

GUARD OUR TONGUES FROM EVIL...

Kol Nidre 5769

I'm sure that some of you were lucky enough to have this e-mail forwarded to you, if not this year, then during High Holy Days past. It reads: "Synagogue Seating Request Form for Yom Kippur" across the top and continues with a series of questions that will help the temple administration assign you a proper place in the sanctuary:

- 1) Which of the following would you like to be seated near for free professional advice: doctor, lawyer, dentist, real estate agent, or accountant?
- 2) Do you prefer a talking or a non-talking section?
- 3) If you prefer talking, which topic of conversation do you desire: stock market sports, medicine, politics, general gossip or specific gossip. If specific gossip, please choose one of the following: The rabbi, The cantor, The other rabbi...the one who looks like a Bar Mitzvah boy, what others are wearing, why they look awful, your neighbors, your relatives, or your neighbor's relatives.

It's long been a humorous truism that Moishe comes to *shul* to talk to God, and Hymie comes to *shul* to talk to Moishe. Gathering together as a community to see one another, catch up, and schmooze is surely a key element of these High Holy Days. And yet, there is a disturbing element of truth to the "Synagogue Seating Request Form" that has made its way around our computers like juicy gossip passes through our homes, our offices, our classrooms, and even through our own sacred congregation. The Jewish tradition is clear that misusing our words so carelessly is not a matter to be taken lightly...a lesson that is taught to us from the first moments of creation.

In the opening verses of Genesis, the Torah tells us, *Vayomer Elohim y'hi or vayehei or*¹ -- "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." God says, "Let the earth sprout vegetation," and plants of every kind burst forth from the earth. Even the animals, with their miraculously varied forms are brought into existence with but a few Divinely uttered words. Indeed, God spoke the entire world into being. This is a profound message from our ancestors that words have extraordinary power. This truth is even made clear in the Hebrew language itself. In our sacred tongue, the term "*d'var*" means both "word" and "thing." In our tradition, words are not immaterial and ephemeral, as we often treat them. Rather, they have weight...they are substantial...our speech has tremendous potential – both to create for the good and to affect great damage.

Our Torah long ago knew this to be true. In Leviticus, the Israelites are commanded: "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people."² The Hebrew for "talebearer" is "*rachil*," more literally translated as a "peddler." A peddler can not succeed in business unless he brings new, previously unavailable products to a community. Similarly, we sometimes act as merchants of the latest and most damaging information about our friends and neighbors, spreading our precious knowledge to anyone willing to acquire it.

¹ Genesis 1:3

² Leviticus 19:16

Our Rabbis learned from this early commandment in Leviticus and transformed it into an entire category of prohibited speech called *Rechilus* – known in our world as “tattling.” We’ve all been there. We’re chatting with someone we love who says, “You really ought to know what Uncle Morty said about you.” The words that follow hurt – they really hurt. Uncle Morty said that? About me? But he loves me. According to Jewish tradition, the one who shares that information with me is wrong to do so. He or she is peddling destructive goods. The conduit of such messages often claims to do so out of a sense of justice. “You deserve to know what Uncle Morty said.” Heaven forbid that everyone we love knew every single thing we ever said about them! Would there be ten amicable relationships left in the world if that were so? Should Uncle Morty have been more thoughtful with his words? Yes. Was it necessary for our mutual loved-one to convey his utterance to me? It was not.

Worse yet, however, is the category of speech which our Sages called *lashon hara* – the evil tongue. “So-and-so is a bad cook.” “He dresses like a slob.” “She got fired for negligence.” “He cheated on his wife.” “She took five tries to pass the test.” In each case, the words being shared are truthful, and in each case, the speaker is lowering this person’s esteem in the mind of the listener. Of course, our tradition sensibly allows for sharing such information in very specific cases when the recipient’s physical, economic, or emotional welfare is at stake. However, before revealing these “negative truths,” it is often a good idea for us to pause and ask ourselves, “Why do I need to share this?” If the answer isn’t genuinely compelling for the sake of the listener’s wellbeing, then we ought to keep our mouths shut.

In fact, our Sages developed myriad rules intended to help us do just that. These are but a few:

One has violated the Jewish law against *lashon hara* even if the listener pressures the speaker to share the information. I think we’ve all been on the receiving end of a persuasive argument like, “Come on, just tell me...” which has actually convinced us to share what we know.

One has violated the laws against *lashon hara* even if information is conveyed without speaking. When I’m asked, “Is it true what I heard about so-and-so?” and I reply with one of these (wink, wink, nod, nod)...just as much damage has been done as if I had spoken my damning response aloud.

One has violated the laws against *lashon hara* even if the speaker includes him or herself in the statement that incriminates another. Therefore, it is not permissible to say, “Sure, Bill cheats on his taxes, but don’t we all fudge those numbers a little bit?”

It’s *lashon hara* even if the subject of your speech told you this information himself and did not specifically request confidentiality, and it is *lashon hara* even if you are speaking about a member of your own family. Are we out of excuses and loopholes for our bad behavior yet?

Our Rabbis spent an inordinate amount of time, energy, and ink cataloguing the ways in which we ought to avoid slanderous and gossipy speech. But why? Is it really that big a deal? I mean, everybody does it, right?

The great medieval scholar, Moses Maimonides, taught that: “A person who makes certain statements, going from one individual to another saying: ‘He said thus and such, and I heard this and that about her,’ Even though this person may be telling the truth, he is bringing about the destruction of the world.”³ “The destruction of the world?” Isn’t that just a little severe? Is this simply Maimonides’ attempt at hyperbole?

Not when viewed through the lens of Judaism. In his book, Words that Hurt, Words that Heal, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin recalls the story of Oliver Sipple, an ex-Marine who saved the life of President Ford by thwarting a shooting attempt in 1975. When the press tried to interview this national hero following the incident he politely requested, “Please don’t write anything about me.” Eager reporters could not help themselves, however, and in the course of investigation about Sipple’s past, they discovered that this noble citizen was active in gay rights causes in San Francisco. One reporter, having caught wind of this scoop went to Sipple’s parents’ house in Detroit and asked his mother what she thought of her son’s homosexuality. This was news to her, and it was not news well received. Our hero’s mother stopped speaking to him, and when she died four years later, his father called to tell Oliver that he would not be welcome at her funeral. Sipple slowly withdrew from everyone around him until, a few years later, he was discovered dead in his apartment at age forty-seven.⁴ Quite a thanks our nation showed this man for his bravery and selflessness. Did we need to know anything about his background in order to show our appreciation for his courageous deed? Of course not. We simply crave the salacious, the sensational, the scandalous. Even in less severe cases than Sipple’s, however, when physical demise is not the final outcome, Maimonides’ assertion still stands...slander often kills by robbing others of their livelihood, their physical and mental wellbeing, their security, and their reputation.

Furthermore, unlike conventional warfare, the damage done by slander knows no bounds. In the words of the Talmud, “The gossip stands in Syria and kills in Rome.”⁵ In our own context, the tabloid writer types in Los Angeles but slays in San Francisco, the sensationalist television host speaks in New York but murders in Washington.

Every example mentioned thus far involves sharing information about a person which is TRUE! Slandering someone by spreading false accusations is considered even more detestable than *lashon hara*. Such an act is called *motzi shem ra* – bringing about a bad name in another – and is particularly unfair and cruel in the damage it wreaks. Just ask former U.S. Secretary of Labor, Raymond Donovan who was lambasted by a rumor mill which ultimately led to his indictment and prosecution. After amassing over a million dollars in legal fees and being found not guilty of all charges, Donovan emerged from the

³ *Mishneh Torah, Mada Deot 7:2*

⁴ Words that Hurt, Words that Heal, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin (New York: Quill, 1996), pp. 20-21.

⁵ *Talmud Yerushalmi, Tractate Pe’ah 1:1*

courtroom and asked, “Where do I go to get my reputation back?” Where, indeed? And yet, who among us can say that we have never spoken damaging words about someone that we knew to be exaggeration, innuendo, or just an outright lie?

When Michele and I occasionally find the time to curl up on the couch and watch a little television, Law and Order reruns are frequently our program of choice. While we love the show, there is one recurring courtroom exchange which regularly throws me into hysterical fits of frustration. The scene is this: a swarthy defense lawyer is cross-examining the District Attorney’s primary witness, and slowly but surely, the attorney’s probing questions morph into accusatory statements of questionable veracity: The witness protests to these false accusations, as does the District Attorney, “Objection, your honor, is Defense going to ask a question here?” “Sustained,” rules the judge as she turns towards the jury box and says, “The jury will disregard the Defense’s last statement.”

By now I am yelling at the television screen, “Don’t be ridiculous! They can’t disregard the attorney’s statement. It’s out there now. What are they just gonna forget it because you say so?!? You can’t take it back! Come on!” Michele is now rolling her eyes at me and suggesting that maybe we should watch The Office instead. This is, perhaps, the most pernicious aspect of *lashon hara* – once they have been unleashed our words can not be recaptured. That’s why our *midrash*⁶ likens the tongue not to a sword, but to an arrow. For if an aggressor raises his sword to slay a man, he may, at the last moment, look into the victim’s eyes, take mercy on him, and spare his life. Once an archer’s arrow has left his bow, however, there is no getting it back, no possibility of reprieve.

But the verbal archer is not the only one to blame for the spread of gossip. Our Rabbis instructed that the wicked tongue slays three: the subject of the slander, the listener, and the speaker of the damaging words.⁷ Indeed, we ought recognize that even when we are on the receiving end of gossipy speech we are contributing to the problem. When *lashon hara* appears in our discussions, we, as listeners, have the power to say, “I don’t want to hear about this.” Doing so is not only ethical but is in our own self interest...if I choose to listen to *lashon hara*, that information will now be mine to own, unrepeatable, for the rest of time. We can all remember instances when we thought to ourselves, “Wow. I wish I didn’t know that.”

Note that the Rabbis also said that the speaker is killed by his own words...how is that possible? Well, when I regularly malign another behind his or her back, I put a space between me and that person. If I do that frequently, and with enough people, I wind up distant, alienated from those who surround me. This is further exacerbated by the fact that those who listen to my slanderous speech stop trusting me with the truths of their own lives, knowing that it is only a matter of time before I spread their private matters far and wide. I slowly become an island, far worse off for my own bad behavior.

Years ago, I was present to hear my teacher and rabbi, Larry Kushner, give a Yom Kippur sermon on this very topic. Is there a better time of year than now to consider the

⁶ *Midrash Rabbah, Tehillim 120:4*

⁷ *Talmud Yerushalmi Pe’ah 1:1 and Talmud Bavli Arachin 15b*

wounds we have inflicted with our words...a day dedicated to atoning for our sins against others? Rabbi Kushner concluded his teaching on that *Kol Nidre* evening by challenging the congregation to go one week without committing *lashon hara*. “No, that is too much to ask,” he corrected. “Go three days without speaking *lashon hara*.” He concluded that to be excessive as well. “Go one day...no, no...try to make it out of the synagogue tonight without speaking about other people.” I bumped into Rabbi Kushner’s son, Lev, after services that night...he was an old friend from youth group, and we had a lot of catching up to do. We had to flee to the parking lot in order to respect his father’s challenge. Can you make it to your car tonight without talking about others? Can you make it all the way home, perhaps even through the end of Yom Kippur? Wouldn’t that be a great tone to set for yourself, for your family, as we enter a new year with a clean slate?

Our *t’fillah*, the central section of our worship service begins with the plea: “*Adonai s’fatai tiftach ufi yagid t’hillatecha* – Eternal God, open my lips that my mouth may properly declare Your praise.” A fitting request before we embark on a dialogue with the Holy One. At the conclusion of our *t’fillah*, however, as we prepare to reenter the world of human discussion, we offer a very different prayer. “*Elohai netzor l’shoni mei-ra, u’sfatai m’daber mirma* – Please, God, guard my tongue from evil, and keep my lips from speaking lies.” May the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable to You on this night, O God, and throughout the year to come. Amen.