in the congregation who refuse to resolve their differences.)

So I conclude that if someone who hurt me with *lashon hara* is willing to acknowledge the behavior in question, and to apologize and make amends sincerely, then I have to be prepared to genuinely forgive that person. This conclusion is based on the recognition that although *lashon hara* itself is based on arrogance, the unwillingness to forgive it is a corollary of that arrogance.

In this regard, we are instructed by the *halak-hah* (rabbinic law) to ". . . forbear to retaliate regarding worldly matters, for to the thinking man [or woman] all things are but vanity, and it is not worth one's while to take vengeance concerning them." (*Code of Jewish Law*, 30:7)

More than renouncing vengeance, forgiveness entails not only that somehow we are able to jettison the psychological and emotional pain of the experience, but that once again we can trust the individual who hurt us, at least as much as we did before the *lashon hara*.

But for me, forgiveness is often hard to grant, even when I'm able to dissolve my anger and resentment. First, because I have to put myself in the place of the other person, to be the one who needs to be forgiven, and recognize that I've done wrong and have been truly sorry for my acts and determined not to repeat them. Second, because often I distrust and fear people who have hurt my loved ones or myself. I imagine that, given the chance, they'll do it again.

So in my own life I've concluded that, while I have to find ways to explore the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation with those who hurt me with *lashon hara*, it has to be in a setting that's not threatening.

Then too, I often have to admit to myself that I don't really know the true facts and merits of the situation. I only know my own experience of it. I truly only know that there is an unresolved conflict that's going to have ongoing painful consequences for all the parties involved.

So I recognize the need for a process that will, first, assure an unthreatening setting and, second, allow me to understand the obstacles to forgiveness and reconciliation.

The first step in that process is for me to meet individually with someone who is trusted by both myself and the person who has spoken *lashon hara* against me, someone who can listen to everyone's experience and assess the obstacles. Then, if it seems feasible, that third party can propose steps that we may take individually, or can mediate a meeting between both parties, with the aim of effecting forgiveness and reconciliation.

I know that forgiveness in these situations is not a certainty, regardless of how well-intentioned

one may be, because reconciliation requires not only the verbal goodwill of all the parties, but their willingness and ability to meet the practical conditions of *teshuvah*.

But I also know now that the failure of forgiveness has much wider consequences than I ever imagined, giving me a much greater incentive to look for possible ways to achieve it, although I may not be formally obligated to do so.

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