

Lashon Hara -- The Evil Tongue

Hassidic tale of pillow with feathers:

A man went about spreading malicious gossip about the rabbi. Later, he realized the wrong he had done and went to the rabbi to beg his forgiveness, asking what he could do to make amends.

The rabbi told the man, "Take a feather pillow, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the winds." After he had done it, the rabbi said, "Now, go and gather up all the feathers."

"Impossible!", said the man. "They are scattered to the four winds!". The rabbi said: "Just as it is impossible to gather all the feathers, so is it impossible to repair the damage your words have caused."

For centuries, the rabbis have been thundering against lashon hara (evil speech, malicious gossip) with little success: It seems so natural that we all do it.

Today's Torah portion is Tazria, tomorrow's is Metzora. They are usually together as a single parsha, Tazria-Metzora, but because this is a leap year they are separated. The portion talks about what the kohanim - the priests - must do in cases of leprosy.

Now, leprosy is universally understood by commentators to be the punishment for Lashon Hara, the Evil Tongue, because, in the Torah, Miriam was punished with leprosy for badmouthing her brother Moses. [Num. 12:1-15]

The portion says that the leper shall take two live, clean birds... slaughter one bird, dip the other bird in the blood of the first, then sprinkle that blood seven times upon himself to be cleansed. Then he shall let the live bird go free. Rashi says that because the affliction comes in punishment for the chatter of gossip and slander, the purification is effected by means of chirping twittering birds.

Here is what our traditional texts have to say about lashon hara:

Torah

You shall not go up and down as a slanderer among your people. Leviticus 19:16

Psalms

...Lord, who shall abide in your tent? Who shall dwell in your holy mountain?

He who walks uprightly, and does what is right, and speaks the truth in his heart.

He who does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor. [Psalms 15:1-3]

Who is the man who desires life, and loves many days, that he may see good?

Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking guile.

Depart from evil, and do good.

Seek peace, and pursue it. [Psalms 34:13-15]

Talmud:

Anyone who shames another in public it is as if he sheds blood. [Bava Metzia 58b]

The upright may be insulted but never insult, hear themselves maligned by do not respond. [Yoma 23a]

Slander destroys three persons: Him who speaks evil, him who listens to it, and him who is being slandered [Ar. 15b]

Commentators

Man was given two ears and one tongue, so that he may listen more than speak. [Hasdai, Ben-ha-Melekh ve-ha-Nazir, 13th cent.]

Chafetz Hayyim: In the 19th century, the Chafetz Hayyim devoted his life to deciding what speech is permissible and what is not. Here are some examples inspired from his work:

Are the following statements Jewishly acceptable or not?

-Joe Cohen doesn't give any money to charity.
No [Damaging. Doesn't matter if true. If false it's being a false witness, forbidden by the Ten Commandments]

-Joe Cohen doesn't give any money to charity - he openly tells everybody that he doesn't believe in charity.
No [Damaging still. His opinion does not count.]

-Amy Levy has a bad temper. I don't mean that negatively - sometimes that temper served her well.
No [Still negative, in spite of denial]

-I have a bad temper.
No [Can't put yourself down]

-"Dear Sir: You asked me for a letter of recommendation for Barry Katz. He is a very affable young man, easy to get along with, and competent in your area of concern. I fear, however, that he does not possess the kind of endurance and creative powers you are looking for, and he tends to work short hours and give up easily when confronted with difficulties."
Yes [If in confidence and requested, it's OK]

-Joe is in jail. He has been convicted on five counts of theft, breaking and entering.
Yes [Public record, so OK; serves as example]

-Joe is in jail. He has been convicted on five counts of theft, breaking and entering. But did you know he also beat his wife regularly?
No [Can't add]

-Joe spent time in jail for theft a few years ago.
No [Entitled to clean slate]

-Hitler was the very incarnation of evil.
Yes [History must be told]

-Joe, who died last week, was an adulterer and a scoundrel.
No [Living or dead, still Lashon Hara]

-Don't mention Jeremy to me, because I don't want to get into the things he did!

No [Implies he did terrible things. Don't have to SAY bad things for it to be damaging]

-Joe was not drunk last night.

No [Implies he usually is]

-Jennifer's two-year-old is ugly, cranky, and always slobbering.

No [Can't slander a 2-year-old, but reflects poorly on mother]

-Yes, Your Honor, I did see the defendant shoplift that shirt at Macy's and leave without paying for it.

Yes [Must tell truth under oath in court]

-No! Stop! Don't kill him! I'll tell you what you want to know.

Yes, Sam did steal those documents and try to frame you for it.

Yes [Pikuach nefesh; saving a life overrides prohibition]

-Don't buy from this merchant. Last week he overcharged me, sold me low quality merchandise that was not as advertised, and his scales are rigged.

Yes [OK only if personal experience; not if relay someone else's]

Rabbi Israel Salanter, the 19th century Lithuanian rabbi who founded the Mussar movement, a Jewish spiritual and ethical movement, said:

Normally we worry about our own material well-being and our neighbors' souls. Let us rather worry about our neighbors' material well-being and our own souls.

Shabbat shalom.
