

Guarding Ourselves – and Others – From Evil Speech

Parashat Toledot

November 21, 2020

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Guard your tongue from evil,

your lips from speaking guile.

Psalms 34:14

In this week's parashah, we see a terrible rift open up between two brothers. It's not as if they had the greatest relationship prior to that. After all, we're told that they fought in the womb. But their relationship really took a turn when one of them became convinced that the other one was trying to cheat him out of something precious. And as we know – since the Torah tells us this—he really did cheat him.

There's nothing like a feeling of being cheated to get one really riled up. It happens to us when we're kids; it happens to us when we are adults.

We should understand that. We're witnessing, right now, on the national stage, what can happen when deliberate efforts are being made to create an impression among some of having being cheated. That's not the same as being cheated, mind you – but the impact can be the same.

Just so we're all clear: we are witnessing a preposterous—absolutely preposterous—premeditated effort to get people to believe that the election turned out the way it did because one side cheated.



Now, you may hear people say, don't worry about it. It's all going to work out. The results of the recent election will be certified.

But my focus right now is not whether the will of the people will be respected in determining the outcome of the recent election that took place. Don't get me wrong: I worry about that. But I'm not speaking about that now.

My concern is about something else: What will we be left with after the election is certified? How will one brother feel about the other?

I think we know the answer to that question. For once someone has raised doubts about another's integrity—baseless though those doubts may be—one is left with **lingering doubts**.

A healthy skepticism is one thing. But **lingering doubts** founded on nothing—those are something quite different.

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Almost always, when I have spoken about the Jewish attitude toward proper and improper speech, I almost always speak about what's called in Hebrew, ***l'shon ha-rah***.

The expression "*leshon ha-rah*" comes from Psalm 34: "*Guard your tongue from evil; [and your lips from speaking guile].*"

What is *l'shon ha-rah*? It's evil speech of a particular kind. It's speech that is true, but whose purpose is, as Rabbi Joseph Telushkin helpfully sums it up, to "harm, embarrass, ... or lower the status of the person being discussed." (Telushkin, p. 332)

Rabbi Israel Stein used to define ***l'shon ha-rah*** as "mean-spirited truth."

Now, the reason that I am so accustomed to speaking about *l'shon ha-rah*, is that it's so easy and so tempting to engage in it. Think about it: for most of us, the most interesting gossip is **true** gossip. It's just not interesting if it's not true, right? So, because it's interesting, we're prone to engage in it.

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But as bad as *l'shon ha-rah* is – and it's pretty bad – even worse, in our tradition, is speech called, ***motzi shem rah***. That literally means “giving someone a bad name” and refers to the malicious spreading of lies about another. Those lies can be said about an individual or they can be said about a group.

A classic example of such slander is in the play, “Othello,” by Shakespeare. The evil villain, Iago, accomplishes his evil through *motzi shem ra*. When Othello bypasses him for promotion, Iago vows to destroy him, and does so by convincing him that his beloved wife, Desdemona, has betrayed him. The charge seems preposterous, but Iago repeats the accusation again and again, and arranges damning circumstantial evidence to destroy Desdemona's credibility. In the end, Othello kills Desdemona, only to learn that Iago's accusation was false.

They don't call that a tragedy for nothing.

But the victims of slanderers are not only individuals but also groups. For example, during the 1920s, Henry Ford, the most successful businessman in the US, launched an attack against Jews.

He charged that Jews were involved in an international conspiracy to control the world's finances and politics. The damage done was enormous. As Teslushkin tells us, “The Nazis translated Ford's articles into German and sitributed them widely. His diatribes helped achieve the 1924 quotas restricting immidgration from Eastern Europe. Hundreds of thousands of

Jews who might otherwise have been able to enter the U.S. were prevented from doing so and were murdered.” Think of the impact of this slander.

Conspiracy theories of all kinds fall into the category of ***motzi shem rah***. The reason is that they are groundless, and yet ***they have traction***. They stick somewhat, and that causes damage.

We can see this clearly today. As I stated, conspiracy theories have arisen in connection with the recent election. Doubt has been cast on the results. Groundless, baseless doubt. As a result, do you know how many people in our country not only have *doubts* about the results of the election, but *believe* that fraud was committed? 50 million people. If 50 million people can be led to believe, with no evidence, that fraud was committed, think how difficult it will ultimately be to convince them otherwise.

Damage done to a person’s good name – or the good name of a group -- sometimes just cannot easily be undone. (That’s of course the point! That’s why people do it!)

And so, Jewish law regards ***motzi shem ra, malicious slander***, as an incredibly serious offense. It’s so serious that under certain circumstances, the victim is not required to forgive the perpetrator, even if that forgiveness is sincerely requested.

Knowing what we know about the importance of forgiveness in Jewish law and tradition, I think we can see how exceptional this is.

So what’s the take-away from all this for us?

I can’t imagine that any of us is going to **fabricate** a conspiracy theory. So, what’s the point of my talking about it here and now?

Well, we may not be fabricators of efforts to diminish a person’s good name, we may not be fabricators of conspiracy theories, but **they come across our**

screens daily. They are shared with us all the time. I'm sure I'm not the only one who receives e-mails from people – in ALL CAPS – urging me to learn of the latest nefarious plot that threatens our freedom.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who reads of such plots on Facebook or Twitter. So we all get exposed to this. What then is our responsibility? What is our Jewish obligation?

Well, before we share a negative statement about someone or about a group, we should always take steps to confirm that it is accurate. It is amazing to me that some people feel it is a *mitzvah* to share unsubstantiated, derogatory rumors. I therefore feel obliged to say it clearly: it isn't.

Skepticism is a Jewish virtue. That's why we should seek to confirm the facts. **Sharing unfounded doubts** (that someone else has concocted for their own nefarious purposes) is not.

So what do we do with that? If we shouldn't be re-tweeting baseless conspiracy theories, what is our duty?

Well, one thing is clear: **the worse thing we can do in such a situation is to convey the impression that we accept slander as truth.** That will only lead people to believe that it is true. And that is a sin.

So, though we may be tempted to remain silent, can we do that? The answer is clear: No. ***"Shtikah k'hoda'ah damei."*** "Silence is akin to consent." We can't be silent.

Instead, we must fight deceitful, defamatory speech, with all our heart, soul, and might. Otherwise, to make use of a metaphor from today's torah portion, we'll be drinking from the waters of hostility, the waters of contention, forever and ever.

Jacob and Esau had an uneasy relationship practically their entire life. The consequences of what happens now can stay with us for decades—even generations. We have to do what we can to play a constructive—and ethically grounded—role in our families and in our society. To do otherwise is to court enduring disaster.

Shabbat shalom.