

Rosh Hashanah morning 2008
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Once there was a man who went about the community telling malicious lies about the rabbi. One day, he realized the wrong he had done, and began to feel remorse. He went to the rabbi and begged his forgiveness, saying he would do anything he could to make amends. The rabbi told the man, "Take a feather pillow, cut it open, scatter the feathers to the winds, and come back to see me." The man thought this was a strange request, but it was a simple enough task, and he did it gladly. He returned to tell the rabbi that he had done it, and asked if he had been forgiven. "Not yet," said the rabbi. "There's one more thing. Go and gather the feathers." "But that's impossible," the man protested. "The wind has already scattered them." "Precisely," the rabbi answered. "And although you truly wish to correct the evil you have done, it is as impossible to repair the damage done by your words as it is to recover the feathers."

This story about words is a graphic illustration of their power. Words have far-reaching effects not only through space but through time. Most of us however, don't have that at the forefront of our minds when we talk about another person. It is a natural human inclination to gossip and something that most people do every day. It makes us feel close to people when we share personal information. We feel important and special when someone divulges a secret. It may not be our intention to harm someone when we talk about them but we have actually transgressed in a very serious way. It is called *lashon hara* in Hebrew or *loshen hora* for those of you from an Ashkenzi/Yiddish background.

Lashon hara is anything that lowers a person's reputation whether it is through what you say, how you say it, for example using sarcasm, or through non-verbal expressions such as making a face or rolling one's eyes. Rabbinic law breaks down *lashon hara* into three categories: gossip, talebearing and slander. Gossip, known as *rechilus* in Hebrew, is often defended as necessary for social cohesion. However, from a Jewish ethical stance, it is important that we minimize the amount we say about others, even of a complimentary nature, because of the foreseeable and even the unforeseeable ways in which it may cause them to be hurt, materially or emotionally. When two people gossip, both the speaker and the listener are considered transgressors, even if the subject of the discussion is present. Talebearing is a term that is usually applied to the spreading of information which, while factually accurate, causes damage of one sort or another to its subject. Finally, slander is the deliberate dissemination of damaging untruths. A slanderer is called a *motzi shem ra* – literally one who spreads a bad name. This person is considered the lowest of the low and was subject to punishment by the rabbis.

Lev. 19:16 says, "Do not go about as a talebearer among your people." Talebearing in this context, is essentially any gossip. The Hebrew word for talebearer is *rakheel*, which is related to a word meaning trader or merchant. The idea is that a talebearer is like a merchant, but he deals in information instead of goods. Just as a merchant goes from house to house buying from one and selling to another, so does the person who gossips. When we tell someone something intimate about a third party, particularly if that information is confidential, we expect to be told something in return of equal intimacy. We trade one intimacy for another just like the merchant.

The person who listens to gossip is even worse than the person who tells it, because no harm could be done by gossip if no one listened to it. Lev. 19:14 commands us not to place a stumbling block before the blind. The Hafetz Hayyim, a 20th century Talmudic scholar, explains that by providing an audience for a gossip, you make it possible for that person to stumble morally. Furthermore, if you gossip about someone behind their back while pretending to be their friend, in addition to being a hypocrite, you are violating yet another commandment: Lev. 19:17 which tells us not to hate your brother in your heart.

It has been said that *lashon hara* kills three people: the person who speaks it, the person who hears it, and the person about whom it is told. The gravest of the sins of talebearing are those which involve discrediting a person or saying negative things about them, even if those negative things are true. Some sources indicate that *lashon hara* is equal in seriousness to murder, idol worship and adultery – the only three sins that may not be violated even to save a life.

The harm done by speech is even worse than the harm done by stealing or by cheating someone financially, because amends can be made for monetary harms, but the harm done by speech can never be repaired. Speech has been compared to an arrow: once the words are released, like an arrow, they cannot be recalled, the harm they do cannot be stopped, and the harm they do cannot always be predicted, for words like arrows often go astray. For these reasons, some sources indicate that there is no forgiveness for *lashon hara* or disparaging speech.

In his book, Words That Hurt, Words That Heal, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin opens with the following thoughts on the subject. Remember the childhood saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me?” In our hearts we know this is untrue, but often we act as if we don’t know how much damage our words can cause. When we speak about others, when we gossip about their lives, their character, whether they are public figures or intimate friends, our words can cause irreversible damage. When we speak to our children, our words resonate throughout their lives, determining how well they will think of themselves and how well they will speak to others. When we express excessive anger at our partners, we block the path toward love. If we gossip about our hosts even as we partake of their hospitality, we jeopardize not only our friendship with them but that of others as well. And when we criticize someone for something that cannot be changed, we are using them for our own need to feel superior, all the while damaging their standing in the eyes of other people. Often it seems, we are more interested in chewing over the fact that so-and-so is having an affair, was fired from his job, or filed for bankruptcy than in discussing how loyal an employee, how fine a spouse, how good a friend that person is. With words it is so easy to turn good into bad.

As powerful as the capacity of words to hurt is their power to heal and inspire. In a time when the word “values” has become merely an empty slogan, capitalized on by those wishing to invoke righteousness rather than to embody it, more and more people are searching their souls, really looking inward and asking themselves, “What do I value and how is it manifest in my behavior – in what I do, in how I speak, in what I expect of others? How can I know what’s right; how can I change?”

The wisdom to know how to choose our words so that they will build bridges, rather than erect barriers to understanding, has been sought by writers, philosophers, and religious leaders throughout history, from the biblical sages to modern thinkers. The

anonymous author of a medieval text spends pages warning of the great evils routinely committed in speech: “With the tongue one can commit numerous great and might transgressions, but,” he adds, “with the tongue one can also perform limitless acts of virtue.”

To begin to reduce the all too human tendency to gossip, here are some suggestions. 1) Make it a point to speak about issues rather than personalities. The more difficult this is, the more it is an indicator of the need for intellectual, spiritual and moral growth. Gossiping about others can reveal a sense of inferiority and an inability to think abstractly and productively. 2) Try to avoid spending time with other people who gossip. It will only lure you into participating. If you cannot avoid the company of people who gossip, try changing the topic and/or explaining why you don't want to engage in the conversation. When you spend time with people who gossip, be aware that eventually you will be the subject of the discussion. 3) Avoid encouraging others to gossip by not asking them the details of private matters. Israel Salanter, the great 19th century rabbi who founded the mussar movement, gave us some good advice: normally we worry about our own material well-being and our neighbor's souls; instead let us worry about our neighbor's material well-being and our own souls.

According to the Talmud, one of the first questions the heavenly court addresses to those who have died is, “Did you hope for the world's redemption?” In other words, did you work toward leaving the world a better place than you found it? If you become the sort of person who learns to avoid speaking hurtful things about and to others, and accustom yourself to saying the words that buoy the spirits of those around you, you will have gone a long way toward fulfilling the age-old mission God addressed to humankind: to perfect the world under the rule of God.

Rabbi Riemer once devoted his Yom Kippur sermon to what he labeled “Four Phrases to Live By.” He urged the synagogue's crowd to “resolve that in this coming year you will learn to say four phrases more often than you have in the past: thank you, I love you, how are you, and what do you need?” These four short statements and questions express gratitude, love, and caring, the three most important concerns that healing words can convey.

Rather than our hurtful expressions, let our uplifting words travel as far as the feathers in the wind. Let them be implanted in the souls of the people around us so that we may truly create a grateful, loving and caring community. *Shanah tovah.*