

## Who are the People in your Neighborhood?

Tazria/Hachodesh/Rosh Chodesh Nissan 5782

The scenarios I'm about to describe are completely hypothetical, but I'm sure we have each encountered them in some form.

In a game of Jewish geography, you ask someone if they know your favorite uncle, Herb.

Upon hearing the name, an awkward silence ensues. While you continue extolling the virtues of your uncle, your interlocutor mentions that the same Herb stiffed them to the tune of half a million dollars from them in a business deal gone sideways. Alternatively, you tell me how much you enjoyed Shearith Israel's first place chili at the Chili cookoff, and I go off on a rant, professing my view that the chili tasted like sweaty gym socks. I continue, getting redder and redder in the face as you slowly back away toward the door, asserting that the judges' taste buds must have been compromised by COVID if they awarded any prize at all for that swill, instead of to the masterpiece the Shaare team prepared. Or, at lunch, your guests remark that they thought the sermon was an insightful, intellectually stimulating, inspiring, relatable oratorical tour de force, but you think that on a Shabbos with three sifrei Torah, it takes tremendous nerve to deliver a sermon at all. If you've experienced any of these, you have had a first hand lesson in Avak Lashon Hara. Literally, it is defined as the "dust" of Lashon Hara, one of the primary sins that cause the affliction of *tzara'at* mentioned in this week's Parsha. It is not *actual* Lashon Hara, because *you* don't say anything negative, but elicit it in others instead- whether through praise or through ambiguous remarks that

can be interpreted in both negative and positive ways. In his famous compendium on the laws of proper speech, the Chofetz Chaim notes that this is one of the most common speech violations, and therefore one of the most difficult to avoid.

For many people, this is a difficult halacha to swallow. Does that mean that you are never allowed to praise anyone to anyone else, for fear that they don't agree with your assessment of the person in question? This halachah is difficult to uphold, and it seems to mandate a joyless and austere world. Above all, this halacha is unfair. After all, why should we be responsible for others who are so dreadful that they turn every compliment into an insult, or always place the most negative interpretation possible on any statement?

I think there are several important lessons to be learned from this halacha.

First, we should speak less about people altogether. In general, conversations that revolve around people and things are the ones that lend themselves to *lashon Hara*, engendering jealousy and pettiness and often leaving nothing of substance to take from them.

Furthermore, *avak lashon hara* asks us to examine not just what comes out of our mouths, but who is around to hear it. By demanding that we monitor how others may perceive our words, we are really asked to consider who comprises our social circle. Are we surrounded by those who are always looking to negate us, to find the flaw in our words or the negative in their world, to find the “angle” when they hear praise? Are our friends the sort of people whose sentences begin with “I hate to burst your bubble, but...” or, “well actually...”? Are they the kind of people who find it humorous to mock the physical appearances of others, or who

react violently to provocation? Those who take the bait and view praise of others as an invitation to critique are among the types of people we are admonished to avoid. While we cannot control what others feel or say, we certainly have influence over the environment we create and put ourselves and others into. Rav Yehonatan Eibeschuetz, one of the most remarkable Torah personalities of the 17th and 18th centuries, suggests that this is the reason that someone who speaks *lashon hara* must go into isolation, or quarantine. It is not just as a punishment for her alienating others, but also an opportunity to rethink her social circles and recalibrate her friendships.

Today is Rosh Chodesh Nissan, and in two weeks we will be celebrating the holiday of Pesach. Next year, and maybe even this year, we will gather in Yerushalayim to consume the Korban Pesach. There is one major peculiarity when it comes to that gathering: the guest list must be carefully prepared in advance, forming what is called a *chaburah*. Uninvited or last-minute guests are forbidden from joining the Pesach Chabura, and those who have committed in advance to joining are required to attend. When hearing this we might wonder: Isn't the central theme of the Korban Pesach is *kol dichfin* - *let all who are hungry and needy join in*. If the *chaburah* is a mandate, does the Torah want us to become elitist, insular, and exclusive in our dealings with others? Quite the contrary! It wants us to prepare a large and inclusive guest list in advance. But at the same time, the Torah wants us to be mindful and discerning regarding who we count as friends. While this may sound like a call to shrink our social circle, it may actually expand as a result. This can happen if we include in our social circle as many people as possible who are of generous spirit, who elevate our conversation, who don't view praise of others as implicit criticism of themselves, who don't

draw friendship lines based on political or religious differences, who are agreeable and pleasant to be around. Let us do so, and above all, let us be those people ourselves.