

Once upon a time, a man went about the community telling malicious lies about the rabbi. Later, he realized the wrong he had done, and began to feel remorse. He went to the rabbi and begged his forgiveness, saying he would do anything he could to make amends. The rabbi told the man, "Go get your feather pillow and bring it back here. When the man returned with his pillow, the rabbi handed him a scissors. "Stand by the window," he said. Then he opened the window and asked his congregant to cut open his feather pillow along one side. Immediately, the feathers began to blow out of the window, across the yard, away into the fields. Then the rabbi said, "Now, go and gather the feathers. Because you can no more make amends for the damage your words have done than you can recollect the feathers."

What is the hardest part of Jewish observance? The laws about what comes out of our mouth. Both are found in Leviticus: Thou shalt not go up and down as a tale-bearer among thy people (Lev. 19:16), and ye shall not wrong one another (Lev. 25:17, which according to tradition refers to wronging a person with speech).

This week's parsha, Levitical of course, is about *metzorah*. Most of the time, this word is translated as "skin disease." But the sages believed that skin disease was actually an affliction of the body brought on by an affliction of the tongue. Moses, they point out, was afflicted with leprosy after he spoke ill of the Israelites to God, claiming that they would surely not believe him. His sister Miriam was afflicted with leprosy after she spoke ill of her brother Moses.

"M'tzorah," the sages wrote, is brought on by "motzi shem ra," Hebrew for "one who gossips. Gossip is like leprosy: Both are highly contagious.

So what is "tale-bearing"? Any gossip. We are asked not to say anything about another person, even if it is true, even if it is not negative, even if it is not secret, even if it hurts no one, even if the person himself would tell the same thing if asked!

The person who listens to gossip is even worse than the person who tells it. After all, no harm could be done by gossip if no one listened to it! Our sages say *lashon ha-ra* (disparaging speech) kills three people: the person who speaks it, the person who hears it, and the person about whom it is told. (Talmud Arachin 15b). The Talmud tells that our tongue is an instrument so dangerous that it must be kept hidden from view, behind two protective walls – the mouth and the teeth – to prevent its misuse.

Did you know this? In Jewish law, everything is understood to be secret unless a person specifically says otherwise.

So one important corollary to “don’t gossip” is also this: “Guard the privacy of information and the integrity of its source.”

Our social networks, our means of communication are easily copied, forwarded, read, transmitted, left unprotected. How do we create a healthy community and a healthy system if we don’t secure healthy boundaries around how we do our business?

The Book of Leviticus is trying to remind us how to become a nation of priests. It offers us beauty of healthy ritual that helps us sanctify the world. It asks us to safeguard the integrity of our community.

Let’s commit to doing just that. We will sleep more easily on our feather pillows if we do.