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HYPOCRITES

In Mattithyahu 15:1-20 there is an encounter between Yehoshua and a group of *P'rushim* (Pharisees) and *Sopherim* (Scribes) who came down from Yerushalayim to confront him about a certain issue. Some say the central issue of the encounter was whether or not the talmidim (disciples or students) of Yehoshua are permitted to eat scripturally prohibited meats. Others say it is about whether or not disciples of Yehoshua should observe any Jewish traditions at all. Neither are correct, and both are “passage-picking” attempts to support a particular doctrinal stance by taking a single verse out of context and using it as a pretext. Our Messiah did not skip around in this passage making various unrelated doctrinal statements, but was completely focused upon the central issue at hand, that of the vile accusation the P'rushim and Sopherim made about his talmidim, and upon teaching those who were present about the true evil it represented. The central issue of the entire encounter, from beginning to end, was and is about the subject of *Shemirath Halashon* – Guarding the Tongue.

There are arguably about thirty-one commands in the Torah which govern the use of *Lashon Hara* – Evil Speech. Yehoshua's exchange with his adversaries involved several of them, yet the listeners on both sides of the encounter seemed to be honestly or willfully ignorant of this. To our own discredit, most believers nowadays are also ignorant of the commands and practice of *Shemirath Halashon*. If they were not so, they probably would not mischaracterize Yehoshua's words in this passage as they do. To illuminate this, it will be helpful to show which commands are associated with what Yehoshua said. The entirety of the instant passage reads:

“Then there came to Yehoshua Sopherim and P'rushim from Yerushalayim, saying, ‘Why do Your talmidim transgress the Tradition of the Elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’ But He answering, said to them, ‘Why do you also transgress the command of Elohim because of your tradition? For Elohim has commanded, saying, “Respect your father and your mother,” and, “He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.” But you say, “Whoever says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me has been dedicated,’ is certainly released from respecting his father or mother.” So you have nullified the command of Elohim by your tradition. Hypocrites! Yeshayahu rightly prophesied about you, saying, “This people draw near to Me with their mouth, and respect Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as teachings the commands of men.” And calling the crowd near, He said to them, ‘Hear and understand: Not that which goes into the mouth defiles the man, but that which comes out of the mouth, this defiles the man.’ Then His talmidim came and said to Him, ‘Do You know that the P'rushim stumbled when they heard this word?’ But He answering, said, ‘Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted shall be uprooted. Leave them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both shall fall into a ditch.’ And Kepha answering, said to Him, ‘Explain this parable to us.’ And Yehoshua said, ‘Are you also still without understanding? Do you not understand that whatever enters into the mouth goes into the stomach, and is cast out in the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and these defile the man. For out of the heart come forth wicked reasonings, murders,

adulteries, whorings, thefts, false witnessings, slanders. These defile the man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.”

Now, let's look at the key verses in this passage and how they correspond to Torah law:

“Why do Your talmidim transgress the Tradition of the Elders?” – There were a lot of people who were present and witnessed this attack. What was the intent of the P'rushim in bringing such a charge publicly in front of so many, rather than first asking Yehoshua their question quietly and in private? It was obviously to defame the talmidim of Yehoshua and, through them, the Master himself, in front of the crowd. The Torah says: *“Do not go walking as a talebearer among your people”* and, *“Do not put your hand with the wrong to be a malicious witness.”* It is a clear command of YHWH that we are not to spread gossip about anyone, whether that gossip is true, or not. It is also a command that we not charge anyone of a crime with evil intent against that person, seeking to deliberately harm them – especially in public where it will be heard and spread throughout the community.

“But He answering, said to them, ‘Why do you also transgress the command of Elohim because of your tradition?’ – Yehoshua here did not respond to the evil accusation directly, but turned the tables on his adversaries using something called a *Qol V'chomer*, a comparison made from *“Lesser to greater.”* This accomplished two things: It showed how their charge against the talmidim was questionable to begin with, since parts of the Traditions of the Elders contradicted the simple meaning of Torah law and therefore could not be binding upon them, as it is written: *“Honor your father and your mother.”* More importantly, it also showed that their charge against the talmidim concerning a tradition was not as heinous as the act of Lashon Hara they committed themselves by bringing their complaint in a public and unlawful way.

“And calling the crowd near, He said to them, ‘Hear and understand: Not that which goes into the mouth defiles the man, but that which comes out of the mouth, this defiles the man.” – After his only response to the accusers of the talmidim, Yehoshua turns away from them and to the crowd and he teaches them the true underlying nature of what they had just witnessed. Traditions are fine and have great benefit, if used in order to more beautifully keep the commands of YHWH or to illustrate something pertaining to His Kingdom. Yehoshua utilized many traditions himself, such as those of the bread and wine at Passover and Qiddush ceremonies. However, the traditions the P'rushim were citing were neither helpful, beautiful, or innocent. Those which break the clear commands of YHWH and show the evil that is in the heart of a man and proceeds from his mouth are what can truly defile him, as he said in another place, *“How are you able to speak what is excellent, being wicked? For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart. The excellent man brings forth what is excellent from the excellent treasures of his heart, and the wicked man brings forth what is wicked from the wicked treasure. And I say to you that for every idle word men speak, they shall give an account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you shall be declared righteous, and by your words you shall be declared unrighteous.”* Lashon Hara is actually equated with murder, as it can kill a man's reputation, his marriage, his means of supporting himself and his family, his freedom, or even result in his immediate physical death. It cannot be remedied by any restitution or animal sacrifice, as can simple uncleanness from a *chattat*, an inadvertent sin – like a trespass against the Temple by touching pots or pans with unwashed hands. It is a *pesha*, a deliberate and willful transgression which carries the death penalty.

“Leave them alone” – Lashon Hara is equated in scripture with causing *tzara'at*, in scripture called leprosy. For example, Moshe, when he spoke ill of the people at the burning bush, and Miriam his sister, when she spoke harshly of her brother about taking a wife from the land of Kush, were both stricken with this disease. The result of being diagnosed with *tzara'at* was that the leper had to be banned from camp of Yisrael until the disease was completely healed, as the Torah says, *“He is unclean, and he dwells alone, his dwelling place is outside the camp.”* *Tzara'at* is just too infectious and endangers everyone exposed to it. Since the destruction of the physical Temple, there is no functioning priesthood to administer the scriptural tests and cleansing for *tzara'at*, and it is thought that the physical symptoms of it are now held in abeyance by the mercy of the Most-High until the

Set-Apart place is once again restored. But Lashon Hara still has the same infectious nature it always had, and still poses a grave danger to the camp of Yisrael. The only solution for dealing with someone who unrepentantly gossips about or speaks evil of others is to *“Leave them alone.”* It is in this spirit that Yehoshua told his talmidim and the others he was teaching to pay no more attention to the P’rushim and Sopherim who brought evil speech against those who followed him.

They are blind leaders of the blind” – An interesting thing about this statement is that one of the Torah commands associated with Lashon Hara is, *“Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind, but fear your Elohim.”* Not cursing the deaf, with regard to Shemirath Halashon, is said to mean that we should not talk about people behind their backs. However, not putting a stumbling block before the blind is thought to mean that we should not do or say things which can cause those who do not adequately know the commandments of YHWH or their deeper meanings to sin in weakness or ignorance. The P’rushim and Sopherim who came to harass Yehoshua and his crowd of as-yet incompletely taught students were well versed in the Torah. They knew the commandments. What they did not seem to understand is that by bringing false or even questionable accusations about them, they were actually breaking the commandments themselves. They were as blind in that way as were the ones they thought to influence and deceive. If Yehoshua had not stopped them, what they were attempting to do would have resulted in causing all to *“fall into a ditch.”*

“Do you not understand that whatever enters into the mouth goes into the stomach, and is cast out in the sewer?” – I am still continually amazed how well-intentioned people, after reading this entire passage in context, can somehow believe that Yehoshua is here endorsing the practice of eating meats expressly forbidden by Torah law. He never even mentions food, but only pots and pans and unwashed hands that are ceremonially unclean. Such uncleanness was only a problem, according to Torah law, when one was in or entering the precincts of the Temple. Even then, it was only a chattat, an unintentional or minor sin requiring a sacrificial remedy. It was not a pesha, a deliberate and willful transgression which requires the death penalty. The P’rushim, through their Traditions of the Elders, were trying to extend that law through their own practices and beliefs to all Jews everywhere. That was the sole reason for Messiah’s statement about what goes into the mouth of a man. For him to teach otherwise would have been a sin. The Torah says, *“This is the Torah of the beasts and the birds and every living being – the creeping creature in the waters, and of every being that swarms on the earth, to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the living creature that is eaten and the living creature that is not eaten.”* The reason YHWH Himself gives for His people to keep this command is, *“For I am YHWH who is bringing you up out of the land of Mitsrayim, to be your Elohim. And you shall be set-apart, for I am set-apart.”* Yehoshua and his disciples wrote to us that we should all be set-apart as he is, and to walk as he walked, which is in obedience to the Torah. He also said,

“For amein, I say to you, till the heaven and the earth pass away, one yod or one tittle shall by no means pass from the Torah till all be done,” which is to say, until heaven and earth pass away. Last time I looked they were still here.

“But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and these defile the man. For out of the heart come forth wicked reasonings, murders, adulteries, whorings, thefts, false witnessings, slanders. These defile the man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.”

– And there it is, the summation of the entire passage. What comes out of the mouth of a man and truly defiles him is unlawful Lashon Hara, evil speech and hurtful words about another person. Messiah himself equates this with *“wicked reasonings, murders, adulteries, whorings, thefts, false witnessings, slanders.”* This is the conclusion of the matter. It is not about what food we can eat or what traditions we choose, but what our filthy and hateful mouths say to and about one another.

Ya’aqov Hatzadik – James the Righteous, who was the half-brother of our Messiah, had this to say about the subject of Lashon Hara:

“If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the entire body. Look, we put bits in the mouths of horses, for them to obey us, and we turn their body. Look at the ships

too: although they are so big and are driven by strong winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot intends. So too the tongue is a little member, yet boasts greatly. See how a little fire kindles a great forest! And the tongue is a fire, the world of unrighteousness. Among our members the tongue is set, the one defiling the entire body, and setting on fire the wheel of life, and it is set on fire by Gehinnom.”

For a confessed follower of Yehoshua Hamashiach to speak evilly of another person, whether the words they say are true or false, is an abrogation of scriptural law and an act of hate. The Torah says, *“Do not hate your brother in your heart. Reprove your neighbor, for certain, and bear no sin because of him.”* For one of the children of YHWH to publicly break the commands of Shemirath Halashon while bearing His name before the world is called in scripture a *Chillul Hashem*, a Profanation of the Name, as it is written, *“And do not profane My set-apart Name, and I shall be set-apart among the children of Yisra’el. I am YHWH, who sets you apart.”*

Chaverym, when you open your mouth to speak about another person for any reason, think first about what you are about to say. Remember what Yehoshua taught his talmidim and the crowd that day. Question yourself about your own motives and how your words might affect others, both your listeners and the person you are about to mention. *“Be on guard, lest you forget YHWH your Elohim by not guarding His commands, and His judgments, and His laws which I command you today.”*

B’ahavah, Ovadyah