Jewish Tribune – Tazria

**The Lure of Gossip**

What is it about lashon hora and gossip that is so enticing? Why are there so many Torah prohibitions proscribing it?

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, in his book “Words That Hurt, Words That Heal” (p35), offers several reasons. A key one is the desire to be “in the know”. One way to elevate ourselves is by retailing inside information about others, so that we will be perceived as being “in the know”. As Dr Samuel Johnson observed two centuries ago, “The vanity of being trusted with a secret is generally the chief motive to disclose it.”

Rabbi Telushkin opines that Dr Johnson’s dictum is not overstated. He offers the following unlikely scenario to prove his point. Imagine the President of the United States of America chooses you as his confidant. He speaks with you regularly, sometimes several times a day, shares his innermost thoughts, bounces ideas off you, and otherwise solicits your advice. The only condition attached to your relationship is that you are forbidden to tell anyone, ever, about it. The president also will never mention to anyone, either during his time in office or afterward, that he knows you or has every spoken to you.

For most of us, the satisfaction and pleasure of having such access to the president would largely evaporate if we could tell no one, now or in the future about it.

Remember the story about the yiddel who, overcome with temptation to have a round of golf, skipped shul one fine Shabbos morning. Setting up on the first tee, it was a beautiful and sunny early spring day, and he was alone in the golf course. He hit the ball, and it shot straight towards the green and gently rolled towards the flag and dropped into the hole. It was a 420 yards hole in one!

The heavenly angels were astounded and asked G-d “Why did you let him get away with that?” G-d smiled and replied, “Who is he going to tell?”

A primary motive for gossiping is to brag to others about our acquaintance with important people and important things; it follows therefore that we must also be important.

Rabbi Telushkin writes about an experiment conducted by Professors Jack Levin and Arnold Arluke, sociology professors at Boston’s Northeastern University. They were researching the topic of gossip – one of the themes of our sedrah and of the causes for the spiritual blemish of tzora’as.

The professors wanted to see how quickly gossip spread among students and soon accidentally discovered that inventiveness is all too common.

For their experiment, Professors Levin and Arluke had hundreds of flyers printed announcing the wedding ceremony to be performed in front of the Northeastern student union building. The flyer read: “You are cordially invited to attend the wedding of Robert Goldberg and Mary Ann O’Brien on June 6 at 3.30 in the afternoon”.

They circulated the flyers throughout the campus, tacking them on bulletin boards, displaying them in classrooms and so on.

Robert Goldberg and Mary Ann O’Brien were fictitious names and Professors Levin and Arluke distributed the flyers on June 7, the day after the wedding supposedly occurred.

A week later, when they polled students to learn how many had “heard” about the wedding, they discovered that 52 percent had. “More amazingly,” they note, “12 percent told us they had actually attended it! These students said they were there on June 6; many of them described the ‘white wedding gown’ worn by the bride and the ‘black limo’ that the newlyweds to their honeymoon destination.”

The students’ responses seemed so bizarre that the two sociologists checked to see if a campus wedding might have occurred on or about the same time, but none had.

Rabbi Telushkin concludes that in their quest to be perceived as people who the “inside scoop about the big event”, 12 percent of the students polled were willing to tell a flat-out lie. The desire to seem important can impel otherwise rational people to act in a pathetically dishonest way.

Perhaps that is one of the motivations to gossip, speak loshon hora and rechilus. The base desire to seem important and have inside information.

As Rabbi Telushkin concludes, how ultimately meaningless such artificial elevation of one’s status is. How much more satisfying it is to let one’s accomplishments cause others to raise their opinion of us.

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