



Beth El
SYNAGOGUE

Shalom Chaverim,

We live in a time ripe with hate speech. I fear that we are growing so accustomed to it, we don't give it a second thought. Now, we know hate speech when we hear it. But here is one we generally don't call out: using cruel nicknames.

This is the kind of thing I think of when I say, "al chet shechatenu l'fanekha b'dibur peh. For the sin we have committed against you by words spoken harshly."

Who has never been called a cruel nickname? I know I have, and it hurts. Who has never used a cruel nickname? I know I have. Of course, it is one thing when little kids do it. We talk to them about bullying. We teach them it's wrong. Unfortunately, today we are seeing adults that should be role models use such language. We largely ignore it to our own detriment.

The Talmud teaches that some people are going to hell. But some people are going to hell and never coming out. One such person is the person who calls his friend by a cruel nickname. (BM 58b). About such a person Rambam teaches in his Laws of Teshuva (3:12) that he forfeits his share in the world to come.

Wow. That is pretty severe. Why so harsh?

The Talmud explains that in this case, the person had grown accustomed to the name. He no longer felt any shame. And yet, the intent was to publicly humiliate him.

I think the reason the punishment is so harsh is because the violator has so demoralized the victim and so desensitized society the value of a person's name and to the power and sanctity of language. Moreover, the violator is not just embarrassing the victim in public. With his cruelty, he is dishonoring God in whose image that person is created.

We are forbidden to cause anyone shame or embarrassment. But for the violator there is hope. The Rambam says that if he does tshuva, if he repents for this transgression, he can regain his share in the next world.

What do we have to do to re-sensitize our society to speak lashon hakodesh, not Hebrew necessarily but to make our speech sacred? That is our task for 5780.

Shanah Tovah!

