

LAWS OF GOSSIP

"The Ten Days" Temple Beth El, Stamford, Connecticut A High Holidays Project for 5757

THE CHALLENGE

To transform ourselves, our community and our world through self restraint, will power and cooperation. To defeat cynicism and reaffirm deep Jewish values.

HOW TO DO IT

From Rosh Hashanah to the end of Yom Kippur, try to be extraordinarily civil and nice in all encounters, speaking primarily words of healing, love and empathy.

Try to Refrain from...

A) ...Gossip and slander (*Lashon Ha-ra*, literally, "evil talk"):

- 1) Negative gossip, even if truthful, unless the information is crucial to someone's physical, emotional or financial well-being -- and then the information must be provided to that individual discreetly and privately;
- 2) Even seemingly harmless discussion of third parties not present, since positive comments can often lead to negative gossip;
- 3) Listening to and repeating unsubstantiated rumors and lies;
- 4) Promoting stereotypes of any group or individual;
- 5) Crude jokes and bigoted comments;
- 6) Inflammatory language of all sorts; excessive sarcasm;
- 7) Humiliation or embarrassment of another person;
- 8) Even non-verbal forms of degradation (e.g. the rolling of eyes as s/he passes by). This is called *Avak* (the "dust" of) *Lashon Ha-ra*;
- 9) Speaking against a community as a whole;
- 10) Relating harmful gossip even to close relatives;
- 11) Repeating rumors even if they are "public knowledge";
- 12) Lying, unless the truth would be excessively hurtful;
- 13) "Tattling" (*Rechilus*), telling someone negative things others are saying about him/her when only more pain can come from sharing that information;
- 14) Excessive flattery, with dishonest motives;
- 15) Enjoying all of the above when someone else is doing it;

B) ...Excessive Anger and Defensiveness:

- 1) Outbursts of anger that are out of proportion to the provocation;
- 2) Not "fighting fair" in disputes, through ugly comments, bringing in unrelated incidents, picking on known sore spots of the other person; pushing "hot buttons";
- 3) Offering criticism out of any motivation but love, in any manner but through gentle, private counsel;
- 4) Being unable to accept constructive criticism without a counterattack;
- 5) Verbal abuse directed against a spouse, significant other, parent or child;
- 6) Overt testiness toward service providers (try complimenting a cashier, cab driver or waiter, even in cases where your patience is severely tested);

GUIDELINES AND HELPFUL HINTS

A) It will be impossible to avoid talking about people altogether; therefore, try to limit such discussion as much as possible, constantly asking yourself, "Would I want people to be talking about me this way?" If you must "give in to the urge" report harmful information only to your spouse or closest friend.

B) When people gossip around you, if you feel unable to change the course of the conversation or walk away, simply try not to contribute to its intensification.

C) Public life relies on gossip to an extent. Try to distinguish between legitimate "news" and malicious rumor. Go with your gut feeling, the difference is usually obvious. When speaking of an individual try to omit names and disguise details of the event.

D) If you are doing this "cold turkey," you'll miss the juicy stuff. No doubt you'll lapse from time to time. But don't give up! No one is perfect! Forgive yourself – and others.

E) If you imagine the subject of each conversation as being created in God's image, it will be much more difficult to stereotype that person and destroy him/her with innuendo.

F) Weigh every word just a little bit more. Imagine yourself living on the seven-second delay they have on the radio. Remember: if it could harm another person, it's *Lashon Ha-ra*.

G) Once the words are out, you can't take them back and undo the damage; but like feathers released into the wind, the sooner you retract your statements, the easier it will be to limit their spread. At the very least, balance all negative comments with positive ones.

H) Develop a healthy skepticism and disbelief about the negative reports of others.

I) When your doubts seem insurmountable, prayer can be a great motivator.

CHANGING THE WORLD - RECORDING YOUR REFLECTIONS

"The Ten Days" project could have an even greater impact if we record and share our experiences. Some suggestions:

A) Have a note pad handy and jot down instances and reactions while they are fresh.

B) At the end of each day reflect on the implications of each incident and how you met each challenge; consider how a knee-jerk response to the challenge would have damaged a reputation (in the case of gossip) or a relationship (in the case of anger).

C) Over the course of a few days, trace these negative and positive implications as they are played out. (eg. Your child/spouse/parent infuriates you on Monday and you hold back the impulse to scream at him/her, but handle the incident more proportionately and "fight fair." What would have happened differently between the two of you on Tuesday and Wednesday if you had screamed on Monday?) See how your close relationships are impacted.

D) As you become sensitized to the kind of talk that goes on around town, devise strategies for improving the level of conversation. Is it possible to have great conversations that are not at anyone's expense? Do you find the quality of your casual conversations improving?

E) Are there particular friends with whom conversation is absolutely impossible under these guidelines? What does that say about your friendship?

F) Does this project make you feel "more Jewish," and if so, how? How does it change your experience of the High Holidays season?

G) When you meet a fellow congregant, one who might have been a stranger before, is your relationship enhanced simply because you are both participating in this project? Is the shared experience of this project making our congregation more of a "family?"

H) After Yom Kippur, reflect on how this project might have changed you.

I) Please consider sharing your reflections with the rabbi. Congregants' journals could be compiled at a later date, but nothing will be made public without written permission of the author. It is possible to reconstruct incidents in ways that will not embarrass others or reveal identities.

J) Send us your original prayers too, or copies of favorite inspirational passages.