

# TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

## Choose Your Words Carefully!

*Parshat Sh'lach L'cha*, Numbers 13:1 -15:41

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z"l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

One of the recurring themes in the Torah is the power of language. The sages recognized this and highlighted this subject in a dramatic and instructive fashion. We learn that the world is created with words and that the downfall of humanity takes place with words, when the serpent speaks in a deceptive fashion to Eve. Moses says that he cannot save Israel because he is not 'a man of words' and the power of Sinai is that God speaks to the entire nation. When Miriam publicly criticizes her brother rather than having a private conversation with him to air her grievances, she is stricken with leprosy leading the sages to the conclusion that leprosy is an apt punishment for *lashon hara*, for gossip and evil speech. But for the sages the prime example of the destructive power of speech is the story of the spies.

According to the Torah, the spies delivered 'an evil report' regarding the Promised Land. The question we must answer is, did they lie? And if God did not want them to report what it was they saw during their journey, why did he bother allowing them to go in the first place? A close reading of the story of the spies reveals that the princes carefully chose their words to discourage the people. While the spies began with a positive assessment of the land ("The land is flowing with milk and honey,"), their descriptions quickly changed from factual information to subjective judgments ("We cannot attack the people for they are stronger than us.") and finally to abject despair ("We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves").

The sages understood the power of speech, especially for those who are leaders. They constantly reminded themselves and others that a leader has the ability to sway the community towards renaissance or destruction. God could overlook the golden calf and numerous other rebellions in the wilderness but when it came to the leaders abusing and influencing the nation God could not remain silent.

**Pirke Avot 1:11** Avtalyon said: 'Sages, choose your words carefully, lest you be exiled by the authorities to a place of 'evil waters' and the disciples who come after you drink thereof and die. You will thus be responsible for the desecration of God's name.'

### Sources

#### Avot d'Rebbe Natan Chapter 11

What are 'evil waters?' Say thou: "And they mingled themselves with the nations and learned their works." (Psalm 106:35) Another interpretation: 'Evil waters' means just that. And some say: 'Lest they be carried off for heavy labor.'

#### Avot d'Rebbe Natan Chapter 9

With ten trials our ancestors tried the Holy One but they were punished for slanderous speech only. And these are the trials: two were at the Red Sea (Israel showed little faith entering and leaving the sea), one when the manna began to fall (Ex. 16:19), one when the manna ceased to fall (Ex. 15:26), one when the first quail were seen (Ex. 16:3), one when the last quail were seen (Num 11:4), one at Marah (Ex. 15:23), one at Rephidim (Ex. 17:1), one at Horeb (the golden calf, Ex. 32), and one when the spies returned. This trial of the spies was the gravest of them all, as it is said, "And they have put Me to proof these ten times and have harkened not to My voice." (Num. 14:22) So too, "even those men that did bring up an evil report of the land died by the plague before the Lord." (Num. 14:37) Now is there not an inference to be drawn here? If the Holy One resented the spies' insult to the land, which has neither mouth for speech, nor face nor feelings of shame – how much more so will the Holy One resent the insult when one puts his fellow to shame. Rabbi Shimon says: 'Upon them that speak slander plagues come....'

#### Babylonian Talmud Sotah Sot 35b (also see Rashi on Num. 14:37)

Rabbah said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: "That night was the night of the ninth of Av, concerning which the Holy One said: Now they give themselves to weeping without cause - so, throughout the generations, I will make [this very night] an occasion for weeping for them!" ... "These men that did bring up an evil report

of the Land died by the plague before the Lord" (Num. 14:37). R. Simeon ben Lakish said: 'They died an unnatural death.' According to Rabbi Hanina bar Papa, Rabbi Shela of Kefar Temarta construed the verse to imply that the tongue of each spy grew so long that it reached down to his navel, and worms crawled out of his tongue into his navel and from his navel into his tongue.

### **Babylonian Talmud Arakhin 15a**

The punishment of him who maligns the young woman he wed as not being a virgin is greater than if he had seduced her or raped her. Thus we find that the decree of death against our forebears in the wilderness was sealed only after the spies had maligned the Land, as is said, "By speaking thus, they tried Me as greatly as the ten other times together [when they did not heed Me]; surely they shall not see the Land which I swore unto their fathers" (Num. 14:22-23).

### **Commentary**

Avtalyon, one of Hillel's teachers, lived in the middle of the first century BCE, between the end of the Maccabean regime and the rise of Herod. This was a tumultuous period when the power of Rome became more obvious in ancient Palestine. The Roman government maintained control of their empire through heavy handed tactics and oppression. Herod was an example of this: thousands died at his hand including his own family during a time characterized by paranoia and violence. Avtalyon's comments must be understood in this context – he warned his fellow sages to choose their words carefully – to challenge the government would jeopardize the entire enterprise of teaching Torah. In some translations of this statement in *Pirke Avot*, "evil waters" is understood as heretical teachings. If one wanted to live in an established Jewish community and teach Torah properly one best avoid the authorities because the consequences of doing otherwise could turn out to be far more destructive to the chain of tradition.

Later, the warning "choose your words carefully," took on a broader meaning for communal leaders and the teachers. It is so easy for one's words to be misconstrued and misinterpreted. Antigonus of Socho whose words in the first chapter of *Pirke Avot* are an example of this ("Be like the servant who serves... with no thought of reward.") His words led some to the heresy that there is no belief of reward or punishment in Judaism. What one says and what others hear is not always the same thing. The spies not only disillusioned the people but they were victims of their own words. They caused a downward spiral of hope in their assessment of the land. "Yes, the land is flowing with milk and honey but its people are mighty. In fact they are so strong that we can't beat them. We can't beat them because we are mere grasshoppers so how can we possibly succeed. That being said, all is lost..."

We often assume that *lashon harah* is slander and untrue accusations. Actually, the sages distinguish *lashon harah*, evil speech, which is true, from *motzi shem ra*, slander or calumny which is false. Both are forbidden. In other words, just because a statement is true doesn't make it ok to repeat out loud and in public, especially if one is in a position of authority. The more authority one has, the greater (positive or negative) influence one can potentially have – and the more careful one must be about how one speaks.

### **Questions to Ponder**

1. Do you think the spies believed the statements they made? What ulterior motive might they have had for bringing back a negative report?
2. What do the sages mean when they speak of drinking "evil waters?"
3. If Avtalyon lived in twenty first century America, would he make the same statement about 'the authorities?' Why or why not?
4. Think of an incident when a statement that you made was both honest and true on your part might have had negative and hurtful consequences?
5. Why did the sages consider the husband who maligns his wife worse than one who commits rape? Do you agree with this statement?

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