

## YOM KIPPUR EVENING SPEECH – 2014

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Why is it that people are so quick to judge their neighbors but unwilling to focus the same moral lens upon themselves? When a public personality or an elected official makes a poor judgment or an unpopular decision, how fast do the media lead the charge to eviscerate that individual and, as is often the case, how often do we the public jump on the bandwagon and feed off the media spectacle that follows?

Now let's think closer to home about how tolerant we are with our neighbors and friends about the errors we believe they commit in their relationship with us. Think about the person who we feel snubbed us at a party. How about the person who raised their voice to us and hurt our feelings? How about the time when a friend did not come through when we needed their help?

We have expectations about how others are supposed to act, and when they fail our standard don't we end up putting ourselves in the position of judge and jury? Our responses range from anger or disappointment to ignoring, shunning and ultimately scorning them. Typically the drama that percolates inside us leads us to sharing our anger with anyone who will listen. How often do we see this trajectory of emotions?

Yet when it comes to our own lives, how fast are we to hold up ourselves to the same bar that we set up for others? Are we just as critical of our own actions as we are when we focus our righteous indignation towards others we feel have failed us? I would like to focus on these questions in terms of judging ourselves with equal rigor as we judge those around us. I do not believe it is a sin to judge others because it is human nature to be judgmental. But is it sinful behavior when we create a double standard for ourselves by judging others and not applying those standards to our own behavior?

I believe that the answer is yes, in three ways. Do we not by being exclusively judgmental of others lead to the sins of gossip and slanderous speech? Second, do we not damage our own reputation when others listen to us denigrate or criticize our neighbor? Third, would we not be better and wiser if we focused more on practicing forgiveness instead obsessing over how disappointed we are or how we can get revenge against the alleged offender? Judaism teaches us that holding up someone's reputation and dignity is one of the most important things we can do to keep peace. Gossip, slander, and bearing a grudge move us farther away from the best in ourselves.

The Hebrew word for gossip is *rachilut*. We will read the Torah and its admonition against gossip tomorrow afternoon from the book of Leviticus. *Lo Telech k'rachil bamecha,* "Do not go about as a gossip amongst your people." The root of this verb *rachil* to gossip means to peddle. In actuality, one who gossips is likened to a person who traffics in the commodity of information. Candidly isn't this the one sin that all of us know is wrong and, yet, the same sin which most commit without regard to the consequences? This is so serious a sin that the Talmud tells a story of a student in the academy who held a secret for 22 years and then revealed it to his classmates. Upon hearing this revealed secret his teachers banished him immediately from the House of Study for the sinful behavior of gossip (Sanhedrin 31a).

Not only does our tradition declare gossip and slander as sins but also even listening to gossip and slander is a sin. The sages teach that when one is gossiping or slandering a person we are to interrupt the person and refuse to listen. Is it not one thing to judge a person we dislike or disrespect and keep our opinions to ourselves and quite another thing to go out and tell all how we feel, that is, how what so and so did hurt us or how it was shameful behavior so that everyone should know how bad a person they are? News media outlets exploit every opportunity to spread information sometimes completely unrelated to the problem a person is having. What happens when the media report is incorrect? How does one reestablish their reputation if it turns out the reported information was wrong? Similarly what is the difference between that kind of insidious news reporting and us talking about and embellishing or exaggerating what someone allegedly said at a party or in a committee meeting? The answer is not much! Do such people who peddle information fall under the admonition of Isaiah who said, “The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned their pathways into crooked roads; no one who walks along them will know peace”(59:8).

The problem with gossip and slander is that the person committing it feels empowered by the attention that they receive. So, a person calls all their friends and tells them what happened, repeats and embellishes the story five to ten times, and never stops to think that what they are saying damages their own credibility as much as the reputation of the person they are talking about. The truth is that people are inherently judgmental about others. It becomes a problem when playing out a grudge means validating ourselves in a conflict situation that leads to gossiping and or slandering that person. This is the underlying meaning of the verse in Leviticus, “You shall not wrong him”(25:17).

I am sure we are all equally cognizant of how important maintaining a good name or reputation is in life. Jewish sources abound with teachings and maxims to reinforce the moral imperative to preserve one’s name and reputation by the way we treat others. Rabbi Simeon said, “There are three crowns; the crown of Torah, the crown of Priesthood and the crown of royalty. But the crown of a good name surpasses them all” (Pirke Avot 4:13). Rabbi Eliezer said, “Let the honor of your fellow be as dear to you as your own” (Pirke Avot 2:10).” Finally a sage Ben Azzai exclaimed, “Never say since I have been humiliated, let my neighbor who I am angry at be humiliated; since I have been cursed or abused by others then let my neighbor be cursed. For as Rabbi Tanhuma said, “If you act this way, realize who it is you are willing to have humiliated? - “the one whom God has created in his own image” (Genesis Rabbi 24:7).

When we judge others who deserve our condemnation and criticism, Judaism delivers a message of restraint. We only diminish our own standing when we go out on the attack against others. I am focusing on the spirit of these teachings in reference to our own social crowds and circles of community that we live in and interact with every day. If we feel wronged by someone does that give us the liberty to go out and destroy them? Of course we have the right to defend ourselves and clarify the truth. At the same time, our right to protect our own honor or reputation means that we should strive to restrain or carefully focus our efforts to demonstrate the truth lest we succumb to the same transgression we are trying to combat.

One instance years ago comes to mind when a disgruntled congregant spoke to me about how upset he was to hear how another had spoken about him with exaggerated stories about the cause of a failed marriage. I suggested that he go and sit down with the individual and clarify the situation and express his hurt feelings for the false accusations. It only took a few days when another person sought my counsel after having heard this person telling others how the person who had originally hurt his feelings was involved in shady business deals. This is exactly how quickly the victim becomes the perpetrator and the matter escalates while many others are dragged in and the hurt feelings multiply. Who wins here? The reputation of the offended party is diminished as well as the first person who started it all in the first place. No one wins and many are hurt.

Whatever happened to the mandate to take the moral high ground? What happened to the value of forgiveness? Why is it that we are so quick to judge and so slow to forgive and make peace? When do, for example, adult children learn how to get beyond their anger at their parents for something they did thirty years ago? When will parents forgive their children for longstanding hurts? Let's face the facts that we are not always going to get an apology just because we think we are owed it. When are we going to stop punishing everyone who does not meet our expectations or our standards? Are we so perfect and so blameless in all things that we cannot find it within ourselves to let old grudges go which in the long run do not really matter anyway?

There is an old Yiddish word, *forbissen*, which literally refers to a dog who refuses to let go of a bone. In other words, when we hold on to a grudge or hold on tenaciously to anger against another person with fierceness like a dog who will not let go of their bone, we diminish our own humanity, not to mention our own reputation and appear intransigent and stubborn to the point of being self destructive. My best advice is to stop for a moment and take a step back before we go on the war path. Think about the anger as well as the solution to the hurt before going out to degrade the offending party. Before going to others and spreading the story think about how we can resolve it before things get out of hand. Finally, consider how we will appear to others before we slander this person in public. Are we so much better than the other when we attack in an unforgiving way?

## Conclusion

Should we not judge ourselves before we go out in public judging others? Yom Kippur is the one holy day when we ask God to judge and ultimately to forgive us. But this is also the day when we are supposed to apologize for hurting others. If the Torah teaches that everyone is created in the image of God, then let's be careful before we hurl accusations against others. Feeling hurt by others does not automatically give us the license to repeat the same behavior towards them. For when we give in to our emotions we risk escalating a situation into an even bigger drama and involve others unfairly in our own problems. We end up spreading the hurt for all to cope with and that does not represent the spirit of Jewish teachings.

In fact the Talmud warns us that God sees through the deception that people often create in their minds and before friends to use the victim role to humiliate the accused party. The fine imposed upon one who wounds another person is based upon two factors, "the first is the reputation of the offending party. The second is the well being of the offended party" (Baba Metzia 58b). The

upshot is that defending ourselves by cutting down someone who offended or hurt our feelings is not simply judging others but it is also shaming them even if what we say is the truth. Judging the hurt against us by slamming or shaming that person only leads to further hurt. Our tradition says, "One who shames another is likened to a person who draws blood from the other." That act is tantamount to murder.

Remember, we just finished saying during the Kol Nidrei that we forgive all sins committed against us from this Yom Kippur to the next year. If we betray our own words and rush to judge someone who wronged us, haven't we really contradicted ourselves before God?

The point is, to stop the attacks and to preserve everyone's dignity and reputation which will create more respectful and reverent human beings to each other and with God. Ecclesiastes said, "A good name is better than precious oil" (7:1). "How far does the oil's fragrance go - From the bedroom to the dining room? But a good name goes from one end of the world to the other" (Exodus Rabbah). Treat your friend's imperfections with the care you would have others treat your own. With that in mind, we might have a more humane world