

Parshas Shelach Lecha – Repentance for Loshon Hora - Keith Goldstein

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The Gemara in Eruvin brings a direction from Shmuel to his Talmid Rav Yehuda that when he is learning the written Torah or the oral Torah he should open his mouth and say the words so as to merit a long life. In support of this Shmuel quotes a verse from Mishlei which, referring to words of Torah, translates as "for they are life to he who finds them and a healing for all his flesh." Shmuel explains that "those who find them" is to be interpreted as he who utters them, the Hebrew word produced by adding a single letter Yud to the Hebrew word find. At first glance, this statement is intended to extol the power of Torah learning generally to bestow long life and healing.

However there are difficulties in that being the sole message intended to be imparted. There is a well-known difference of opinion between the Beis Yosef, the compiler of the Shulchan Aruch, and the Vilna Gaon as to whether one can fulfil the mitzvah of learning Torah by mere thought, without speech. According to the Beis Yosef one needs to speak out the words to fulfil the mitzvah of learning Torah, whereas according to the Vilna Gaon one can fulfil the mitzvah by meditating on words of Torah without speech. The respective views determine whether one can make the Brocho before learning Torah if one is only going to read or meditate without uttering the words. If one adopts the view of the Beis Yosef, the Gemara brought above seems difficult in that one would have expected Shmuel to exhort Rav Yehuda to say the words out loud as a prerequisite to the fulfilment of the mitzvah of Torah learning rather than on account of them bestowing a long life. According to the Vilna Gaon it is hard to understand why Rav Yehuda could attain long life only by uttering words of Torah out loud when he would fulfil the mitzvah of learning Torah even if meditating or reading quietly. Another difficulty with the Gemara is why Shmuel expressed this direction specifically to Rav Yehuda rather than to all of his pupils or indeed to all people. Also, the expression "and a healing for all his flesh" is an unusual one and it is noteworthy that Shmuel did not say to Rav Yehuda that he should say the words out loud both for a long life and in order to stay healthy, in accordance with the end of the verse.

Rashi comments at the beginning of the parsha this week that the spies should have learned a lesson from Miriam who was punished with leprosy for speaking loshon hara about Moshe Rabeinu but did not and as a result they slandered the land of Canaan promised to the Jewish people by Hashem, with tragic consequences as we know. The severity of and damage done by the sin of speaking loshon hara are set out at length in the sefer Shemiras Haloshon by the Chafetz Chaim ZT"L. How does one do teshuvah for that sin? The sin is different from other sins, as the Chafetz Chaim explains, because with other sins a person contaminates only the parts of the body which committed the sin, for example the eyes, if one looks in places where one should not whereas loshon hara contaminates the whole of the person. He explains that the reason for this is that speech is what defines a human being and elevates him above the animals and therefore abusing the gift of speech damages the core of his humanity; as we know, Onkelos explains the verse in Bereishis "and man was a living spirit" as "and man was a spirit that could speak". The Chafetz Chaim points out that loshon hara is the antithesis of learning Torah which elevates the whole of the person. Rabeinu Yonah in Shaarei Teshuvah says that a person needs to perform a mitzvah with the limb which committed a sin as an atonement for that sin and in the case of loshon hara that a person should engage in the learning of Torah; the Manchester Rosh Yeshiva ZT"L comments that since he sinned with his mouth, the atonement must be with his mouth.

In this way, perhaps we can understand the Gemara mentioned above. Shmuel was instructing Rav Yehuda that when he learns he should learn out loud so as to atone for the sin of loshon hara. As we know the sefer dealing with the laws of loshon hara is called Chafetz Chaim based on a verse in Tehilim "who is the man who wishes life to whom days are beloved to see goodness – guard your tongue from speaking evil and your lips from guile..." Accordingly, if a person has spoken loshon hara he needs to restore the promise of life by repenting, and the repentance, as mentioned above is to engage in Torah learning which elevates the whole of the person in contrast to loshon hara which degrades and contaminates the whole of the person. However, to achieve that, according to all opinions he would have to learn out loud so as to be able to make good a sin committed with his mouth, and even if learning by meditation or quiet reading would fulfil the mitzvah of learning Torah, it would not be sufficient as an atonement in this instance. It was with this in mind that Shmuel told Rav Yehuda to learn out loud to restore longevity. He did not wish him health because of the end of the verse, as the cure referred to for the whole of the flesh reflects the fact that the sin of loshon hara affects the whole of the flesh and the learning of Torah restores the whole of the flesh.

However, this explanation begs the question as to why Shmuel should suspect that Rav Yehuda should have spoken loshon hara; Rav Yehuda was a great person who later became a Rosh Yeshiva in Pumbedisa and indeed was so great that one of the Amoraim saw that in the world to come he would be the master and Shmuel his pupil! The answer to this question might be that Rav Yehuda became a pupil of Shmuel only after Rav died until which time Rav Yehuda was the pupil of Rav. The Gemara in Bava Basra brings a statement by Rav Yehuda in the name of Rav that everybody is guilty of avak loshon hara, literally the dust of loshon hara i.e. the least extreme degree of loshon hara. With this it can be explained why Shmuel specifically instructed Rav Yehuda because, in his own words in the name of his then master, Rav Yehuda himself must be guilty of loshon hara, albeit to the smallest degree, and such required atonement.