

THE PEDDLER'S SECRET

Text:

The Parsha describes the skin condition known as Tzara'as, a punishment for Lashon HaRa –negative or harmful speech.

Who is the man who wants life?... Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking falsehood!

[Psalms 34:13]

Once a peddler was circulating in the villages around Sepphoris, announcing, "Who wants to buy the elixir of life?"

[Rabbi Yannai pressed the peddler to reveal what he was selling.] He took out a book of Psalms and showed him the verse, "Who is the man who wants life?...Guard your tongue from evil...!"

Rabbi Yannai said, "All my life I read this verse and did not understand it, until this peddler came and taught me."

[Midrash on Parsha Metzora]

Question:

What did the peddler teach Rabbi Yannai that he didn't already know?

Answer:

The peddler's charade did not provide Rabbi Yannai with any new insight or additional information. However, it dramatized the idea that guarding one's tongue is a recipe for life. Taking a simple truth and making it come alive – even if no additional knowledge is gained – can have a life-changing impact on a person.

Message:

We all acknowledge certain basic principles, while at the same time failing to live up to them. What we lack is not information, but the ability to internalize what we already know. King David himself, in the Book of Psalms, used a creative strategy to drive his point home: "Who is the man who wants life?" The use of such evocative imagery is not just a gimmick for the unsophisticated; our wisest teachers understood that it is the mission of every human being.