The Power of Words

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(A Thought for Shabbat April 5, Parashat Tazria)

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The Torah portion this week and next week deal with a mysterious disease/impurity known as tsara-at, usually translated as leprosy. Rabbinic tradition links this malady to the sin of lashon hara--evil talk, gossip. Moses' sister Miriam was stricken with symptoms of this disease after she had spoken inappropriately about Moses.

The Talmud (Arakhin 15b) compares the sin of evil talk to idolatry, adultery and murder.

Everyone knows that gossip is wrong, that mean words are damaging, that careless words can cause much grief. Everyone knows that slandering others is a sign of moral weakness i.e. the maligner wants to build up his/her own fragile ego by tearing others down.

Yet, almost everyone still gossips and causes pain by using words in hurtful ways.

In recent months, the Jewish media have run stories about "Torah scholars" who have used terrible words. One "sage" was quoted as saying that Israeli soldiers died in the Lebanon war because of their sins. Another was quoted as having said that the Holocaust was a punishment to the Jewish people caused by the rise of the Reform movement. Yet another was careless enough to tell a group of students in an Israeli yeshiva that the Prime Minister should pay with his life if he decides to divide Jerusalem. In the case of the first two rabbis, both of them stuck to their statements even when criticized. In the last case, the rabbi apologized profusely for his rash words and said he had only said them in jest.

The above statements--and many similarly obnoxious pronouncements--are deeply offensive to thinking people, and surely do not represent Jewish teachings at their best. Surely, all reasonable people should conclude that such statements are arrogant and misguided. Yet, because these statements were made by "Torah luminaries", some religious individuals are reluctant to criticize them.

A number of people (in letters to the editor and in private conversations) have stated that it was improper to criticize "gedolei hador", the "great rabbis of the generation". Since these rabbis are so great, they should not be subjected to public ostracism or criticism.

I have a problem with this line of argument. I would suggest that the greater the Torah scholar is, the more careful he/she should be with words. They are the first who should realize that their statements carry weight with their followers, and that whatever they say impacts on the image of Torah Judaism. Before they utter statements, even in jest, they need to think very carefully: will these words bring comfort and healing or will they bring grief and pain? will these words bring honor to Torah or will they bring shame?

Everyone makes mistakes during the course of a lifetime. None of us can say the right thing every time, without ever blundering. When we do make mistakes, it is proper for us to self-correct. If we don't self-correct or don't even realize that we've caused undue pain with our words, it is proper for someone to inform us gently of our error so that we can repent and do better next time.

No one--not even great "sages" and "Torah luminaries"--is exempt from this process of self-correction, and being corrected by others. Correction is most effectively done quietly, without causing embarrassment or scandal. Those who have uttered arrogant, mean or hurtful words should apologize, and issue new statements making it clear that they had misspoken. Once they have repented, the matter should be dropped without further gossip and controversy.

Years ago, I participated in a meeting at the home of the President of Israel, as part of a delegation of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. President Herzog said that he worried about the mean-spirited qualities he detected in the news media; but he went on to give an especially scathing attack of the "religious" media, where lying and slandering and character assassination were the norms. What he described then (early 1990s) seems still to be apt in describing some "religious" publications. While everyone needs to be careful and truthful with words, those who claim to be religious need to be even more scrupulous in fulfilling this area of morality. False and mean words are not only destructive and painful to the victims, but destructive and painful to the moral fiber of the person who utters such words. Such words bring Torah and religion into disrepute.

If we are to build an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive religious Jewish community, we need to conduct our lives in a spirit of humility, respect for

the feelings of others, and a very careful attention to the words we utter. Evil talk is--evil. It is destructive to spiritual growth and to the religious life of the community.

We need to ask ourselves: when/why have we engaged in lashon hara? when have we personally felt hurt by the words of others, and how did we respond? how do we find the right way to correct those who have spoken meanly or carelessly or arrogantly? do we react to mean words by responding with mean words of our own? Why does the rabbinic tradition consider lashon hara to be such a major sin? How can we make ourselves, our families and our communities better able to avoid this terrible sin?

The truth is: we all can do better. The hope is: we all will be better.