The Three Victims of Lashon HaRa

Most people, when they think about Lashon Hara, focus on one victim: the person being spoken about. And indeed, that person suffers real harm. Their reputation is damaged, people's opinions of them shift, and often they have no idea it is happening and no opportunity to defend themselves.

But the Talmud teaches something remarkable: Lashon Hara harms three people simultaneously – and the person being spoken about may actually suffer the least.

The first victim is the subject – the person being discussed. The damage to them is obvious: their good name is diminished, relationships are affected, and trust is eroded. In many cases, this damage cannot be fully repaired, even if the speaker later regrets what was said.

The second victim is the listener. This is the one most people overlook. The moment you hear negative information about someone, something changes in the way you see them – often permanently, even subconsciously. You may try to remain objective, but the mind doesn't work that way. Once a seed of suspicion or contempt is planted, it is very difficult to uproot. The listener has received distorted information that will color their judgment, their behavior, and their relationship with that person going forward. They have been spiritually and psychologically harmed by something they did not ask for and may not have wanted.

Moreover, the listener bears a *halakhic* responsibility. Listening passively to Lashon Hara is itself a transgression. The Tora says: *"Do not accept a false report"* (Shemot 23:1). Our Sages extend this prohibition to any negative speech about

another person. Sitting silently while someone is being spoken about badly is not neutral – it is a form of participation.

The third victim is the speaker. This is the most counterintuitive. The person doing the talking, the one who seems powerful in the moment – who has information, an audience, and the floor – is actually damaging themselves profoundly. They are cultivating a habit of negative thinking. They are training their mind to seek out the worst in others. They are eroding the trust others place in them (because everyone knows: if he speaks about others this way, he speaks about me the same way). And according to our tradition, they are incurring a severe spiritual consequence that no amount of clever framing can undo.

The Sages summarize this with a striking formulation: Lashon Hara kills three – the one who says it, the one who hears it, and the one about whom it is said. Understanding that we are not just protecting others when we guard our speech – we are protecting ourselves – is one of the most powerful motivations for taking this mitzvah seriously.