

**Rosh Hashanah 5773 – First Day**  
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## Gossip

Suppose we add just one detail to the story we just read in the Haftarah. Instead of being alone in the sanctuary at Shiloh, imagine if Eli the *kohen* knew that there was another priest on the grounds. Instead of talking directly with Chana, I could imagine Eli slipping out discretely to have a word with his colleague.

“You'll never believe what I just saw. This woman came in -- imagine, a woman just here all alone, without her husband! And she was just sitting there. Her lips were moving, but I couldn't hear anything she was saying. She must have been drunk.”

“Who was it?”

“Oh, there was this family from Ramatayim-Tzofim who came up for the holiday. She must be one of them. Imagine, a husband letting his wife come here, to the sanctuary, all by herself. And in that condition!”

“Right. Well, those Ephraimites, we all know who wears the pants in their families. But at least they weren't Benjaminites. I could tell you some stories...”

It's not hard to imagine how a conversation like that might go, one thing leading to another. Just making conversation. It's what people do. I found one estimate that the average person spends at least six hours a day talking, in one fashion or another. If you're a manager, or if you're in a talking profession, it might be even double that! Even if you figure that most of that talking is doing business, that leaves a good hour or two *at least* that is filled with some other kind of talk. Odds are, it is some kind of gossip.

Next week on Yom Kippur, when we say the *al-chet's*, the alphabetical list of specific wrongs we are owning up to, you'll see just how many of them have to do with speaking. Jewish law calls this *lashon ha-ra*, literally "harmful language."

But I want to start off by making a case in favor of gossip.

Specifically, I want to share with you a *moral* argument for gossip. It comes from a book called *Elsewhere, Perhaps* by the great Israeli author Amos Oz. This particular novel is set on a kibbutz in the 1950s. The narrator of the novel is first-person plural, the "we" of the entire kibbutz, which is of course an idealistic, socialist collective. The book opens with a description of the kibbutz and one of its leaders, named Reuven Harish. Reuven's wife has left him and his two children. She ran off with a tourist from Europe. And Reuven has taken it upon himself to be the personal guide and escort for all foreign tourists who come to see the kibbutz. "Gossiping tongues" in the kibbutz, the narrator reports, are full of theories and speculation about why he does this. That people like to relive their pain, or "there was even an outrageous suggestion, which we reject absolutely..." -- but the narrator shares it anyway. About all this, the narrator says to the reader:

Gossip plays an important and respected role here and contributes in its way to reforming our society... The secret lies in judging one another day and night, pitilessly and dispassionately. Everyone here judges, everyone is judged, and no weakness can succeed for long in escaping judgment. There are not secret corners. You are being judged every minute of your life. That is why each and every one of us is forced to wage war against his nature. To purify himself. We polish each other as a river polishes its pebbles. ....

Gossip is simply the other name for judging. By means of gossip we overcome our natural instincts and gradually become better men. Gossip plays a powerful part in our lives, because our lives are exposed like a sun-drenched courtyard. There is a widow in the kibbutz, Fruma Rominov by name, who is steeped in gossip. Her judgments are severe, but not cold-blooded. Those of us who fear her caustic tongue must overcome their weaknesses. And we, too, judge the widow. We accuse her of excessive bitterness and we cast doubts on her commitment to the ideal of the kibbutz. So Fruma Rominov in turn is compelled to overcome her nature and to refrain from excessively malicious remarks. Here, then, is a concrete illustration of the image of the pebbles in the river. Gossip is normally thought of as an undesirable activity, but with us even gossip is made to play a part in the reform of the world.

So there it is, the moral case for gossip. A community has standards, expectations, and it's better for people to know them, to be judged out in the open. It's the only way we can learn how to measure up -- to know the flaws other people see in us, and work to correct them.

It's a theory, and I'll be curious to hear what you think of it. These sermons, after all, are not to tell you what to do, but to get you to think.

What is gossip? I've used the word several times already, and it's a loaded word, a negative word. There are all kinds of ways two people talk about a third person who is not there. We share news. We tell funny stories of things that have happened. We speculate on why he or she did this or that. We shrug our shoulders, we sigh in exasperation. We process. We criticize.

Do we do it, like the idealistic kibbutzniks of Amos Oz, for *tikkun olam*, to reform the world? Let's be honest: not really.

If Amos Oz's narrator is right about one thing, it is that gossip is bound up with judgment. Whether that's constructive is another question. Jennifer Bosson, a psychologist from the University of Oklahoma, led a series of studies in which college students were asked to describe what attitudes they share with their closest friends. The *New York Times* explained their findings like this: "one of the surest routes to friendship is disliking the same things about other people." Friends, in this study, tended to share positive feelings about things like going to the movies, or rooting for the Patriots, but negative assessments about other individuals. In other words, friends are people who like to do the same things, and and who like to gossip about the same people.

A good deal of our talk about others is negative, or critical. Listen to your own conversations sometimes, when the talk turns to other people. What kinds of things do you say, or do you hear, or do you respond to? What's the tradeoff here, between connecting with the person you are

talking to, and the effect on the person who isn't there?

As I was preparing this D'var Torah, I found a fascinating book called *Good Gossip*, which I ordered it from TextbooksRus.com -- yes, apparently there is a textbook about gossip! It's full of sociology and philosophy about gossip. One of the editors of the book is an Israeli scholar named Aaron Ben-Ze'ev. It turns out that between 1994, when the book was published, and now, Professor Ben-Ze'ev has become the president of Haifa University in Israel!

In his opening essay, Professor Ben-Ze'ev gives what he calls a "vindication" of gossip. He argues that gossip is a form of relaxation. It resembles a game; it's whimsical and everyone knows it's not serious. That's why so much gossip, he says, involves humor and funny stories. He says too that sharing light gossip helps us feel part of a group. Furthermore, according to Professor Ben-Ze'ev: "Really good gossip is usually not just a piece of information but an anecdote, a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end... The pleasure derived is often that of a good story."

The professor is careful to say that he's not talking about sharing rumors about other people. I think he has a certain point. A group of friends is sometimes a group of characters, or there may be one or two characters who people like to talk about. Remember that time when so-and-so.... Would you call that gossip? What if everyone was there, and everyone remembers? Does it make a difference if most of the people who are talking are in on the story, but one person isn't part of that group?

Jewish ethics has a lot to say about the topic, which is called *lashon ha-ra*, harmful talking. In fact, one of the most well-known books of Jewish ethics in traditional circles, called *Sefer Chafetz Chaim*, is split into daily teachings, something about *lashon ha-ra* to think about each day. For instance, here's one for the 6th of Cheshvan: "When someone gives a sermon in the house of study, it is forbidden by law to make fun of him, and to say that his sermon had nothing in it worth hearing." I'm just telling you what's in the book....

Jewish teaching about *lashon ha-ra*, about harmful talking, jumps off from a verse in the psalms. King David is said to have taught:

Come, my children, listen to me and I will teach you how to revere God:  
Hold back your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit  
Turn away from evil, and do good; seek peace and pursue it.  
*Netzor l'shoncha me-ra....*

The words may well be familiar to you, because they have become the prayer that we say as we finish the individual *Amidah*: "Guard my tongue from evil." In Jewish law and ethics, we look at our texts with the assumption that no word is extraneous. *Hold back your tongue from evil -- ra -- and your lips from speaking deceit -- mirmah*. We know what deceit is. What about *ra*, the other word in the verse, the one we're translating as "evil"? It must mean something further.

*Ra*, to give you a bit of Hebrew, is a biblical word not just for "evil" in the abstract sense, but "harm" in a concrete sense. Hold back your tongue from causing harm. How, other than deceit,

might our words cause harm?

The Talmud picks up this question when it tries to define *Lashon ha-ra*. And here is the central insight: *Lashon ha-ra* isn't just slander, and it isn't just false rumors. Sometimes, our conversations cause harm by reporting something that is true. In *Masechet Arachin*, the Talmud asks: What is *lashon ha-ra*? Rabbah says: For instance, if a person said: There is a cooking fire in so-and-so's home. Abaye said to him: What did he do? He simply revealed a neutral fact! But, Rabbah explains: the neutral fact leads to *lashon ha-ra*, for the other person would say: Where else would there be fire but in so-and-so's home, where there is meat and fish!

Abaye asks: How can just reporting a fact about another person be harmful? Rabbah explains that hearing something that is "just a fact" can spark jealousy. Sometimes just bringing up the subject of person X unleashes negative talk -- you can hear the sneer, the person just waiting to take a shot at so-and-so.

If commenting on neutral facts is not permitted, how about praising one person to another? Also not good, says the Talmud. Rav Dimi gives this example: A person comes into the marketplace and says, "I was a guest at so-and-so's house, and he went to such lengths to take care of me!" And people hear it, and suddenly everybody is inviting himself over to so-and-so's for dinner. Or, says Rav Dimi, a person talks at length about the great qualities of so-and-so, but one of the people listening tired of all the praise and thinks of something negative to add about the person.

This is all very strict, and a lot of it is built on assumptions about people's reactions that may or may not be true. But the Talmud's larger point is this: the words we say about other people have consequences beyond what we realize. I think of Rav Dimi's point all the time. If I sing the praise of one person, maybe there's someone else I should also be praising, but I forgot to, or it was just casual conversation so I didn't. And the one I'm talking with will think I have some problem with the person I overlooked. And maybe that gets around. Or maybe if I'm talking to you, and say how generous or warm or insightful so-and-so is, you'll think I don't have the same regard for you.

There are many ways that the words we say about people who are not in front of us can cause harm, beyond spreading falsehoods or rumors. Jewish law has a great term for this: in Hebrew this is called *avak l'shon hara*, which means "the dust of harmful talking." It's everything we do that isn't malicious in and of itself, but might lead someone to make a criticism or to say something negative that's gratuitous. "I just had lunch with so-and-so", followed by a long pause -- that kind of thing.

Obviously, there are times when we have to talk about other people. Two people may be worried about a third, and need to tell each other what they have observed, so they can figure out how to help. When we talk to our counselors, our doctors, our attorneys, our clergy, we are engaged in constructive talk, or at least we can talk freely without fear that our words will travel somewhere inappropriate. And Jewish law recognizes that some things are simply public from the beginning -- anything heard initially by three people is fair game to repeat and talk about.

I learned my own lesson about *lashon ha-ra* early in my career. I was working in a Jewish day

school where I knew many of the members of the Board already from the Seminary or the community. Early on I had certain frustrations about the workplace and about the person I worked for, who was also someone I had known from the Seminary, and a friend of all these same people. I used to express my thoughts in conversations with these Board members. I thought I was engaged in reflection, with people who I knew cared very much about the same things that I did. I figured I was in some general way building support for changes that were important, things my boss was not attending to.

Eventually some of my more pointed words made their way back to her. To her great credit, she came right to me and asked me if I had indeed had these conversations, said these words about her, and she told me straight out that she was hurt, and disappointed. I owned up, and apologized.

It was around that time that I remembered a lesson that one of my peers in Jewish education had taught me. She herself had just been through a bruising time as a leader at a Jewish school, and had lost her job in an environment that a lot of sniping. She presented her story as a case study at one of our conferences, and as part of her reflections, I recalled her saying: In the midst of something difficult, pick a mitzvah to work on. It can be an anchor -- something constructive to focus on and a guaranteed source of learning, when everything otherwise seems out of control.

I knew, after talking to my boss, that the mitzvah for me to work on would be *lashon ha-ra*. Right away I changed entirely the kinds of conversations I was having with these Board members. But I started gradually to pay more attention to other kinds of conversations.

When I arrived here four years ago, I realized I had a terrific opportunity to work on the practice of curtailing my own *lashon ha-ra* habits. Think about it: When you come to a new workplace, there are all kinds of stories people would like to tell you about the people you'll be working with. When you come to a new community, there is a lot of conversation, and participating helps you become part of the group. For a rabbi, this is a perfect storm, because the workplace and the community overlap quite substantially. So I set out to figure out: how can I observe the teachings of *lashon ha-ra*, and still learn what I need to know about the community, and become a part of things?

I decided what I should do is monitor myself as carefully as I can. I ask myself whether something I might want to say, about someone who is not here in the conversation I am having, is not just valuable, but actually necessary. Valuable isn't a high enough standard -- it's an occupational hazard for a rabbi to assume that everything I have to say is valuable. If I open my mouth, moment to moment, will I say something not just valuable, or useful, but necessary? If I think I should speak now about someone not present, or respond to what someone else says, would I be willing to say the same words to that person directly?

Now I don't claim to be perfect, and you'll have to be the judge, and I hope that you will and that you will bring that to me directly. But I feel that this has become a practice for me every bit as important as prayer, kashrut, and Shabbat. The Talmud states in the discussion I have quoted that *lashon ha-ra* is comparable to murder, and to idolatry. I find the monitoring of my own *lashon ha-ra* to be unbelievably cleansing, and purifying. It helps me listen. All the time, it slows me

down, and curtails the inclinations of a talkative person. It brings the issue of respect for other people to my consciousness all the time. Being quiet, or quieter than usual, can be such a relief.

The traditional Jewish teachings about *lashon ha-ra* goad us to ask these questions -- about the harm our idle words might cause, about the ways our casual conversations might lessen our own dignity as well as that of others. I have to say, that as I read the essays about "good gossip" they too challenged me to think about the code. Professor Ben-Ze'ev's ideas about gossip as a form of play, and group-building might hold some water -- if they don't bring harm to others. This should be our research project, yours as well as mine, as you think about the conversations you have that are not malicious, not slanderous, but just gossip-y.

Gabriele Taylor, a scholar at Oxford, says that we often talk about other people and what they do because it helps us make sense of all the things that are still mysterious about ourselves and how we should live. She says of what she calls noncritical gossips, "they want to know how people manage their lives, how they cope in different situations, how they solve the problems generated by personal relationships." Of all the rationales for light and nonmalicious gossip, that's the most constructive. As we continue to try to learn how to live and act, we consider how other people we know do it, and sometimes when we criticize it's not to correct them, but to correct ourselves.

Well, I imagine I've made you squirm a little before your next social gathering. I hereby give you permission to violate the law about the rabbi's sermon, and pick it apart anyway you like. But I hope you'll give some thought to both sets of voices. To the voices of the scholars, who wonder why so much of our time is spent talking about people who aren't around. And to the voice of Torah, which cautions us about how seemingly meaningless words always have consequences. Perhaps you'll even consider trying on a new practice, by listening to your own words and those you hear, or by swearing off *lashon ha-ra* for a period of time.

Here in prayer, we stand and recite words that have been selected and purified by the generations. And as we end each Amidah, we say the words drawn from David: Hold back my tongue from harming. May those words guide us, every time we segue from the holy talk of prayer and study, to the friendly talk of the rest of the day.

*Shana tova.*