



THE PERSON

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IN THE PARSHA

Words Can Never Harm Me?

For many of us, the first pieces of wisdom which we learned were from nursery rhymes and schoolyard jingles. Sometimes these childish lessons had value, but more often they were off the mark and had the effect of distorting a truer perspective on life.

Take, for example, this ditty: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me.” The implicit message, which had some utility on the playground, is that we can safely ignore insults to our emotions and feelings, and need to only be concerned about physical injury. The truth, however, is quite different.

Obviously, we want to protect ourselves from physical harm. The trauma of bodily injury is something which none of us

wishes to bear. But we cannot minimize the harmful effects of psychological trauma, whether it comes in the form of insults, embarrassment, or shame.

During the years I spent as a psychotherapist, I dealt with quite a few victims of domestic violence. I saw the effects that abuse could have upon people, but I noticed that those who suffered emotional abuse were less amenable to successful treatment than those who were physically battered.

Let’s face it. Words hurt.

The power that words have to do damage is something which is recognized by our Torah. That emotions can be grievously wounded, reputations ruined, and relationships damaged beyond repair through “mere words,” is illustrated in biblical narratives, Talmudic tales, and Hassidic stories.

In this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Ki Tetzei*, we are instructed to “remember what the Lord your God did unto Miriam, on the road out of Egypt.” The Torah is referring to the fact that Miriam was punished by a leprous infection.

The full episode of Miriam’s sin and its consequences appears in an earlier portion of the Torah, at the very end of *Parshat Beha’alotecha*, *Numbers* 12:1-16.

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There we learn that Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of his Cushite wife. They went on to belittle Moses' importance, and spoke condescendingly about him.

It seems from the context of the story that Miriam, as the instigator of this critique, did so privately. Nevertheless, the Almighty was angry with her and she was healed, ironically, only because of Moses' prayerful intervention.

Thus, our sages understand this command to remember Miriam as an injunction against speaking *lashon hara*, malicious gossip.

Much closer to our time, at the beginning of the last century, the sage and saint Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan of Radin, became convinced that the central evil of modern times was the abuse of words. So confident was he of the certainty of his diagnosis of the social ills of our time that he devoted a major work to the subject of *lashon hara*. The name of that work is *Chafetz Chaim*, "Desirous of Life," after

ברוך דיין האמת

We are saddened
by the passing of
Rabbi Joseph Karasick z"l
past President and
long standing board member
of the OU

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to his entire family**

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the verse in Psalms, which reads, “Who is the person who desires life? Let him guard his tongue against speaking evil.”

Recalling Miriam’s misdeeds, and taking seriously the comprehensive teachings of the author of *Chafetz Chaim*, is especially valuable today. Because, you see, words have become even more powerful and potentially destructive than a rabbi living a hundred years ago could possibly imagine.

Nowadays, through the power of electronic instant communication, words can be sent to millions of people in microseconds of time. If these words are negative, they can harm individuals instantly, without even the possibility of recourse or recall. The power of words has exponentially increased in scope and effect in our day and age.

Our tradition teaches that using words to offend another human being is akin to a snake and its venom. The snake’s venom kills, yet the snake has no benefit from its fiendish action. So too, human beings usually benefit from every other sin imaginable, but gain nothing by harming others verbally. Because of this, *lashon hara* is the least justifiable of sins.

Not a day goes by when we do not receive e-mails or read Internet reports which damage reputations of individuals, without due process and without the remotest possibility of defending themselves. This goes against both our Jewish heritage and our democratic ideals in a very fundamental way.

It is already the first week of Elul, the last month of the Jewish year. At this time, it behooves us to introspectively examine our faults. It is the season of *teshuvah*, repentance, which precedes and heralds the imminent High Holidays. We must give thought to how we have offended others with words and with deeds.

Although the unimaginable spread of verbal abuse that postmodern technology has instigated is beyond the capacity for any one of us to correct, we have no option but to try individually to control the way we use words and the words which we use. None of us is innocent of *lashon hara*, and none of us is exempt from sincerely addressing this weakness.

In conclusion, I call to your attention the rabbinic dictum that the power of Good exceeds the force of Evil manifold. Thus, if words have the ability to harm, they have the infinitely greater ability to soothe and to heal. The way to undo our sins of the negative use of language is to resolve to use language positively.

Imagine if e-mails were limited to complimentary statements and words of praise. Imagine if the blogs and websites were replete with stories of human accomplishment, altruism, and heroism. It would be a happier world for sure.

And it would be a world closer to that which the Almighty intended. Now, less than a month before Rosh Hashanah, is the ideal time for each of us to commit, in a deeply personal way, to bring about that better world. ■