Lashon Hara: Thoughts for Tazria/Metsora

View PDF



Angel for Shabbat: Tazria/Metsora

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Years ago, I—along with many others-- regularly received envelopes stuffed with pages put together by a group that claimed to represent “authentic” Judaism. The authors believed themselves to be the sole arbiters of true Judaism, and they vilified those who deviated from their views. Their screeds were drenched in hateful, slanderous language. It seems not to have occurred to them that lashon hara—evil gossip—is a highly serious sin.

Halakha teaches that just as it is forbidden to communicate lashon hara, so it is a transgression to receive it. I sent the authors several requests to remove me from their mailing list but they ignored my requests. I finally came up with a great idea. The next time I received one of their mailings, I took a red magic marker and wrote in large letters on the front of the envelope: RETURN TO SENDER: OBSCENE MATERIAL. That solved the problem. I received no more mail from them.

When such people engage in gossip/slander/defamation of character, they are indeed generating obscene material. They somehow delude themselves into thinking that they are permitted to defame people whose views they deem insufficiently religious. Their misguided and self-righteous behavior reflects an incredible arrogance…and sinfulness.

The problem has become far more severe now that people can spread their defamations via electronic means. They reach thousands of readers by posting their venom on websites, or entering malicious material on Wikipedia, or sending emails.

Rambam points out that among the sins for which there is almost no possible atonement is the sin of maligning someone in public. Even if one eventually wishes to repent, he/she will not know who heard the sinful words and therefore cannot ever be sure he/she can reach everyone to retract the wicked statements. Evil words, once made public, are impossible to retract fully. All the more so with "electronic lashon hara."

Modern technology makes it quite easy for people to post hostile remarks against those with whom they disagree. These ad hominem attacks gain lives of their own, being forwarded to readers who then forward them to others etc. When people—including those who think of themselves as being religious—spread defamatory material, they undermine the moral fabric of society.

Rabbinic tradition teaches that the disease of Metsora—spiritual leprosy— is brought on by speaking lashon hara. By debasing others, the sinner becomes debased and befouled. Such individuals need to be isolated so that they can come to terms with their personality flaws...and hopefully change their ways for the better.

The daily Amidah prayer has a concluding meditation: "Oh Lord, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully." Let everyone pay close attention to these words and strive to live up to them. Lashon hara is obscene material. It must be avoided, it must be rejected, it must be returned to sender for atonement.