

Mishlei 17-04

Speech – Listening

Key Concepts

Human speech is a marvelous gift from Hashem. However, it can easily be misused and cause great harm. Once words are spoken, the initial judge of what has been said is the listener. What does he listen to? What credence does he give to what he hears and how does he react?

In this segment Mishlei explores the motivation behind listening to perverse speech, both where the content is accepted as true and where the content is known to be false. If someone is describing the sinful behavior of another person, he will find a certain type of listener drawn to his words. A person who is pleased at the downfall of others will pay close attention to such talk even though the speaker is committing the sin of *lashon hara* (gossip or evil speech). The listener will be especially attracted to such “sinning lips” if he believes what he hears is true. And this is despite the fact that in doing so, the listener himself becomes encumbered in the sin of *lashon hara*.

Another type of sinful speech is that which is inherently false because it is intentionally used to deceive others. Frequently a practitioner of falsehood has grown accustomed to lies because he depends on lies to cover his faults and prevent others from detecting his own deceptive behavior. If he uses lies as an instrument of deception, he is not especially concerned with the degree of truth in what he hears from the “destructive tongue” that utters them. He judges the value of what he hears by how useful it is in deceiving others, rather than by its truth.

Exploring Mishlei

(ד) מֵרַע מְקַשֵּׁיב עַל שְׂפֵת אָוֶן שֶׁקָּר מִזֵּין עַל לְשׁוֹן הָוֵת:

(4) **An evildoer listens to sinning lips;
a liar inclines his ear to a destructive tongue.**

This proverb compares two types of speech based on the motivation of the listener and the truthfulness of what is said. The words that convey tale-bearing or gossip are described as issuing from the lips. Here the lips are seen as a superficial organs of speech, which pass on the content without substantial alteration. However, they

are described as "sinning lips" (שִׁפְתֵי אָוֶן) because the speaker has committed *lashon hara*. The listener is also committing this sin and so he is described as an evildoer (מַרְעֵ). His interest in what he hears is derived from its entertainment value since it pleases him to hear the gossip about the foibles of others.

In contrast to the relatively truthful words spoken by the lips, the falsehoods being issued by the "destructive tongue" (לְשׁוֹן הַוַּת) are intended to deceive. In comparison to the lips the tongue is seen as a more active organ of speech which develops words to be used as an instrument that will have an effect.

Learning Mishlei

(4) An evildoer – מַרְעֵ

who is eager to hear sinful gossip

(truthful *lashon hara*)

listens closely to the – מִקְשִׁיב עַל

sinning lips – שִׁפְתֵי אָוֶן

of a tale-bearer.

In contrast, a practitioner of **falsehood** – שֶׁקֶר

who lies all the time,

inclines his ear – מִזִּין

to the falsehoods spoken by

a destructive tongue – עַל לְשׁוֹן הַוַּת

Additional Insights

[1] The buildup in the development of perverse speech from the sinning lips to the destructive tongue mirrors the natural progression of sin which gets worse as the sinner becomes accustomed to it. (אלשיך)

[2] Lies are natural accomplices for the criminal because he is ready to save himself by lying. A person who is unable to lie will instinctively avoid criminality. (רשרייה)

[3] Unfortunately, a person who intentionally listens to *lashon hara* is happy to believe it because he wants it to be true. The correct attitude is to avoid listening to it unless he is directly affected. Even in that case he should refuse to believe it while still taking reasonable precautions to protect himself. (רבינו יונה)