

EYE ON בעין חינוכית EDUCATION

מרחשוון תשע"ג, ג' Issue 5

Lashon Hara: A Mitzvah?

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We are all familiar with the laws of *lashon hara* (evil speech), *rechilus* (gossip mongering), *kavod habriyot* (treating others with respect), and *halbanat panim* (humiliation). These *halachot* are well-known – even if they are not always easy to implement. But sometimes, not only is *lashon hara* permitted, it is actually a **mitzvah**!

After ignoring Yochanan ben Korach's "*rechilus*," Gedaliah ben Achikam was murdered by Yishmael. The Gemara (BT Niddah 61a) discusses this incident – including Gedaliah's own underlying guilt – and concludes:

"אמר רבא, האי לישנא בישא, אע"פ דלקבולי לא מבעי, מיחש ליה מבעי."
"This *lashon hara* – although one should not accept it as a fact, one should take note of it."

Although Gedaliah had no basis to convict Yishmael, he should have gathered intelligence and posted a guard – in case there was some truth to the matter. Moreover, not only did he have license to do so; he was **required** to do so. And since he did not act on the information, he also bears guilt for his murder, the murder of his people, and the survivors' exile. Such conduct is unbecoming for any man – and certainly for a leader who is responsible for the entire community.

This same idea is reflected in the Torah's juxtaposition of two seemingly unrelated commandments:

"לא תלך רכיל בעמך לא תעמוד על דם רעך."
"You shall not go around as a gossipmonger among your people; you shall not stand idly by the blood of your fellow." (Vayikra 19:16)

What is the connection between the prohibition against *rechilus* and the *mitzvah* to save a life? According to the Ohr HaChaim and the Netziv, the latter is meant to curb and check the former. Although one is forbidden to "go around as a gossipmonger among your people," even this serious prohibition has a limit. Hence:

"אם יודע שאיש אחד רוצה לירד לחייו של אדם אחר, הרי זה מחוייב להודיע ואסור לעמוד על דם רעך."
"If one knows that a certain man wants to take the life of another man, one is **obligated** to divulge this, and one is forbidden to 'stand idly by the blood of your fellow.'"

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Thus, the Chafetz Chaim (Hilchot Rechilus 9:1-3; Be'er Mayim Chayim - Ibid) ruled:

"אם אחד רואה שחבירו רוצה להשתתף באיזה דבר עם אחר, והוא משער שבודאי יסובב לו על-ידי זה עניין רע, צריך להגיד לו כדי להצילו מן העניין הרע ההוא. כגון שרוצה ליקח אחד לשרת אותו בביתו, וזה מכירו מכבר שהוא גנב...מחוייב מן הדין להגיד לו."

"If one sees that his friend wants to participate in some matter with another, and he surmises that evil will befall him as a result, one must tell him, in order to save him from that evil. For instance, if he wants to hire someone to work in his home, and knows, from previous experience, that he is a thief...he is obligated to tell him."

Similarly, the Pitchei Teshuvah (Orach Chayim 156) felt deeply about this issue:

"כל ספרי המוסר מרעישים העולם על עוון לשון הרע, ואני מרעיש העולם להיפך – עוון גדול מזה וגם הוא מצוי יותר, והוא מניעת עצמו מדבר במקום שנצרך להציל עשוק מיד עושקו!"
"All the *Mussar* (ethics) works rally against the sin of *lashon hara*, but I am rallying against the opposite - a sin that is even greater and more common: not speaking out when there is a need to save the oppressed from the hand of his oppressor!"

On a practical level, ask yourself how far this should go. For example, consider a man who submits his candidacy for an election. Questions about the style of his moustache or his girth are obviously unjustified because they have no bearing on his suitability for office. However, what about the various scandals and offenses which are unknown to the public? Furthermore, which "offenses" are relevant? Embezzlement or also infidelity? Violent behavior or also "hidden" diseases?

Then there is the subject of *shidduchim* (matchmaking). When someone asks me about a friend who is "going out," how much should I tell, and how much should I omit? Should I volunteer information? What is essential and what is trivial and insignificant? Is an event that took place in the distant past still relevant? How about his beliefs and opinions? His accomplishments? What he did during the Disengagement?!

- The easy answer: It is *lashon hara* and *rechilus*! It is forbidden!
- The very easy answer: It is a *mitzvah*! An obligation! Start talking!
- The difficult yet correct answer:

"הלב יודע אם לעקל ואם לעקלקלות."

"The heart knows whether it is for a net [gain] or for perversity." (BT Sanhedrin 26a)

(The Gemara teaches that one's heart knows whether one honestly intends to help or whether one is taking advantage of a loophole.)

In other words, no one ever said that these are easy questions...