LASHON HARA: Words and Arrows

“His tongue is like a poisoned arrow… with his mouth, he speaks cordially… but in his heart, he lays a deadly trap”.

Jeremiah 9:7

WHAT IS LASHON HARA*?

Lashon hara means speaking badly about other people, damaging the reputation of another individual, making negative comments about others, even when the facts are true! Bullying, embarrassing someone in public, in a WhatsApp chat, Facebook, or Instagram, etc. These are all variations of lashon hara. Lashon hara is judged very severely by our Torah. Our Sages learn about the severity of malicious gossip from a verse of the prophet Jeremiah, Yirmiyahu, who compares the tongue of the wicked to sharp arrows shot at innocent victims.

A DEADLY WEAPON

The tongue can be a deadly weapon. Defamation, due to its devastating effects, is compared to poisoned arrows. The most incredible thing, and the hardest to understand, is that the damage caused by slander—a lethal damage—is completely disproportionate to the act that was carried out: that is, “speaking.” If someone is about to commit an act of violence, and especially if that act can culminate in murder, they are going to be very careful and cautious and will think several times about the consequences that their actions are going to bring about. “Speaking,” however, seems innocent and harmless. Pronouncing words, articulating ideas, and expressing thoughts are things we do frequently and almost without thinking. It does not seem possible to us that it is violent or devastating… That is why the Torah reminds us that the consequences of defamation and slander can be very serious, and in some cases, lethal. Our words can kill a person’s name and destroy their reputation.

ARROWS IN THE AIR

The sages also wonder why the prophet Jeremiah uses the metaphor of arrows and not, for example, swords. The response of the sages is shocking. When an individual draws their sword and is about to kill another person, the victim may beg for mercy and the assailant may reflect, have compassion, and return the sword to its place. But the same does not happen when one shoots an arrow. Once in the air, you can't go back and repent, you can't return the arrow to its place… the same goes for words: once we utter them, we lose control over them, we cannot take them back. Just like with a bullet, once fired, the damage that the arrow—and our speech—would cause is unstoppable and irreparable.

CANCELLING THE CANCELLERS

For this reason, the Torah is so strict with individuals who speak lashon hara. Yesterday's Parasha describes the condition of the metzora, which was explained by our sages as a consequence of lashon hara. According to Maimonides, this physical manifestation was providential, supernatural (ot umofet) that was established by the Almighty to educate the Jewish people and prevent lashon hara in the community of Israel. The individual who incurred this transgression was affected by tzara'at and had to remain in quarantine for seven days. The sages explain that this severe "punishment," which was not applied to any other similar situation, was established by the Torah as a preventive mechanism: whoever speaks ill of other people must be separated from the community because lashon hara separates families, causes friends to fight, and divides the community.