

Not long ago I found myself struggling with something and I could have sworn that I heard a tiny voice on each of my shoulders. I had attended an all-day conference that I had anticipated with great relish. Let it suffice to say that by the time the conference was over I was quite disappointed, almost angry in fact, for it was my perception that the planning for the conference had been quite shoddy. A friend who had also been in attendance saw me a few days later and asked me what I had thought of that conference. It was at that very moment that two tiny voices made themselves heard.

The devilish voice urged me to pull out all the stops and castigate the conference organizer. It recognized that some part of me wanted badly to be sarcastic, to heap some abuse on the person who had planned the conference. I heard the words forming in my mind: “The conference was doomed from the beginning because that guy couldn’t organize his way out of a paper bag. He once gave a surprise birthday party for someone and then forgot to invite the person whose birthday it was! “

The words were there, the opportunity for Lashon ha-ra the temptation to speak ill, was poised on the tip of my tongue, when the tiny angelic voice spoke up urging restraint. It suggested that I say that the conference was “interesting” and leave it at that.

Though it lasted but milliseconds, two parts of me waged a fierce struggle. I speak of this struggle this evening because the struggle is, for me, the crucial part of our story, for life without struggle is flat, empty. Some struggles we don’t choose. Some struggles we can and must choose, even if we run the risk of occasionally limping away from them.

I want to address one such struggle this evening...the grappling with Lashon ha-ra, the Hebrew words which ascribe a spectrum of harmful speech, for I am convinced that each of us, to a greater or lesser degree, wrestles with this one every day.

The problem of controlling our speech, being the master of our words, is by no means a new one. We read in Leviticus 19:16, “You shall not go up and down as a talebearer among your people.” Proverbs 10:18 states the case more succinctly: “Whoever slanders are a fool.” It is an ancient problem, and we are still grappling with it: “Hey, did you hear that you-know-who flunked the readiness exam? That guy’s such a loser it’s hard to feel sorry for him.” or “somebody told me that Carl was rejected by every fraternity he tried to pledge. He is so dumb he couldn’t even get into the fraternity.”

Why is a little gossip, a little sarcasm at someone else’s expense, fitting material for a sermon?

I think it is safe to assume that each of us, in his or her own way, identifies with, and belongs to, a community...be it the community of worshippers here this evening, a sorority, the Jewish community, staff or perhaps your college community. What then, is a community? The Jewish writer and thinker Hafetz Hayyim suggested that a community is a “collectivity of people who talk to each other about each other.” “Aha!” you are saying to yourselves, “That just proves that Lashon ha-ra is an inherent part of the community since people speak to each other about each other!”

But here we must distinguish between two kinds of speech: that speech which is community-making and that which is community-breaking. Gossip, slander, lies, innuendoes, malicious sarcasm, half-truths, exaggerations and the list go on, and all fall into the category of community-breaking speech generally known as Lashon ha-ra.

In the opinion of at least one Talmudic sage, gossip and slander can kill. Consider the following passage from the Talmud: “Why is gossip like a three-pronged tongue? Because it kills three people: the person who says it, the person listens to it, and the person about whom it is said.” Let’s try to place ourselves in each aspect of this three-part assertion.

The first part: Lashon ha-ra kills the person who says it. You know the experience...you are speaking with someone you’d very much like to impress.

The conversation turns to mutual acquaintances. “Do you know so-and-so?” The person asks you. “So-and-so” you reply, “What a fool! He thinks he is an artist, and he couldn’t even paint a barn door!” Only to find out that the artist in question is a close relative of the person with whom you are speaking.

You have given offense and the other person lets you know it in no uncertain term by walking away. Later you say to yourself, “I could kill myself for my big mouth.”

It’s not too far from the truth to suggest that a part of you has been killed because of your words. Your sensitivity to others and your self-esteem are diminished; you have become a lesser person because of hurtful words.

The second part: Lashon ha-ra kills the person who listens to it. “Say,” you ask a friend, “What’s the scoop on professor Plony? I am thinking of taking his course in the spring.” Your friend is only too happy to reply. “A space-case. That guy’s the worst! The lights are on but nobody’s home. He gives you a ton of work, wears neckties that keep you from falling asleep, they are so ugly and, on top of which, his breath could curdle milk from five feet away!” What’s the result of hearing this response? You are predisposed for the worst, you subverted your own sense of judgment, short-circuited your own machinery for making up your own mind by listening to venom. The more you listen to Lashon ha-ra the more jaded you become, the more willing to believe the worst you hear and not bother to seek out the truth or the other side. Once again, as a person you are diminished.

The third part: Lashon ha-ra kills the person about whom it is said. You are sitting in the waiting room about to be interviewed for your first job, or your first-choice graduate school, or your first pulpit. On the other side of the door sit the members of the interview committee. One member of the committee bluntly asks the others, “Anyone got any dirt on this individual we are about to interview?” After a moment’s silence someone speaks up, “Yea. I spoke with the Dean of Students from his college. He didn’t have all that much to say but he did remember that the candidate used to wear outlandish clothing...bright red socks,

that sort of thing. Says he thinks the candidate might be peculiar. I also spoke to his hometown rabbi who wasn't sure that he remembered the candidate all that well. But he thinks that he remembers that this person got into trouble in youth group for smoking marijuana, although the rabbi said he couldn't prove it."

And you, sitting out in the waiting room...what do you think your chances are of impressing this committee when Lashon ha-ra has already prepared them to perceive you as some sort of deviant. This time you are the object of Lashon ha-ra and the results are no less devastating than in the other two-thirds of our Talmudic assertion.

What causes us to engage in community-breaking speech? Many shades of insecurity: we doubt our own talents and capabilities, so we do away with someone else's reputation with a little slander; we seek to enter into a certain group of people, so we make cutting remarks about an outsider so as to please our listeners; we perceive someone as a threat to our own interests and so we try to neutralize that perceived threat by putting that person down before his or her peers. And if we do it consistently enough, we can be certain that we will alienate even our closest friends.

A tale is told among the Chassidim of the man who was careless with the words he spoke. One by one, he lost friends they would no longer even speak with him when he entered the tavern in the village. Forlorn and deeply troubled, he finally went to speak with the rabbi to ask him why his former friends had deserted him.

"They have left you because your words are sharp edged and rough," said the rabbi. "They give pain to others and that is grievous in the eyes of God and man." The unhappy man seemed to take the rabbi's words to heart and as he turned to leave, he said, "I'm sorry for what I have done." "Wait," said the rabbi, "There is something that I want you to do. Take the pillow on which you sleep to the top of the hill behind the village. There I want you to tear it open and let the

wind come, pick up and scatter the feathers across the sky.” The man was puzzled by the rabbi’s strange request, but he agreed to do so. A while later he returned to the rabbi and told him that he had done as the rabbi asked. “Now,” said the rabbi, “Go gather up all the feathers and put them back into the pillowcase.” “What!” exclaimed the man, his eyes wide in astonishment. “That’s impossible!” “You’re right,” replied the rabbi. “Just as the words we speak, once spoken and sent on their way cannot be gathered again. Be careful, therefore, with the words you speak. Watch them carefully, know where they go and what they do. Then you shall have many friends and your name will be honored among them.”

Why should we struggle with our urges to speak or to listen to Lashon ha-ra? It has already been suggested that we commit a triple homicide when we engage in gossip and slander and this Hasidic tale clearly points out how easily we can alienate those close to us through Lashon- Hara. Those should be sufficient reasons to do battle with it. But there is another reason as well; the struggle with Lashon ha-ra may be seen as a legitimate part of the Jewish tradition of wrestling with ourselves to turn ourselves into something finer than we were a year ago, or a day ago, or even a moment ago.

Beyond the realm of the self and the personal risks of losing our friends or failing to fulfill our potential, Lashon ha-ra carries with it, long-range detrimental affects for our community.

The bedrock of community is trust...the willingness of one member to believe in the good intentions of the other members of that community. If my friends and colleagues are truthful with me, both in their praise and in their criticisms, then trust is established between us. I can believe what I hear and can count on being truthfully represented when I am spoken about to someone else.

When Lashon ha-ra enters the picture, however, a toxic waste dump of bitter feelings and mistrust soon accumulates, poisoning the atmosphere of personal relationships and shattering the element of trust. There can be no confidences

when we are not sure if our words will be repeated to others; we cannot risk self-disclosure if we have no confidence that our secrets will remain secrets. Suspicion and doubt hold sway and the delicate fabric of community disintegrates.

But how to avoid Lashon ha-ra, that's the tough part. The Yiddish expression says, "If you don't open your mouth flies would not get in." That's too extreme a solution. We cannot all join a community of silent contemplatives. Words are far too important to our tradition to forgo them entirely. Speech is a fundamental human activity, and a quintessentially Jewish one. Moreover, our tradition teaches us that it was with the spoken word that God created the world. Words have the power to create and to destroy and ultimately each of us can be their master by deciding which words we will speak, which words we will hear.

Is there a danger of curbing our tendency and our desire to engage in Lashon ha-ra? There exists the danger of a backlash if your friends and acquaintances perceive your efforts to refrain from Lashon ha-ra as "holier-than-thou" posturing. But the key lies right there in that word "holy" ...kadosh...a word which derives from the literal meaning of "separation", as setting apart from. By consciously acting to set ourselves apart from community-breaking speech and by consciously opting for community-making speech, we can become holy with out becoming holier-than-thou.

And if we are watchful and diligent, if we pay closer attention to the tiny angelic voice on our shoulder, and if we were too hard on ourselves when we fail to win a scrimmage with Lashon ha-ra, then we can make the transition from name-callers and, like Jacob, acquire a new name...the name of one who has struggled and won.

Amen.