

***Motzi Shem Rah: Another Kind of Malignant Speech***

***Parashat Tazria-Metzora***

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I'm really grateful to our bat mitzvah, Talia Weinstock, for speaking about *l'shon ha-rah*, or "gossip," this morning. Every time we read this week's *parashah*, it's good to remind ourselves just how dangerous gossip is. Long before the era of social media, gossip was an easy activity to engage in and its impact was dangerous; unfortunately we can see that this is still true today.

Now, gossip is not the only kind of speech that the rabbis condemned, nor the only kind that they linked with today's *parashah*.

For there are two different kinds of forbidden speech that the rabbis link with the malady called *tsara'at*.

One, as Talia shared with us, is gossip. Generally speaking, gossip is sharing private or not widely known **true** information about a person that might lead others to think less of him or her. In fact, it's usually intended to accomplish that aim.

There's another kind of speech, called, *hotza'at shem rah*, or "defamation." To be a *motzi shem rah* is to spread **false** information about a person, with the same intent -- to malign.

Now, ordinarily, the only kind of malignant speech that I think it necessary to speak about is gossip. The reason is that gossip is incredibly tempting! When we hear gossip, it's almost like holding a hot potato. We can't wait to hand it over to someone else. In fact, it makes us feel *better* to hand it over to someone else. If someone else knows it, then it's almost as if we have diminished our own responsibility for sharing it.

On the other hand, it's just not as tempting, ordinarily, to share *false* information about another person. You really have to be a *devious* person to want to do that, because you have to be someone who not only wants to hurt the person you're speaking *about*, but also wants to mislead the people you're speaking *with*. That



puts you in the category of being a *liar* and a *deceiver*, which is a very different, more sinister, category than that of the gossip.

**Most people are gossipers; most people are not liars.** Most people don't deliberately state falsehoods in order to gain an advantage over others.

So ordinarily, I don't think it necessary to talk about outright lying. But I want to do that now, because we're living in an era when lying has become commonplace.

Let me give you two examples of that that surfaced in the news over the past few days.

First, in the past week, a number of people have gone on national television to cast aspersions on certain public figures by referring to certain scandals, and stating that these public officials were responsible for them.

Now, when those television appearances took place, those statements seemed like gossip. But subsequently, it became clear that those statements were unfounded. Now, there may yet be evidence to the contrary; it may yet be demonstrated that those public figures really were responsible for those scandals. But such evidence hasn't yet surfaced, and it certainly hasn't yet been offered. It sure looks as though these statements were part of a calculated plan to defame certain people; to discredit them by associating them, falsely, with those scandals.

The second example is a little different. You may recall that there was an incident at a Starbucks in Philadelphia. Two black men were asked to leave. They said that they were waiting for someone, but they weren't believed. The police were called and the men, after being handcuffed, were almost arrested. Subsequently, the police apologized, and Starbucks apologized, and in the wake of this incident Starbucks has decided to close its stores for a half day to institute anti-bias training. It reached out to several organizations that have had experience confronting discrimination and racism: the Equal Justice Initiative, the NAACP, and the ADL.

So far so good. But then, someone, a prominent person, someone who has a lot of followers on twitter, tweeted that Starbucks should be criticized, not praised, because it shouldn't have included the ADL among those it consulted. Why? Because, in her own words, "The ADL is CONSTANTLY attacking black and brown people." So an effort by Starbucks to address a problem becomes an opportunity to denigrate the ADL!

Um, no, the ADL is not “CONSTANTLY attacking black and brown people.” They condemn racism among people of all complexions. Some racists are white, and some racists are black; and the ADL will and does condemn both kinds. It’s just wildly untrue to suggest, much less to assert, that they CONSTANTLY attack black and brown people.

What these two stories have in common is what is delicately called mudslinging. Mudslinging is taking a lot of dirt and throwing it at a target, hoping that some of it will stick. What usually happens is that, even though much of the mud eventually falls off the target, some of it, *enough* of it, remains to damage the reputation of one’s opponent.

Mudslinging has been around a long time. In “The Barber of Seville,” Beaumarchais cries out, “Calumniate, calumniate! -- for some of it will always stick.” This is based on an old Latin proverb, “Throw plenty of dirt, and some of it will stick.” We will see examples of mudslinging in the Torah itself, in a few weeks. We’ll read about Korach and how he maligned Moses; and we’ll read about the ten spies who maligned the Land of Israel and introduced much discord among the people, which ultimately prevented them from entering the Land.

As the rabbis teach us, those spies -- indeed, most mudslingers -- leave a little bit of truth in what they say; otherwise, people wouldn’t listen to them at all. But that little bit of truth isn’t enough to make up for the weight of their lies.

It isn’t easy to respond to mudslinging. For it’s much easier to throw mud than to clean it up. So the dangers are huge.

Mudslinging is an example of *motzi shem rah*, throwing out false and defamatory statements. As I said, ordinarily I wouldn’t feel the need to condemn it. After all, how many people here today engage in this kind of talk? For most of us, it’s just not very tempting. In fact, it’s disgusting. However, based on stories like the ones I’ve shared with you today, I am concerned that now it is becoming increasingly commonplace. We are being exposed to more and more of it every day.

Sadly, it’s becoming normative to lie, and to lie in this particular way, which I call “instrumental lying,” which is telling lies strategically in order to gain an advantage over an opponent.

Let me share yet another example: Think about that phrase, “Fake News.” It’s a perfect example of instrumental lying. It’s defamatory. It basically throws mud on

the entire news gathering and reporting industry of our society, which is filled with plenty of honest, upstanding people who are instantly condemned unfairly with an accusation like that.

To call inconvenient facts fake, to make things up about people one doesn't like -- and to repeat those false statements, even after the truth has been pointed out -- these are examples of *hotzaat shem rah*, defamation, which is a terrible, destructive form of behavior..

We can learn that from the Book of Psalms. There's a passage that appears in our prayer book that makes the point very clearly:

*“Guard your tongue from evil,  
And your lips from speaking guile;  
Turn from evil  
And do good.”*

(Psalm 34:23-24)

This passage puts it bluntly: Telling the truth is connected with doing good; and lying is evil. We don't need much more evidence than that.

So, ... what should we do?

Well, the first thing is simple: we shouldn't lie. I hope that that is obvious.

But as I said, most of us aren't liars. So is there anything else we should do?

The answer is yes. We should and must go further: We should take note of it when we become aware that people are lying, and we should challenge that. *We should never become complacent. We should never accept as truth what is in fact a lie.*

We should go even further than that. For we have more of an impact, we *can* have more of an impact, on the media and on our leaders than we may think. We should support the free press. We should insist on higher standards from our leaders; insist on more and better fact checking, and more and better follow up questions. We can and should do more to elevate discourse in this country. We must never allow lying to become normative. When we hear lies, we should remind ourselves and our children that that is what they are. We should call them out.

In the end, we will get the level of discourse that we deserve. If we tune out, if we simply say, “Well, all politicians lie. What can you expect?” If we simply say, “Oh well, I’m ok with these activists who are doing so many wonderful things; so what if they don’t have their facts straight when it comes to Jews or the State of Israel?” If we simply look at what’s going on in this country as a source of **entertainment**, and stop caring about making a difference, then we will share responsibility for the consequences. “*Mavet v’Hayim b’Yad Halashon.*” “Life and death are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21).

Let’s choose life.

*Shabbat shalom!*