Electronic Lashon Hara: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tetzei

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tetzei

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

At a lunch meeting with friends, we were discussing the ugliness and lack of civility which too frequently characterize blog sites and online comments. 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. In a matter of a few seconds, people can spread “lashon hara” to a wide audience.

My friend told me of a woman who had been viciously attacked by online critics for statements she had made. She patiently searched for the telephone numbers of as many of the critics as she could identify. And then she called each of them.

They were startled to actually be speaking with the person they had so harshly maligned online. When they realized that the person they had attacked was a real human being with real feelings, they became somewhat apologetic for the rashness of their remarks. It is one thing to write an anonymous comment against an anonymous person; it is another thing to confront the person directly, as a fellow human being.

Modern technology makes it easy to dehumanize others. People can lodge the cruelest and most outlandish charges—without ever having to face the victims of their venom, without ever having to consider the ultimate impact of their “lashon hara”. They feel that it’s ok for them to vent, to call names, to discredit others—because they don’t see these “others” as fellow human beings. The victims are merely targets on a computer screen, to be shot down just as one shoots down enemies in other computer games.

Rabbi Eliezer Papo, one of the great sages of the 19th century, offered an important insight to authors. He suggested that if author A wished to write a critique of a work by author B—even if author B had died long ago—author A should imagine that author B was in the same room with him. He should not write down even one word that he wouldn’t say to author B face to face. This advice inculcates respectfulness to fellow human beings. If we wish to critique ideas or opinions, we should not use ad hominem attacks. Rather, we should focus on the

issues themselves, and offer calm and cogent arguments. Name-calling never establishes truth; only careful and thoughtful reasoning can lead us to truth.

In this week's Torah reading, we are commanded to "remember what the Lord your God did unto Miriam by the way as you came forth from Egypt" (Devarim 24:9). According to rabbinic tradition, Miriam was struck with leprosy due to her sin of speaking "lashon hara", evil-spirited gossip against Moses. The Torah insists that we remember the consequences of "lashon hara", that we recognize that it plagues the speaker as well as the victim.

"Lashon hara" has always been considered by Jewish tradition to be among the most heinous sins. It is a sin that causes affliction to the speaker, to the listener, and to the victim. In the modern era, "lashon hara" has reached new magnitudes of danger and harmfulness, due to the instant communications made possible by new technologies. If Miriam was punished for spreading a little gossip among a relatively few people, imagine the culpability of one who electronically spreads slander and disparagement to many thousands of people.

Here is some advice for coping with electronic "lashon hara".

1. Don't post any comment or critique that you would not say to the victim in person.
2. Don't write ad hominem attacks or engage in character assassination. If you object to someone's opinions, then focus on the opinions. Show why they are wrong. Offer cogent arguments. Be respectful.
3. 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".
4. Do not trust the reliability of anyone who sends around ad hominem attacks.
5. Remember what the Lord your God did unto Miriam by the way as you came forth from Egypt.