

Parshat Metzora
April 29, 2017
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas
“Lashon Harah? Today it’s about *Etzbah Hara!*”

A man saw his Rabbi leaving a BBQ place. There was a big pig on the sign, so there was really no chance that this place could be kosher. He sees the Rabbi walking out of the restaurant with tins of food.

So the man turned to his phone, took a picture of the Rabbi holding the tin, exiting the blatantly *treif* restaurant, and posted it on twitter with the caption “Is this kosher?” People re-tweeted back questioning their Rabbi as a Jewish spiritual leader because he eats at Sonny’s BBQ. Minutes later, the picture spread to Facebook, and was re-posted on walls by many.

Two days later, this same congregant went to the webpage of his local newspaper, he saw a picture that shocked him. It was his Rabbi, and a local priest, delivering BBQ tins to the local homeless shelter.

So, the man called his Rabbi and set up a meeting. The man showed him what he wrote and apologized. The Rabbi told the man that he would forgive him if he did two things: First, delete all his postings about the Rabbi – he promised he would. Then the Rabbi said, then I want you to find every instance where your words were posted, re-posted, tweeted and re-tweeted, every like and every comment on Facebook – all of it – find them and take them down and have all those others take them down as well!

“But that’s impossible!” said the congregant. Well therein lies the problem with this kind of thing,” said the rabbi. “I might forgive you, but you can never truly right this wrong.”

When I heard this story I liked it for several reasons. First of all it was clearly a modern update to the old rabbinic story that many of us are familiar with, the story of the feather and the pillow. You know the one where the woman spreads a malicious rumor about the rabbi that also turns out to be untrue and then seeks the rabbis forgiveness only to be instructed by the rabbi to take a pillow and release its feathers to the wind and then when she comes back and lets him know she had complied with his wishes – he then tells her to go and gather up all of the feathers that had been scattered to the wind. When she protests as to the impossibility of such an effort – the rabbi delivers his lesson as to the problem with *Lashon Hara* the problem with gossip is that it is always impossible to undo the damage it does. We rabbis love that story, but it is hard to use today, I mean really, try teaching a 13 year old student about a pillow that is made of feathers! But in this updated version – the one where we have the rabbi’s picture uploaded to the internet, we not only have a modern version of this ancient tale, but we begin to see that the truth embedded in the original story is more relevant today than it has ever have been.

Another reason I like this example is that I was recently a victim of just this kind of gossip. A family had questions about an incident in our Early Childhood Program. They had one child in our school and were debating whether to enroll their second child. Their first child loved our program and except for this one incident with a teacher, had a fantastic experience. We did everything we could to accommodate this family, even though we are not sure the incident that was making them angry even happened. No matter what we did, they were not satisfied. They found their way

to my office and while acknowledging how happy their child was, made it clear that unless we fired the teacher they would not be mollified. We did not feel this was justified. Frustrated they turned to a Facebook group that some of you may have heard of called "Roslyn Moms." This Facebook group describes itself as "A central place for ONLY Roslyn parents and/residents to exchange info, ask questions or get answers." Sounds fair enough. The problem is all too frequently it serves not as a helpful exchange of information and ideas, but a forum for venting grievances and spreading gossip. This parent began a conversation aimed at seeking help in trying to make their decision as to whether they should enroll their second child in our ECC. But quickly the conversation turned from the merits of our program to a character assassination of the school, the shul and yours truly.

Some of our members approached me, (I am not a subscriber to the Roslyn Mom's Facebook group) and informed me of the things that were being said about our shul, our school and about me on this site. They felt we, I, should respond. I did not. Defending oneself against gossip only elevates the conversation. I believe that gossip does not deserve a response. Eventually the matter died down, but a certain amount of damage was, I suspect, done. Interestingly, this family ultimately decided to enroll their second child in our school. I guess they decided we were an appropriately good place for their child, despite all that they had said. Do you think they went back on Roslyn Mom's and shared their decision? Do you think they apologized, or took back their harsh words? I don't think so.

The story of the rabbi and the feathers was a quaint homiletical lesson. But today, the internet has upped the ante and the challenge of gossip in a connected world is infinitely more problematic.

The rabbi and the feathers was a cute story – but my experience was all too real as is the following incident that was documented by the New York Times:
(<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/27/us/27sexting.html>)

"One day last winter Margarite posed naked before her bathroom mirror, held up her cell phone and took a picture. Then she sent the full-length frontal photo to Isaiah, her new boyfriend. Both were in eighth grade. They broke up soon after. A few weeks later, Isaiah forwarded the photo to another eighth-grade girl, once a friend of Margarite's. Around 11 o'clock at night, that girl slapped a text message on it: "H* (Skank) Alert!" she typed. "If you think this girl is a wh*re (prostitute), then text this to all your friends." Then she clicked open the long list of contacts on her phone and pressed, "send." In less than 24 hours, the effect was as if Margarite, 14, had sauntered naked down the hallways of the four middle schools in this racially and economically diverse suburb of the state capital, Olympia. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of students had received her photo and forwarded it.

Yes, there is a big difference between the old feathers of the story we rabbis used to love to tell and what we are witnessing in our world today. Feathers need wind to spread, but all Facebook or Instagram needs are clicks. Eventually, feathers go away and sooner or later are forgotten about, but everything we put on the Internet is there forever.

It has become a source of good-natured humor as some of you have watched your old rabbi stumble his way into the use of social media. This old dog is struggling to learn new tricks, as I attempt to master the use of Facebook and Twitter and blogs to increase the reach of the torah that we teach here day in and day out. So much has happened and in such a short time.

Facebook, the social connectivity website that is now part of our vocabulary much like Google, was launched in 2004. By the end of that year, Facebook had 1 million users; now, Facebook has more than 1.23 billion active users each month, all over the world.

Before Facebook, we “smiled” when we wanted to show that we liked something. When we wanted to update friends we “dialed” the phone. And “tagging” was a game kids played. A recent reviewer said that AOL opened people to the Internet and Facebook opened people to each other.

Last week I went on a rant about twitter, this week I am picking on Facebook, what is with our rabbi? But the truth is I am not against Facebook, I just think that the technology has out- paced our understanding of it and as we explore the possibilities of an interconnected world, we also need to explore the responsibilities that are associated with it as well.

This week’s double Torah portion of *Tazria* and *Metzora* deals with a subject that is not easy to talk about. As a result, the rabbis who were eager to expand, or some might even say, avoid the subject matter, made a play on words and transformed the word *metzora* – which means leper, or a similar kind of contagious skin disease – and through the use of a pun made it into *motzi shem ra* -- which means gossip. Tired of talking about skin disease, the rabbis used this verbal acrobatics to enable them to open a wider and even 2,000 years ago – a more relevant conversation into the evils of a loose tongue and the dangers of unguarded or un-careful speech.

And for the last 2,000 years rabbis have often taken to their pulpits on *parshat metzora* to caution their flock on the dangers of gossip. The tongue, say the rabbis is a very wet place and it is so easy for it to slip. But never, never in the long history of our people have the rabbis been able to imagine the danger that can be inflicted – not by the tongue – but by the finger. “Click” – and lives can be destroyed!

The danger of what my colleague Rabbi David Baum calls *etzbah harah* - the “evil finger” as opposed to *lashon hara* - the evil tongue.

I’ll let you in on a current predicament and I invite your input on how you think I should handle it. On May 21st we are having our major fund raising event of the year, a dinner featuring what we have billed as “Dancing with the TBS Stars!” Members of our congregation are busy preparing their dance presentations and you the members in attendance will get to vote on who you feel will be our TBS Star Dancer. And guess who volunteered to be one of the participants? Yep, in what I now consider one of the worst decisions I ever made – knowing people would come from far and wide to see me embarrass myself, I agreed in the spirit of “taking one for the team” to dance. Now those of you who know me know that dance is a word that has never been associated with me. I do not dance. I am not proud of this, I wish I could dance or at the very least, I was one of those people who didn’t care how I looked and allowed myself to just do it. But alas I am not a good dancer and am too self-conscious to allow myself to just do it. I will confess to you something I have never admitted to before, I am haunted by a line from a movie, it was from the Karate Kid (I know this movie is not known as a great source of wisdom) but this line stayed with me – it was spoken by Mr. Miaggi who said, “never trust a spiritual leader who does not dance!” That statement resonated with me and stayed with me. I think I understand what he meant. A spiritual leader who does not know how to let himself go, surrender himself to a moment, loose himself in the moment – uncaring about how he may look or what others may be saying – is one

who is not to be trusted. And so, I have never been proud of my inability to dance – and agreed to this challenge for a lot of reasons.

I will say, after three lessons – this is not going to end well. And I am not at all sure what those in attendance will be rooting for more – seeing me dance, or seeing me fall on my face.

But the die is cast – and that is not the advice I am seeking from you today.

For better or for worse, we will have a good time. Whatever bruises I suffer to my body and my ego – I will recover. But, what do you think is the likelihood that someone will take a video of me dancing, post it to their Facebook page. And once on the internet, it can be posted and re-posted *ad infinitum* and once on the internet it is there, forever. Can I ask people not to post without the permission of any of the participants? Do you agree that we have the right to our internet privacy or am I being naïve and just accept that we now live in an age where we no longer have any right to privacy, that privacy, as that 8th grade girl learned and as I learned from Roslyn Mom's – no longer exists?

I am concerned that our young people are most vulnerable as they are the ones who truly appreciate the power of these tools – but don't yet appreciate their danger.

Many people say that the laws that we have in Judaism are a thing of the past. Stories of pillows and feathers, they all seem so quaint. But our way of life is more necessary now than ever. We can destroy a life with one Facebook post, with one forward of an email or text. How we conduct ourselves in the virtual world is a daily test that will challenge our *Yetzer HaRah*, our evil inclination like never before because of the power that we have in our little fingers. We have to make sure that we and our children realize that the virtual world is also the real world.

In *Pirkei Avot* we find this line, “Rabbi Shimon says there are three crowns: the crown of Torah and the crown of priesthood and the crown of kingship (civil rule) but the crown of a good name rises above them all.”

You might have the title of Torah scholar, or the title of Priest, or the title of king or president, but without a good name – the other crowns are unsustainable. The *keter shem tov* is how people perceive you. Ask the rabbi whose picture of him exiting a *treif* restaurant was posted to the internet; ask the 14 year old girl who had naively sexted a picture of herself to her then boyfriend. If I end up being known as a bad dancer, I think I will survive but never before in human history has a good reputation been more important and never before has it been harder to maintain.

All of us must work together to keep our *keter shem tov*, and to make sure, God forbid, that we are not the cause of damage to anyone else's reputation.

How you are talked about on the web, and how you talk about others in the virtual world, the *keter shem tov*, is the thing that is going to matter most in our future in a world where everything is permanent.

Eventually, feathers turn to dust, but words on the Internet? Now they are forever. Guard your good name, and guard the good name of others. Guard your tongues – and your fingers, make sure they are used for good, and not bad.