

Two instances of *lashon hara* occur at the end of our parashah, actually a third if we include the people's incessant complaining to Moses about the lack of meat and the resulting glut of quails. *Lashon hara*, literally evil tongue, encompasses all forms of intentional or inadvertent communication capable of causing physical, financial, or emotional harm. It includes any derogatory, embarrassing, insulting, or inciting statement concerning an individual, whether true or untrue. It is noteworthy that on Yom Kippur 11 of the 43 sins we enumerate in the *al chet* confession have to do with speech. The basic prohibition against gossip appears in Chapter 19 of Leviticus, as does the seemingly contradictory command to rebuke when necessary, and further comments on evil speech are found throughout our sacred writings and rabbinic literature. From a long discourse on *lashon hara* in Talmud tractate Arakhin 15b: "Anyone who speaks malicious speech increases his sins to the degree that they correspond to the three cardinal transgressions: Idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed. ... The tongue kills in the same manner than an arrow kills." Our tradition holds that evil speech is worse than stealing or cheating, because once spoken, it cannot be unspoken, and its harmfulness can spread unabated. Libraries are full of works on this universal human weakness, both scientific and literary. In Rossini's "Barber of Seville," Don Basilio's aria *La calunnia*, describes how slander can grow from a gentle breeze of speculation to a full-blown, lethal storm, and the evil speech of Shakespeare's Iago culminates in death and destruction. We have seen the effects of evil speech throughout history, with modern technology steadily increasing its already enormous destructive potential. Now, let's examine each of these three instances of *lashon hara* in our parashah. The people have driven Moses to the breaking point with their unceasing barrage of complaints, causing him to doubt his ability to lead them. HaShem tells him to appoint 70 elders, who will receive a divine spirit of prophesy in order to assist him with the burden of caring for the people. This leads to the next instance: talebearing. A certain young man hears Eldad and Medad, who are not among the 70 chosen elders, prophesying in the camp in the absence of the elders, and runs to tell Moses of this apparent infraction, winning the enthusiastic approval of Joshua, who calls for their imprisonment. Like Joseph tattling on his brothers, the lad is filled with righteous indignation, which in turn incites Moses' trusted servant and eventual heir. Wiser than Jakob, Moses defuses the situation with a gentle reprimand. "If only all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would bestow His spirit upon them." (11:29) In other words, set a good example by minding your own business and paying attention to how you obey the *mitzvot*. Halacha does make allowances for constructive criticism, and for forms of talebearing that can protect someone from harm or defend an innocent person in court. But because the boundaries between these and *lashon hara* are thin and porous, it is important to exercise scrupulous discernment. This applies to the *lashon hara* of Miriam and Aaron, which follows the episode of the quails. "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. They said, 'Has the Lord spoken only to Moses? Hasn't He spoken to us too?' And the Lord heard." (12:1-2) Several things are at play here: The Cushite woman, Moses' marital responsibilities, and the apparent challenge to Moses' authority. Is "Cushite" a racist slur or an analogy? Is the wife in question the Midianite Tziporah, or a second, Ethiopian, wife? Interpretations vary from the fanciful to the pragmatic; some say that Tziporah was the only wife, citing the fact that the desert-dwelling Midianites may have been dark-skinned enough to resemble Africans. Others hold that Moses had married a Cushite while still in Egypt, and still others see "Cushite" as a compliment. "But is her name Cushite? Tziporah is her name. Rather, just as a Cushite is distinguished by his dark skin, so too, Tziporah was distinguished by her actions." (Babylonian Talmud Moed Katan 16b) But the issue may not be the woman herself, but actually the marital relationship. Midrash Tanchuma holds that Miriam and Aaron are criticizing Moses for separating from his wife in order to remain a prophet, Miriam having overheard Tziporah' remark after Eldad and Medad had prophesized: "Woe unto those men's wives since they are needed as prophets and they will separate from them just as my husband has separated from me." Or is this a rare case of sibling rivalry? Just as Moses had rebuked Joshua and the tattletale lad, HaShem points out their error in judgement and explains Moses' unique position. In departing, HaShem inflicts Miriam with *tzara'at*, the punishment for *lashon hara*, and she is quarantined outside the camp for 7 days. Why only Miriam? Perhaps because she is mentioned before Aaron, which implies that it was she who had taken the initiative. As leader of the women, she may have been moved to engage in constructive criticism concerning Moses' wife, justifying it by stating that all three siblings are prophets, a gentle reminder that not all prophets abandon their wives. If so, she should have gone straight to Moses rather than speaking to Aaron behind his back, even if she was simply seeking Aaron's approval and support. The parallel to the tattletale lad is obvious. Indeed, there is a fine line between speaking out with good intentions and *lashon hara*, and distinguishing one from the other requires extreme sensitivity and enormous self-control, a daunting task even for people like Joshua and Miriam.

Shabbat shalom!