

Lashon Hara
Parashat Tazria-Metzora (Men's Club Shabbat)
April 29, 2006
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Temple Aliyah, Needham

As a senior in college, I reached a fork in the road of life—rather than join many of my peers and follow the path to medical school, I chose graduate school in social psychology. My training has served me reasonably well and this morning, in reflecting on Parashat Tazria, I've made a similar choice. The parasha could be read as a divinely proclaimed differential diagnosis and treatment manual: The Torah for the identification and treatment of skin diseases. Given my background, however, I'm going to focus on a psychological interpretation of the parasha, which is also a traditional interpretation.

Our reading today joins the narrative as some of the manifestations of tzara'at—translated as “leprosy,” although it actually refers to a broader set of skin disorders—are described. As our Chumash commentary explains, one who has leprosy is a m'tzora. Our sages noted that m'tzora is linguistically similar to motzi shem ra—one who gossips. And here's where psychology comes into action. Based on this play on words, our sages consider leprosy not merely as a physical ailment, but as punishment for the sins of slander and malicious gossip. And, just as leprosy is contagious, so, too, is gossip.

Our sages were not merely punsters and the forefathers of the BBC's “My Word.” They were, of course, students of Tanach. The proof texts for the gossip interpretation are instances in Tanach where leprosy is associated with harmful speech. Thus, in B'midbar (12:10) Miriam is metzora'at after she incites rebellion against her brother Moses by gossiping about his marriage to a Cushite.

From our Tanach discussion of leprosy, a halacha of speech has developed. We call prohibited speech Lashon Hara—literally, “evil speech.” Lashon Hara is an extraordinary concept in that it prohibits virtually all derogatory or damaging communication. Even truthful things are forbidden to be uttered if they are hurtful.



In our dealings with others, the laws of Lashon Hara reject the legal principle that “truth is an absolute defense.”

Lashon Hara evolves out of our sense of the importance of our words and the “sanctity of speech.” Talmud teaches that the tongue is so dangerous that it must be hidden from view and guarded by two protective walls: mouth and teeth. Rabbi Perkins told me that “one can’t speak too often” about Lashon Hara. He’s correct—our lives are overfilled with opportunities to harm others by our words.

Typically, when we discuss Lashon Hara, we talk about the spiteful things we say about others. Each of us possesses a vast armamentarium of ways to poison our interpersonal relationships. But I’d like to focus on another kind of Lashon Hara—the ways in which we “diss” whole groups of people. As my focal example, I’d like to consider an issue—Intermarriage—that both your Rabbi and the Men’s Clubs have been vitally concerned with. Your Rabbi has been a clear and consistent voice arguing for different ways to engage interfaith families. And, the Federation of Men’s Clubs has led the Conservative movement in trying to develop better ways to deal with Intermarriage. If you haven’t read the books and pamphlets written and edited by Rabbi Charles Simon, the national director of your Federation, I highly recommend them. My comments are intended to amplify and support these efforts.

Perhaps proving the contagious, pathogen-like properties of speech, across the Jewish community, intermarriage has been the focus of a debate that has bordered on warfare. In this war of words, social researchers have been provocateurs, with the metaphoric *casus belli* being the release of the results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study. It showed that the majority—52%—of recently married Jews had married non-Jews.

What has been an intense debate, no doubt heartfelt and stimulated by Holocaust nightmares about the extinction of Jewry, seems to have become increasingly hateful and hurtful. Part of the problem is the pejorative language used to describe Jewish and non-Jewish spouses in intermarriages. The larger issue, however, is advocacy for norms that disparage and deprecate those Jews who intermarry and dismiss those non-Jews who are unwilling to convert.

Again, those of us in the social scientific community bear partial responsibility. Our data show that intermarried families are less likely to participate in the community—educate their children Jewishly, involve themselves in synagogue life and contribute to Jewish causes. From this association, some have concluded that all possible measures must be employed to “prevent” intermarriage. These analysts even argue that it is counterproductive to welcome interfaith families into our synagogues: If we make it too easy for interfaith families to remain so, we encourage behavior which will lead us to the precipice of demographic oblivion.

It’s, perhaps, an ironic metaphor in light of our parasha, but this school of thought suggests that we treat those who intermarry as lepers: That we separate and treat intermarried families differently. It is, no doubt, a *koshi*—a dilemma. In light of our tradition, how do we encourage families to become part of the community—for example, by promoting conversion—but not engage in *Lashon Hara* if they decide otherwise.

One question is whether it is *Lashon Hara* to derogate those who decide to remain in an interfaith family. That, too, is complex. According to traditional interpretations of the laws of *Lashon Hara* (see *Sefer Chofetz Chaim*), intermarriage is an exception to the near-universal prohibition against derogatory speech. Although one is enjoined not to speak critically of one who does not observe mitzvot, it is ok according to traditional interpretation to speak negatively of one who intermarries. It is reasoned that a person who neglects to follow a particular ritual commandment may do so because they don’t understand the rule or they didn’t realize that it applied. But intermarriage is different: It implies intentional disregard of God’s commandments. Normally, we are supposed to “hold our tongue” and give the person the “benefit of the doubt,” but not so in the case of intermarriage.

I’d like to suggest that now that we better understand the dynamics of intermarriage, this exception to the laws of *Lashon Hara* needs to be reconsidered. Intermarriage is not, necessarily, an act of defiance by individuals who reject Judaism. Simply put, it’s an act of love. In some cases, it arises because the individual has not had the benefit of a Jewish education and doesn’t appreciate the value of following tradition. In other cases, the Jewish partner had a wonderful education and home; as well, they have a healthy Jewish identity and they would

like to raise their children Jewishly, but they recoil when asked to pressure their spouse to reject his or her family's tradition. It may also be a conscious effort to reject Judaism. But it's hard to know what motivates others and any generalizations may be wrong more often than right.

I want to advocate vigorously for an interpretation of Lashon Hara that emphasizes our obligation not to act or speak in hurtful ways—particularly so when we speak as a community. Not only does our tradition teach us to do so, but in the case of intermarriage, it's critical for our communal health. The fact of modern Jewish life in the Diaspora is that we are a small minority and, increasingly, Jewish households include non-Jewish members. Our religious obligation, as a tradition that values the sanctity of speech, is that we engage in respectful dialogue with all Jews. Such a respectful community will be one that Jews, as well as their non-Jewish spouses, will want to be part of.

You may think I am advocating avoidance of conflict and dishonesty in communication. No, that's not me and, along with integrity and believing that we need to be clear about our values, it wouldn't be fun to be Jewish if we didn't have disputes. I'm simply calling for more careful and nuanced communication. In social psychology, there's a concept we call the Fundamental Attribution Error. It says that when we look at others we attribute their behavior to their personalities. When we look at ourselves, however, we see only the situational constraints that led us to behave as we do.

It's all too easy to look at others and see their character traits as driving all of their decision-making and behavior. We're not as harsh on ourselves, however, and most of us have well-developed skills at explaining our behavior in terms of the choices we had and the situations we face. Perhaps, as suggested by the fundamental attribution error, we're primed to see intermarried individuals as having made a conscious decision to reject Judaism. It may be so, but the answer is probably a lot more complex. I will bet that those of you who are intermarried and/or have intermarried children have a very different view than those who don't. But let's not dismiss or derogate anyone because of their status. It's not the Jewish way.

In recognition of Men's Shabbat, a final comment: In Deborah Tannen's book about communication between men and women, "You Just Don't Understand," there's an anecdote about a husband, whose wife asks, "Would you like to go to the movies? He says, "No." She's enraged—how dare he fail to understand that her question was not a random poll, and that she wanted to go to the movies. Putting oneself in another's place is difficult, very difficult, but as our tradition teaches, it's not ours to finish the task, but we are obligated to try. Let us, especially in our communication about groups within our community, be mindful of the power of our words and their impact.

Shabbat Shalom.