

Vayeshev

This week's parasha is Vayeshev. It is the story of Jacob and his 12 sons, his favorite being 17-year-old Joseph. Animosity grows between the 12 brothers when, as they worked the fields, Joseph brings back 'evil tales of his siblings to his father Jacob. This, alongside Joseph's misguided decision to share his prophetic dreams of his family bowing down to him in the future, lead to Joseph being thrown in a pit, sold into slavery and sent Egypt for 22 years.

In the Torah, there are 31 commandments of shmirat halashon- guarding the tongue. These stem from a general prohibition found in Leviticus: lo telech rachil b'amecha, do not go about as a talebearer amongst your people.

Speech has the power to lift up, and the power to rip another apart and crush them. The Talmud teaches that the tongue is an instrument so dangerous that it must be hidden away behind two protective walls- our lips and our teeth- to prevent its misuse.

There are 3 basic categories of speech against which the Torah urges us to guard ourselves.

Lashon hara: (the evil tongue) speech about a person that is negative or harmful to them even though it is true

Hotza'at shem ra; (to take out – (like a library book- in otherwards, to give someone a bad name) negative or harmful speech about a person that is FALSE; defamation. Slander.

And Rechilut; (gossip)- Hearing and spreading either one of the above.

LISTENING LASHON HARA IS FORBIDDEN BECAUSE YOU FORM IMPRESSIONS OF OTHERS BASED ON GOSSIP YOU HEAR, NOT ON AN OPINION YOU HAVE FORMED YOURSELF BY ENGAGING HONESTLY WITH THE PERSON.

The Talmud teaches us that Joseph was in Egypt for 22 years because of both his and his father's sins of lashon hara. For 12 years Joseph was imprisoned for his 'talebearing', and for 12 more years Joseph was in Egypt for his father's sin of listening to his son's gossip.

We ALL are guilty of this sin. Probably every day. It should be noted that there are occasions for which lashon hara is allowed. For example, Toelet- (translated as benefit or value). This type of lashon hara is constructive or beneficial. It is for a purpose that may serve as a warning, prevent harm or an injustice. Therapy also falls under this umbrella because it 'removes worry from the heart' and could potentially heal a situation.

In so many ways our world is being crushed under lashon hara and Hotza'at shem ra. Anti-semitism is on the rise. Wars rage and people are enslaved for no reason other than their religion, culture or race. Members of our own communities are facing challenges keeping their youth safe in schools and keeping rights already given safely in place, while others cannot seem to thrive because they live their lives by how others see and judge them, not by who they are. The loudest policy makers speak for the silent many who either don't know better or are led to believe their voices do not matter.

If we learn one lesson from the story of Jacob and Joseph it is that, in the moment, it is not always easy to know when we are participating in lashon hara. Therefore, every single day we must be mindful of the power we have over what we say and what we do with the information we hear.

Our voices matter.
Our words matter.
Use them sparingly,
use them well.
Shabbat shalom.