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Congregation Adat Reyim Retreat

D'var Torah on Tazria-Metzora [Lev 12:1-15:33; Rosh Hodesh Num 28:9-15, Is. 66:1-24]

Gossip

The Torah portion for this week is a double one, Tazria-Metzora. It deals with skin diseases common in biblical times and their associated purification rites. Having to comment on it is generally understood to be punishment for naughty rabbis. But it comes in the spring, at a popular time for retreats, and so we are stuck with it again, just like last year!

Although we are no longer subject to the skin diseases of the biblical text today, Baruch HaShem, Talmudic and later commentators have come to the rescue by telling us that what is really referred to here is SPIRITUAL impurity, in the form of lashon hara', that is: gossip. At the retreat last year I talked about lashon hara'. This year I said to myself that I was NOT going to talk about lashon hara'. But after surveying the field of possible alternatives, I decided that I WILL talk about lashon hara' after all!

No, seriously. The reason I'll talk about lashon hara' is that something happened in the past year. You could have guessed it was going to happen if you've been following the evolution of Western morals. Ladies and gentlemen, in this age of moral relativism, in this age where there is no wrong behavior, some psychologists are now telling us that studies have shown that GOSSIP CAN SOMETIMES BE GOOD!

Let's examine their findings. But before we do that, let me remind you of the Jewish position on lashon hara':

- You may not speak ill of others, even if you are telling the truth, even if they are dead, even to the people closest to you.
- You may not speak ill of yourself.
- You may not IMPLY ill, through body language, tone of voice, omissions, or ambiguous expressions.
- You may not speak *what will be interpreted* as ill, even if you say you don't *mean* ill.

- You may not relay damaging information even if you say you are not sure it is reliable.
- You may not relay information about someone who does not want it relayed.

Exceptions are few and far between. You may speak ill of others if you are:

- writing a letter of recommendation on request;
- or testifying in court;
- or saving a life;
- or warning someone against dealing with people who have been crooked in dealing with YOU (and only with you);
- or referring to the misdeeds of people *currently* serving a legal sentence *for those misdeeds*;
- or teaching about cruel and crooked historical figures to avoid history repeating itself;
- or speaking to someone, in private, to advise him on how to correct the faults you perceive in him.

The Talmud says:

"Anyone who shames another in public is as if he had shed blood." [Bava Metzia 58b].

It also says:

"Slander destroys three persons: He who speaks evil, he who listens to it, and he who is spoken about" [Ar. 15b]

Now, what are these psychologists saying?

First, the facts. A study based on a huge amount of eavesdropping in public places showed that two-thirds of the time, when people talk, it is gossip that comes out. Other studies addressed what is contained in this gossip.

Now, the speculation. To quote a psychology professor at the University of Liverpool, "Language evolved for social purposes, not spreading technical information like whether it will rain or how to get from New York City to Washington, D.C. Knowledge of the social world has a much deeper purpose. It's not just the fact that I saw Jimmy kiss Penelope, but how that incident relates to me and the group."

First, they say, gossip fosters bonding. When two people exchange slander about others, they create an association: Two superior people versus the inferior masses. Also, when we gossip, we show others we trust them enough to share such information, which reinforces the bonding.

This bonding extends to entire groups. A study showed that spreading good news about the group's friends and damaging news about the group's enemies makes the group as a whole feel good, which helps to buttress group goals. Some also suggest that negative talk in a group about a member of the group who deviates from group norms can be used as punishment, and as a means to get the offending member to mend his ways.

Second, talking about people who are less skilled or of lower status bolsters our own self-esteem.

Third, some psychologists view gossip as evolution of the species. Natural selection pressured us to learn as much as possible about the people around us, as a means of protection against them. As a professor at Knox College said, "If you weren't curious about others, you'd pay the consequences".

Fourth, a Yale researcher suggests that gossip gives us something to talk about. She says, "We don't tend to like people that don't have anything to talk about. Talking about other people gives us an infinite source of conversational material."

Fifth, gossiping about prominent people can be used to test the limits of acceptability. When people talked about President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, they were also trying to see whether their social circle was ready to accept this as normal behavior in a changing world. (Hey, if this flies, maybe I can join the fun!)

Sixth, when you spread dirt, you become popular - most of the time.

A psychologist at the University of Santa Barbara, author of the book "Why Gossip Can Be Healthy", says, "Gossip is like chocolate. Humans are drawn to fatty, sweet foods like chocolate because such high-calorie foods were once our lifeblood in lean times. As a result, people crave those foods - even when they are not in dire need of calories. Likewise, the pleasure

that people derive from gossip can create a tendency to "dish dirt" - even when the subject matter doesn't affect our lives, such as with celebrity gossip, or when divulging information could be more risky, such as at work".

So there you have it. None of this is particularly new or unexpected. These psychologists are correct. OF COURSE you will derive benefit from gossip. In fact, you believe you will derive benefit from everything you do, or you wouldn't be doing it - even if that benefit is just a feeling of satisfaction. That's not the point. The real point is, does this benefit outweigh the harm done to others? Our tradition answers this question with a resounding and unambiguous "No!" For example, when two Gentiles who are not particularly antisemitic share antisemitic jokes, they DO bond; but they also unwittingly set the stage for the next Holocaust.

It's up to us whether to follow our tradition or not.

Shabbat shalom.