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“Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well”

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Joseph Telushkin received his rabbinical ordination from Yeshiva University and pursued graduate studies in Jewish history at Columbia University. He currently serves the Synagogue of the Performing Arts in Los Angeles.

He is also the author of the popular Rabbi Winter mystery series as well as: *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History*; *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*; *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism* (co-authored); *Why the Jews? The Reason for Anti-Semitism*; and a screenplay, *The Quarrel* (co-authored), which was chosen as an American Playhouse production and showcased at the Toronto film festival. Rabbi Telushkin's forthcoming book, *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well*, will be published by William Morrow & Company in April, 1996. ♣



Rabbi Joseph Telushkin addresses an issue of personal responsibility that is fundamental not only to our civil society but to our humanity: the ethics of speech. He reminds us that the Golden Rule should apply not just to how we act toward others but how we speak about them. His presentation was delivered during the September 1995 Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "Fiction and Faith."

Over the past decade, whenever I have lectured throughout the country on the powerful, and often negative, impact of words, I have asked audiences if they can go for twenty-four hours without saying any unkind words about, or to, anybody.

Invariably, a minority of listeners raise their hands signifying "yes," some laugh, and quite a large number call out, "no!"

I respond by saying, "Those who can't answer 'yes' must recognize that you have a serious problem. If you cannot go for twenty-four hours without drinking liquor, you are addicted to alcohol. If you cannot go for twenty-four hours without smoking, you are addicted to nicotine. Similarly, if you cannot go for twenty-four hours without saying unkind words about others, then you have lost control over your tongue."

How can I compare the harm done by a bit of gossip or a few unpleasant words to the damage caused by alcohol and smoking? Well, just think about your own life for a minute. Unless you, or someone dear to you, has been the victim of terrible physical violence, chances are the worst pains you have suffered in life have come from words used cruelly—from ego-destroying criticism, excessive anger, sarcasm, public and private humiliation, hurtful nicknames, betrayal of secrets, rumors, and malicious gossip.

Testing Your Speech

There is no area of life in which so many of us systematically violate the Golden Rule. Thus if you were about to enter a room and heard the people inside talking about you, chances are what you would least like to hear them talking about are your character flaws and the intimate details of your social life. Yet, when you are with friends and the conversation turns to people not present, what aspects of their lives are you and your companions most likely to explore? Is it not their character flaws and the intimate details of their social lives?

If you do not participate in such talk, congratulations. But before asserting this as a definite fact, try monitoring your con-



versation for two days. Note on a piece of paper every time you say something negative about someone who is not present. Also record when others do so, as well as your reactions when that happens. Do you try to silence the speaker, or do you ask for more details?

To ensure the test's accuracy, make no effort to change the content of your conversations throughout the two-day period, and do not try to be kinder than usual in assessing another's character and actions.

Most of us who take this test are unpleasantly surprised.

Negative comments we make about absent companions is but one way we wound with words; we also often cruelly hurt those *to whom* we are speaking. For example, many of us, when enraged, grossly exaggerate the wrong done by the person who has provoked our ire. If the anger expressed is disproportionate to the provocation (as often occurs when parents rage at children), it is unfair, often inflicts great hurt and damage, and thus is unethical.

All too often, many of us criticize others with harsh, offensive words, turn disputes into quarrels, belittle or humiliate others, and inflict wounds that last a lifetime.

The Power of Words

One reason that many otherwise "good" people use words irresponsibly and cruelly is that they regard the injuries inflicted by words as intangible and therefore minimize the damage they can inflict. For generations, children taunted by playmates have been taught to respond, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words (or names) can never hurt me." But does anyone really think that a child exposed to such abuse believes it?

An old Jewish teaching compares the tongue to an arrow: "Why not another weapon—a sword, for example?" one rabbi asks. "Because," he is told, "if

a man unsheathes his sword to kill his friend, and his friend pleads with him

and begs for mercy,

the man may be mollified

and return the sword

to its scabbard. But

an arrow, once it is

shot, cannot be returned."

The rabbi's

comparison is more than just a useful metaphor. Because words can be used to inflict devastating and irrevocable suffering, Jewish teachings go so far as to compare cruel words to murder. A penitent thief can return the money he has stolen; a murderer, no matter how sincerely he repents, cannot restore his victim to life. Similarly, one who damages another's reputation through malicious gossip or who humiliates another publicly can never fully undo the damage.

Words, quite simply, are very powerful. Indeed, the Bible teaches that God created the world through words. At the beginning of Genesis we learn, "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." I would submit that human beings, like God, also create with words. Consider the fact that most, if not all, of us have had the experience of reading a novel and being so moved by the fate of a character that we have cried, even though the character who has so moved us doesn't exist. All that happened was that writer took a blank piece of paper, put words on it, and through words alone created a human being so totally real that he or she is capable of evoking our deepest emotions.

Words are powerful enough to lead to love, but they can also lead to hatred and terrible pain. We must be extremely careful how we use them.

A Jewish folktale, set in nineteenth-century

Eastern Europe, tells of a man who went through a small community slandering the rabbi. One day, feeling suddenly remorseful, he begged the rabbi for forgiveness and offered to undergo any form of penance to make amends. The rabbi told him to take a feather pillow from his home, cut it open, scatter the feathers to the wind. The man did as he was told and returned to the rabbi. He asked, "Am I now forgiven?"

"Almost," came the response. "You just have to perform one last task: Go and gather all the feathers."

"But that's impossible," the man protested, "for the wind has already scattered them."

"Precisely," the rabbi answered.

The rabbi in this story understands that words define our place in the world. Once our place—in other words, our reputation—is defined, it is very hard to change, particularly if it is negative.

President Andrew Jackson who, along with his wife was the subject of relentless malicious gossip, once noted, "The murderer only takes the life of the parent and leaves his character as a goodly heritage to his children, while the slanderer takes away his goodly reputation and leaves him a living monument to his children's disgrace."

Considerate, fair and civilized use of words is every bit as necessary in the larger society as in one-on-one relationships. Throughout history, words used unfairly have promoted hatred and even murder. African Americans, for example, were long branded with words that depicted them as subhuman. Those who first described blacks in such terms hoped to enable whites to view them as different and inferior to themselves. This was important because, if whites perceived blacks as fully human, otherwise "decent" people could never have tolerated their persecution, enslavement, or lynching.

Similarly, when the radical Black Panther Party referred to police as "pigs" during the 1960s, its intention was not to hurt policemen's feelings but to dehumanize them and so establish in people's minds that murdering a policeman was really only like killing a dumb animal.

The Biblical Ethics of Speech

The biblical ethics of speech derive in large measure from a verse in Leviticus: "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people" (19:16), which, not coincidentally, appears only two verses before the Bible's most famous law, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18).

Because the commandment is so terse, it is difficult to know exactly what the Bible means by "talebearing." Does this law mean that it is forbidden to talk about any aspect of other people's lives (e.g.,

telling a friend, "I was at a party at Sam and Sally's house last night. It's absolutely gorgeous what they've done with their kitchen.")? Or does the verse only outlaw damning insinuations (e.g., "When Sam went away on that business trip last month, I saw his wife Sally at a real fancy restaurant with this good-looking guy. She didn't see me, because they were too busy making eyes at each other.")? Is it talebearing, for that matter, to pass on true stories (e.g., "Sally confessed to Betty she's having an affair. Sam ought to know what goes on when he's out of town.")?

The Bible itself never fully answers these questions. But for centuries Jewish teachers have elaborated upon the biblical law and formulated, in ascending order of seriousness, three types of speech that we should decrease or eliminate: non-defamatory and true remarks about others; negative, though true, stories that lower the esteem in which people hold the person being discussed (in Hebrew, *lashon ha-ra*); and slander—that is, lies or rumors that are negative and false (in Hebrew, *motzi shem ra*).

Non-defamatory and True Remarks

The comment, "I was at a party at Sam and Sally's house last night. It's absolutely gorgeous what they've done with their kitchen," is non-defamatory and true. What possible reason could there be for discouraging people from exchanging such innocuous, even complimentary, information?

For one thing, the listener might not find the information so innocuous. While one person is describing how wonderful the party was, the other might well wonder, "Why wasn't I invited? I had them over to my house just a month ago."

But the more important reason for discouraging "innocuous" gossip is that it rarely remains so. Suppose I suggest that you and a friend spend twenty minutes talking about a mutual acquaintance. How likely is it that you will devote the entire time to exchanging stories about his or her niceness?

Maybe you will, that is if the person you are discussing is Mother Teresa. Otherwise the conversation will likely take on a negative tone. For most of us, exchanging critical news and evaluations about others is far more interesting and enjoyable than exchanging accolades. If I were to say to you, "Janet is a wonderful person. There's just *one thing* I can't stand about her," on what aspects of Janet's character do you think the rest of our conversation will most likely focus? The reason is that "Nobody ever gossips about other people's secret virtues," as British philosopher Bertrand Russell once noted. What most interests most people about others are their character flaws and private scandals.

Even if you do not let the discussion shift in a negative direction, becoming an ethical speaker forces you to anticipate the inadvertent harm that your words might cause. For example, although praising a friend might seem like a laudable act, doing so in the presence of someone who dislikes her will probably do your friend's reputation more harm than good. Your words may well provoke her antagonist to voice the reasons for his or her dislike, particularly if you leave soon after making your positive remarks.

Indeed, the danger of praise leading to damage is likely at the root of the Book of Proverbs' rather enigmatic observation: "He who blesses his neighbor in a loud voice in the morning, it will later be thought a curse" (27:14). Bible commentaries understand this to mean that fame and notoriety can ultimately damage a person's good name—or worse.

Negative Truths

As a rule, most people seem to think that there is nothing morally wrong in spreading negative information about another as long as the information is true. But ordinary experience proves otherwise. The Jewish tradition also takes a very different view. Perhaps that is why the Hebrew term *lashon ha-ra* (literally "bad language" or "bad tongue") has no precise equivalent in English. For, unlike slander, which is universally condemned as immoral because it is false, *lashon ha-ra* is true. It is the dissemination of *accurate* information that will lower the status of the person to whom it refers; hence I translate it as "negative truths."

Jewish law forbids spreading negative truths about others unless the person to whom you are speaking needs the information. To do so is a very serious offense, one that has been addressed by many non-Jewish ethicists as well. Two centuries ago, the Swiss theologian and poet Jonathan K. Lavater offered a good guideline concerning the spreading of such news: "Never tell evil of a man if you do not know it for a certainty, and if you know it for a certainty, then ask yourself, 'Why should I tell it?'"

Intention has a great deal to do with the circumstances in which it is prohibited to speak negative truths. The same statement, depending on the context, can constitute a compliment or a mean-spirited attempt to diminish another person's status. For example, if you relate that a person known to have limited funds gave a hundred dollars to a certain charity, you will probably raise the person's stature because people will be impressed at his or her generosity. But, if you say of an individual known to be wealthy that he or she gave a hundred dollars to the same cause, the effect will be to diminish respect for the person; he or she will now be thought of as "cheap."

Unfortunately, this realization does not deter many people from speaking negative truths. Gossip

often is so interesting that it impels many of us to violate the Golden Rule to "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." Although we are likely to acknowledge that we would want embarrassing information about ourselves kept quiet, many of us refuse to be equally discreet concerning others' sensitive secrets.

Slander

The most grievous violation of ethical speech is, of course, the spreading of malicious falsehoods, what Jewish law calls "*motzi shem ra*," or "giving another a bad name." To destroy someone's good name is to commit a kind of murder—that is why it is called "character assassination." Indeed, it has led to literal murder. During Europe's devastating fourteenth-century Black Plague, anti-Semites and others seeking scapegoats spread the lie that Jews had caused the Plague by poisoning village wells. Within a few months, enraged mobs murdered tens of thousands of Jews.

Too often, the victims of slanderous tongues suffer terribly. In Shakespeare's thirty-eight plays, there is no villain more vile than *Othello's* Iago, whose evil is perpetrated almost exclusively through words. At the outset, Iago vows to destroy the Moorish general Othello for bypassing him for promotion. Knowing Othello's jealous nature, Iago convinces him that his new wife, Desdemona, is having an affair with another man. The charge seems preposterous, but Iago repeats the accusation again and again, and he arranges the circumstantial evidence necessary to destroy Desdemona's credibility. Soon, Othello comes to believe the slander, and he murders his beloved, only to learn almost immediately that Iago's words were false. For Othello, "Hell," as an old aphorism teaches, "is truth seen too late."

Where Heaven and Earth Touch: A National "Speak No Evil" Day

What if we could share our consciousness of the power of words with many others—even the whole nation? I have proposed an annual "Speak No Evil" Day, starting on May 14, 1996. Senators Connie Mack (R-FL) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) have introduced a bipartisan resolution in the U.S. Senate that requires the co-sponsorship of fifty senators. This resolution would establish such a day, requesting that the President issue a proclamation calling on the American people to:

—eliminate all hurtful and unfair talk for twenty-four hours;

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