

"Electronic Lashon Hara"--Sinful Words from Sinful People: Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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Years ago, I—along with many others-- regularly received envelopes stuffed with pages put together by a group that claimed to represent “authentic” Judaism. The authors believed themselves to be the sole arbiters of true Judaism, and they vilified those who deviated from their views. Their screeds were drenched in hateful, slanderous language...and it seems not to have occurred to them that lashon hara—evil gossip—is a highly serious sin.

Halakha teaches that just as it is forbidden to communicate lashon hara, so it is a transgression to receive it. I sent the authors several requests to remove me from their mailing list, but they ignored my requests. I finally came up with a great idea. The next time I received one of their mailings, I took a red magic marker and wrote in large letters on the front of the envelope: RETURN TO SENDER: OBSCENE MATERIAL. That solved the problem. I received no more mail from them.

When such people engage in gossip/slander/defamation of character, they are indeed generating obscene material. They somehow delude themselves into thinking that they alone are God’s policemen and that they are permitted to defame people whose views they deem not sufficiently religious. Their misguided and self-righteous behavior reflects an incredible religious arrogance...and sinfulness.

The problem has become far more severe now that people can spread their defamations via electronic means. They reach thousands of readers by posting their venom on websites, or entering malicious material on Wikipedia, or sending emails.

Rambam points out that among the sins for which there is almost no possible atonement is the sin of maligning someone in public. Even if one eventually wishes to repent, he/she will not know who heard the sinful words and therefore cannot ever be sure he/she can reach everyone to retract the wicked statements. Evil words, once made public, are impossible to retract fully. All the more so with “electronic lashon hara.”

Modern technology makes it quite easy for people to post hostile remarks against those with whom they disagree. These ad hominem attacks gain lives of their own, being forwarded to readers who then forward them to others etc. People feel that it’s fine for them to vent, to call names, to discredit others. In their self-righteousness, they don’t realize the gravity of their transgressions.

The Talmud teaches that the ancient Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed because of *sinat hinam*, gratuitous hatred. A key feature of *sinat hinam* is the use of derogatory language.

In a fascinating responsum (Meshiv Davar, no. 44), Rabbi Naftali Tsevi Yehudah Berlin—the

Netsiv—reminded his readers that during the time of the Second Temple, the Jewish people were divided between the Perushim and Tsedukim. Competition between the groups was intense. The situation became so bad that Perushim branded as a Tseduki anyone who deviated even slightly from prevailing practice. To dissent from the predominant opinion led to one's being ostracized. The Netsiv applied the lesson to his own time: "It is not difficult to imagine reaching this situation in our time, Heaven forbid, that if one of the faithful thinks that a certain person does not follow his way in the service of God, then he will judge him as a heretic. He will distance himself from him. People will pursue one another with seeming justification (beHeter dimyon), Heaven forbid, and the people of God will be destroyed, Heaven fend."

When people—including those who think of themselves as being religious—spread defamatory material, they undermine the moral fabric of society. They do not teach "truth," but rather become models of what religious people should not be. They desecrate the Torah they claim to defend and honor.

In an age of mass communication, the dangers of *sinat hinam* and *lashon hara* are greatly exacerbated. Here is some basic advice on how to cope with this serious problem.

1. Do not post ad hominem attacks or engage in character assassination. If you object to someone's opinions, then focus on the opinions. Offer cogent arguments. Be respectful.
2. If you receive a comment/blog/email that contains *lashon hara*, delete it immediately. Do not forward it to anyone else. If possible, communicate with the sender and register your disapproval of his/her spreading of *lashon hara*.
3. Do not trust the credibility of those who engage in defamation/*lashon hara*. If they have no compunctions about defaming others, they'll have no compunction about defaming you!

Remember that our Temple was destroyed because of *sinat hinam* and *lashon hara*. Those who engage in these sins are committing a terrible injustice not just to their victims, but to our entire community and society. When they pose as being upholders of authentic Orthodoxy, their sins are particularly reprehensible. How will they ever be able to repent? Will they even realize that they need to repent?

The daily Amidah prayer has a concluding meditation: "Oh Lord, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully." Let everyone pay close attention to these words and strive to live up to them. To pray them and not mean them makes a mockery of the prayer...and a mockery of one's own purported religiosity. *Lashon hara* is obscene material. It must be avoided, it must be rejected, it must be returned to sender for atonement.

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