

# RABBI RICK RHEINS

## CLERGY

Oh, the things they say. Let's hope they'll stop!



For many years I had a sign on my desk that read: "Thank You For Not Speaking *Loshon Hora*." That little sign worked like a charm because visitor after visitor to my office ask me the same question: "What does that mean?" *Loshon Hora* is the Yiddish pronunciation of the Hebrew term *Leshon Hara*. They both literally mean: "evil tongue" and refer to gossip, slander and inappropriate words said at another's expense. The problem with *Leshon Hara* is that it is a sin that nearly everyone indulges in. It is as if we feel that a little gossip is not so bad. Making fun of someone is. . . well, "fun!" It's so much fun that we even try to justify it. "She's my dearest friend, but God knows, she has the worst taste in clothes." Well, after that, not only God knows, but someone else knows as well! Others feel that it is not really gossip if what they're saying is true. "Now I wouldn't say this, if it wasn't true...but so and so does such and such." And so on and so forth. It is amazing that people who would never dream of physically attacking another have no hesitation speaking ill of others.

And yet, we all know that those words are far from harmless little fun. All too often, they hurt, and they hurt deeply. The Talmud elaborates at some length about the sins of gossip and slander. The ancient laws and teachings

against gossip and slander were codified by the great 12th century sage, Moses Maimonides (Rambam). In his *Mishneh Torah*, Rambam wrote: "... the greatest violator of the prohibition against evil speech is the one who commits *leshon hara*. One who speaks *leshon hara* is one who speaks disparagingly about someone, even though what one says is true."

Maimonides goes on to quote the Talmudic passage in Tractate Arakhim: "*Leshon hara* kills three people: the one who spoke the evil, the listener, and the one spoken about; and the listener will be punished worse than the speaker." (MT. Deot 7.2-3)

What this means is that a reputation can be destroyed and spirits can be crushed by cruel and malicious speech. How so? The speaker of *leshon hara* is brought down because he/she earns a bad reputation as one who speaks with malice about others. The listener of gossip is spiritually damaged because by listening to gossip the image he/she might have had of that innocent person is sullied. In turn, the listener of gossip is judged as an accomplice to the slander. His sin is worse. Because without an eager audience, the gossipier would have had to have held his

or her tongue. Finally, the one who is being slandered suffers the loss of reputation, potential friends and over time can lose his cheerful and optimistic attitude and can himself acquire a taste for cynicism and cruelty.

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If only the problem of *Leshon Hara* was an isolated phenomenon! Unfortunately, our national discourse has been seriously distressed by a climate of harsh and uncompromising rhetoric. No era is immune from partisan bickering. But our generation has indulged in inflammatory accusations, public shaming, and disrespect to such a degree that the very notion of polite civility seems quaint.

As we learned above, the problem of *leshon hara* has plagued every generation. So, too, the challenge

of corralling it is for each generation to address. To do our part, Temple Sinai will be joining with several other Jewish organizations and synagogues to partner on a new initiative which we are calling Clean Speech Colorado. Starting this fall, we'll hold panel discussions and offer regular learning opportunities that will raise our awareness of the power of the things we say. Will our efforts radically change the unfortunate direction of society? Maybe. Maybe not. Perhaps it may simply help an individual or two. Maybe it will give a greater sense of control and respect for a couple or a group of friends. If so, then all the effort will be worth it!

We note that the cornerstone of Judaism is the *Shema*: "Hear O Israel, the Eternal is Our God, the Eternal is One." The power of speech is second to the gift of listening. We are commanded to hear and raise our consciousness to become aware of that which unifies all life and elevates the significance of every being. This commandment to listen was deemed so important that the Talmudic sages determined that our prayers, including the *Shema*, may be recited in any language in order that a person can fully understand and comprehend their meaning: "Let your ears hear what your lips utter!" (*Berakhot* 13a). From this, we learn that we must strive to be more fully aware of the things we say. Do our words reflect our nobler qualities? Do our words exhibit our caring and sensitive soul? Do our words demonstrate wisdom, curiosity, openness and tolerance ---even for those with whom we disagree?

*Yih'yu l'ratzon imrei fi v'hegyon libi l'fanekha, Adonai tzuri v'go-ali: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, Adonai, my Rock and my Redeemer (Psalm 19:15).*

*B'vrakhah*

*Rick*

Rabbi Rick Rheins

## **B**IBLE, BEERS & BROTHERHOOD MEN TALKING TORAH WITH RABBI RHEINS

The next sessions are:  
Thursday, July 25 at 6:00pm  
Thursday, August 22 at 6:00pm

Join the men at Darcy's Pub to talk Torah and schmooze with Rabbi Rick Rheins! Darcy's Pub is located at 4955 South Ulster Street #103, Denver, CO 80237.

## **S**ICK? STRUGGLING? WANT A CALL OR A MEETING? INFORM THE RABBIS!

Adding to the agony and frustration of dealing with illness or struggling with a difficult time is the nagging thought that you are forgotten and that no one cares. Temple Sinai most certainly cares about every one of our members. Rabbi Rick Rheins and Rabbi Jordy Cohen will be quick to make a call or visit to any of our members and loved ones. In addition, we have a group of volunteers on our Caring Committee who will do their best to respond with cards, calls and offers of assistance.

So please call or write to our Rabbis and let them know that you'd like their help and attention. Confidential messages can be made directly to Rabbi Rick Rheins at his email: [rabrheins@sinaidenver.org](mailto:rabrheins@sinaidenver.org)