

Parshat Vayeishev

The Effect of Lashon Hara

Rafi Lowy

Chicago, IL



This week's parsha contains the infamous sale of Yosef. The brothers see that Yosef is coming to meet them in Dotan, and they decide on the spot to get rid of him. Rashi says that the name of the place is an allusion that they had decided even before this time to carry out judgment against Yosef. What exactly was it that Yosef had done that they figured that they had to get rid of him?

If we look earlier in the parsha we will find that one of the things that Yosef did was tell Lashon Hara about his brothers. Rashi tells us that there were three things he said about them, and he was punished severely for each one. They were: *ever min hachai*, for which he was punished that they slaughtered a goat after they threw him in the pit; they called the sons of the maidservants Bilha and Zilpa slaves, for which he was sold as a slave; and, finally, that they were adulterous, for which the Potiphar's wife desired him. This raises another question. Why was Yosef punished so severely?

The answer to the first question is that the brothers thought that, similar to Yishmael and Eisav, Yosef was an impurity in the family that had to be gotten rid of in order for the Jews to continue. What does this mean? We know that the middot of Yishmael and Eisav were perversions of the pure middot of their fathers. Avraham had the trait of chesed; Yishmael took chesed too far and it became thievery. Yitzchak had *din* (justice); Eisav took that too far and it became murder. What did the brothers think Yosef was? They thought that by telling Lashon Hara he was taking Yaakov's trait of truth (*emet*) too far. Therefore, they reasoned that they had to get rid of Yosef.

Now we turn to our second question. The reason that the Lashon Hara that Yosef told about his brothers carried with it such heavy punishment was because of the destructive power of Lashon Hara. Lashon Hara destroys unity between friends, partners and even family. People don't want to be associated with a person who speaks Lashon Hara because even though the things they say may be funny, you can never be sure that they aren't saying the same kinds of things about you to others. The Chofetz Chaim tells us that for every word of Lashon Hara that a person speaks he can violate up to 31 transgressions and receive 3 curses. He also mentions that just as Talmud Torah is comparable to doing all of the mitzvot, so, too, Lashon Hara can destroy all that. Therefore, not only is Lashon Hara harmful to a person and everyone around him socially, he is also destroying his own good merits. Lashon Hara is also contagious. If one person starts talking Lashon Hara, others will begin to as well.

Taking both of these items into account, it is possible to understand why the brothers acted as they did. They knew that there would be a point in time when the Jews would be enslaved by another nation. They also knew that they would be redeemed eventually. The only way for people to survive such a trial and still remain separate from the nations around them is if they have achdut. Without achdut, people each go their own way, and while they might still think of themselves as one people – they really cannot be. If you look at the Hebrew word for "nation" – *am*, you will notice that if you change the vowels it makes "with" – *im*. In order to make a nation of people it is necessary that they be with – "*im*" one another. If one member of the of the nation is speaking Lashon Hara it can spread to others and then they will destroy the precious "*im*" that is needed. The brothers knew this, and decided that they had to do what they thought was necessary in order to enable the nation that would come from them to weather the slavery that they would endure in the future.