

## “Know Your Limitations”

Regarding *tzaraas* spots found on the walls of one's house, the Torah emphasizes that one must tell the *kohein* that he found a spot that *looks* like *tzaraas*: “And the one to whom the house belongs will come, and he will tell the *kohein* [by] saying, ‘[something] like a *negah* has appeared to me in the house’ (14:35).” Rashi elaborates that even if the home-owner is a *Talmid Chacham* and knows with certainty that the spot is indeed *tzaraas*, he may not declare that he found *tzaraas* in his house; rather he must say that he found something that looks like a *tzaraas*-spot.

At first glance, it would seem that the lesson here is one of humility. He must not presume that he knows the law with certainty; rather he must humbly say that it looks like it is *tzaraas*.

But, if that is the case, doesn't it seem like false humility? If the homeowner is indeed a *Talmid Chacham* to whom other questions of *halacha* that span the entire Torah gamut are constantly addressed, why would it smack of arrogance for him to say that it is definitely *tzaraas*? Furthermore, why is this lesson of humility for the *Talmid Chacham* being taught here? Isn't it a general idea that would be more appropriate in the section of the Torah that teaches us about the authority of the *Chachamim* and instructs them in how to *pasken*?

*Chazal* revealed that the main cause of the affliction of *tzaraas* is *lashon hara*. What brings one to speak *lashon hara*?

The *Chafetz Chaim* teaches that if a situation arises whereby one could judge one's fellow favorably and he instead assumes guilt - and as a result of which speaks negatively of that person - he has thus violated the prohibition of *lashon hara*. Although this is but one example of a violation of the prohibition of *lashon hara*, we can nevertheless cull from here that judging one's fellow unfavorably is one of the root causes of slander, if not its principal cause.

*Chazal* teach us, "Do not judge your fellow until you reach his place (Avos 2:5)." We are also taught that (in general) a judge should not judge a court case by himself, "for there is only One Who judges alone (Avos 4:10)."

When we see another person doing something, we do not know the myriad details which lie behind his action. Every person is an entire world of thoughts, emotions, life circumstances, life experiences, difficulties, intellect, level of wisdom and understanding. Therefore, it is quite presumptuous indeed for one to jump to a negative conclusion about something they really don't know too much about.

*Do not judge your fellow until you have reached his place.* True, the homeowner may be a knowledgeable scholar who knows the law with complete clarity. Nevertheless, if he attempts to make a pronouncement that the spot is *tzaraas*, he is presuming to assume a role that is not his.

The Torah states very clearly that only a *kohein* is authorized to pronounce whether the spot is pure or impure; nobody else can. So, with all of his knowledge and understanding, this *Talmid Chacham* must still know his place, his limitations.

This point is a crucial lesson in order to avoid *lashon hara*: No matter how intelligent, knowledgeable, and wise you may be – you must nevertheless recognize your limitations. Do not jump to judge your fellow negatively - know your limitations, know your boundaries. Do not presume to be a lone judge, for there is only One Who judges alone. Do not judge your fellow until you have reached his place – and realize that that place is so multi-dimensional and complex that the chance that you have or ever will reach it is practically nil.

Of course, just as there are unique or extenuating circumstances that would permit or require a

*dayan* to deal with a court case by himself, so too there are situations where a person may be permitted, or perhaps even required to clearly define the actions of his fellow as completely wrong. The *Chafetz Chaim* discusses the particulars of these *halachos* at length.

The central point, though, that we need to absorb, is that to approach such matters from a presumptuous, arrogant stance is wrong and will inevitably lead one to violating the prohibitions (even though, in his arrogance, he is convinced of the truth and justice of his assertion). Rather, one's outlook must be exceedingly humble, and with that approach one will certainly be able to find ways to judge others favorably, or at the very least think of mitigating factors that greatly lessen the negative impression of the subject. And this, in turn, will greatly assist us in avoiding the terrible sin of *lashon hara*.

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