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*Lashon Hara* (gossip and libel)  
in text messaging and the Internet:  
Understanding from a Jewish Perspective

## **Chapter I: The Issue**

Fort Chipewyan, an isolated Canadian settlement eight hundred miles north of the American border, is where scientists were sent in the early 1990s to gather information about the effects of pollutants in nearby rivers, pollutants which were the attributed causes of instances of diabetes and cancer in the local population. The team's remit was to gather local knowledge by interviewing members of the community; despite their good intentions, the people of Fort Chipewyan did not welcome them. Their leader, Chief Archie Waquan, stated, "The elders want to know why you are here, and why you want to harvest our words. They want to know what you will do with these words. Once words leave the elders' mouths, they will take on life. Will you take these words to heal, or will you use them as a weapon, to build more factories and hurt us even more?"<sup>1</sup>

Rabbinical studies, too, consistently underscore the power of words, reinforced through *hallachah* (law), *aggadah* (Talmudic homiletic and exegetical texts), and, ultimately, a series of scriptural references and teachings. These teachings, most of them ancient in nature, have dealt largely with the power of words in spoken or written form. In most cases, the impact of "tale-bearing" (Leviticus 19:15), or "carrying false rumors" (Exodus 23:1) relates to the direct exchange of information, often negative in nature, from person to person. In ancient times, this would often be accomplished in town squares and markets, in houses of worship, and in other public places. Peddlers earned a particular reputation for spreading gossip and "meaningless

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<sup>1</sup> Irwin Huberman, "Northern Rivers Basins Study: The experiment and the Lessons Learned," Environment Canada Report, p. 31.

words”<sup>2</sup> as they sold their wares from door to door. As the Talmud observes in *Berachot* 51b, “From peddlers news, from rags vermin.”

Over the centuries, the extensive references in both the Scripture and through rabbinical commentary stood the test of time. Laws and teachings surrounding gossip and slander (*lashon hara*) contained in the Talmud, as well as the *Shulchan Aruch* and other *halachic* compilations, seemed – until recently – universal enough to encompass most forms of interpersonal communication. In 1873, Rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen Kagan, commonly known as the Chofetz Chaim, synthesized these teachings and Biblical references into a central work mandating proper speech, with special attention to seventeen negative and fourteen positive *mitzvot* (commandments). These commandments will be enumerated and discussed below.

*Sefer Chofetz Chaim* continued to serve as a credible guide applying to most forms of communication well into the twentieth century. Until recently, the communication of events, ideas, opinions, news and ideologies was largely limited to direct speech and the written word, and that included face to face contact, telephone, manuscripts, letters, pamphlets, books, newspapers and other mass media. Nevertheless, the relevance of Judaism’s teachings regarding *lashon hara* changed during the last decade of the twentieth century with the onset of a technological revolution which centered around the computer, aptly called *machshev* (“the thought machine”) in Hebrew.

The vastness of the informational and communications capability of the internet and cellular technology – and the meteoric growth of email, websites, and weblogs or “blogs”, coupled with the exponential explosion of their users – has far outstripped society’s ability to

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Hersch Goldwurm (ed.), *Talmud Bavli*, p. 51b, Note 6.

assess the moral contribution and sociological impact of these media. This technology, and its unprecedented ability to facilitate communications links through the internet, has afforded individuals the opportunity to exchange a wide range of information with friends, associates, and interest groups. With further development, the internet's sphere of influence has expanded the exchange of thoughts, opinions, perspectives and other information. By linking users through various social forums such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace, like-minded individuals are able to form complex networks for professional, personal, and ideological purposes. But in this infinitely complicated world of instantaneous, unmonitored communication, it is the relatively simple innovation of text messaging, enabling cellular telephone users to communicate via electronic text from device to device, which most acutely demonstrates the power of words, particularly among younger users, to whom the computer and the cellular telephone are not innovations, but media with which they have been raised.

The principles of *lashon hara* have an obvious place in any discussion of online and cellular communication, but curiously, the role of this governing Jewish tradition as a potential steward of new media has yet to be examined. The question becomes one of the parameters of adult responsibility in ensuring that information communicated within this new domain does not damage reputations, encourage misinformation, or cause harm. Specifically, the roles and responsibilities of clergy, parents, teachers, and other authority figures in guiding the primary users of this new media must be contextualized and examined. The principal question guiding the research of this project is whether or not the principles of *lashon hara* – by which the Jewish tradition has unwaveringly abided – can apply to these new media; and if it can, how this can be effectively communicated. The conclusion of this project offers a number of recommendations

and tactics for communication regarding electronic lashon hara amongst peers, as well as between parents, other authority figures, and children.

Any discussion of this new ethical question must begin with the context of first the media under examination – in this case, online and cellular communication technology – and secondly, the foundational Jewish texts which may be employed to guide the former's use. As such, this project will begin with an enumeration of the role of new media in the lives of both young people and adults.

Research shows that while adults tend to use the internet for specific purposes such as shopping, banking, news, weather, and other limited functions, younger users tend to spend more time on the internet for less specific and more holistic purposes. Many young people – particularly those aged ten to twenty-one years – use text messaging and social networks such as Facebook, My Space and Twitter to provide a running commentary of their lives. *Netsafekids*, a parent resource organization designed to educate and protect families from internet threats, observes that:

*Parents should be aware ... that, whereas most adults use the Internet primarily for work-related activities, adolescents in the U.S., in general, use it primarily for entertainment and socialization purposes. For them, the Internet is both a popular communication tool, like the telephone, and a familiar community environment, like the mall or a movie theater, where kids can develop their identities, join youth subcultures, relieve boredom, or cope with emotional issues or other personal concerns.*<sup>3</sup>

Statistics from February 2009 collected by the Neustar Research Group indicate that 2.5 billion text messages are sent each day in the United States; more text messages than telephone calls are sent per cellular device. The average number of text messages sent and received per month is

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<sup>3</sup> NetSafeKids: "How do Kids use the Internet?" Accessed 24 October 2009 at [http://www.nap.edu/netsafekids/inter\\_kids.html](http://www.nap.edu/netsafekids/inter_kids.html).

357, compared to 204 cell phone calls.<sup>4</sup> A December 2009 survey conducted by *The Daily Telegraph* reported that the average British teenager sends more than 10,000 text messages per year. Almost 75 per cent of those surveyed said they used social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter to share photos and communicate with friends. Approximately half of those questioned stated they had as many as 250 "friends"<sup>5</sup> with whom they kept in regular contact via the internet.<sup>6</sup> Although no such study is immediately available in the United States for 2009, statistics kept by Google indicate no significant difference in internet usage among younger users from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.<sup>7</sup>

Michael Hirsch, Student Life Coordinator at Solomon Schechter High School in Glen Cove, New York concluded that:

*Parents don't really know anything about this type of communication. Students are endlessly texting, using live chat and the Internet, communicating faster than their parents can ever keep track of. It is not that parents don't want to know. It is just that they and other adults have not kept pace with the technology, and the psychology of the technology. Parents are also unaware of the content of these messages.*

Significant research for this project took the form of interviews with twenty students in the New York area, aged ten to twenty-one years, regarding their online and text messaging experiences. With confidentiality assured, students told without exception of personal hurt, grief, stress and distress caused by the unbridled use of the text messaging by peers. These cases of alleged *lashon hara* have, in some instances, escalated to involve the police and the courts. In

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<sup>4</sup> Neustar: USA Text Message Statistics. Retrieved 18 November 2009 at: <http://www.textmessageblog.mobi/2009/02/19/text-message-statistics-usa/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Friend" is the technical term used for subscribers to an individual's social networking web page.

<sup>6</sup> Claudine Beaumont, "Teens send 10,000 text messages per year, study finds", 9 December 2009, *Daily Telegraph*, retrieved 9 December 2009 at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/3722869/Teens-send-10000-text-messages-per-year-study-finds.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Google Public Data: retrieved 10 December 2009 at: [http://www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met=it\\_net\\_user\\_p2&idim=country:CAN&q=internet+usage+statistics#met=it\\_net\\_user\\_p2&idim=country:CAN:USA:GBR](http://www.google.com/publicdata?ds=wb-wdi&met=it_net_user_p2&idim=country:CAN&q=internet+usage+statistics#met=it_net_user_p2&idim=country:CAN:USA:GBR)

particular, the misuse of text messaging and social networks affect young women, whose sexual reputations continue as fodder for malicious scrutiny. The unprecedented ease with which sexual information about young women can be skewed or fabricated via the media of text messaging and social networks has proven both slanderous and dangerous, and studies suggest that the young women themselves, whether willingly or reluctantly, are participants in these interchanges.<sup>8</sup>

The primary focus of this project is the population of young people aged between ten and twenty-one years, a demographic powerfully governed by peer pressure in an increasingly sexualized society. It is unsurprising, then, that every one of the young people interviewed in researching this project had either been victimized or involved in text messaging and Facebook, Twitter, or MySpace communication which included derogatory terminology referring to a fellow student or friend's appearance or sexual reputation. Furthermore, because so many students are involved in online social networks, many of these comments, whether true are not, can be spread within seconds to entire student populations and young communities. To complement interviews with young people, this study also included similar interviews with selected professionals in positions of authority. As high school guidance counselor Bonnie Cahn notes, "These networks are often used to publicly comment on appearance, and to signal ugliness – that someone is unwanted – in order to disgrace."

Incidents of "sexting" or "sex-texting" are also rampant. "Sexting" involves women as young as thirteen years of age posing nude for their partners; these images often "go viral", being forwarded far beyond their intended audiences. A 2008 survey conducted by the National

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<sup>8</sup> See the findings of a 2008 study commissioned by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, in concert with CosmoGirl.com, *Sex and Tech: Results from a Survey of Teens and Young Adults*, retrieved July 2009 from [http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/PDF/SexTech\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/PDF/SexTech_Summary.pdf).

Campaign to Prevent Teenage Pregnancy estimated that 20 per cent of those surveyed between 13 and 19 years of age had either sent or received nude or semi-nude photos or videos of themselves. This figure rises to 33 per cent of young adults (20-26 years of age), and is ten per cent more prevalent among young women than young men.<sup>9</sup>

These practices are widespread across all schools, private and public, religious and secular. It presents a challenge for rabbis, ministers, teachers, and other persons of influence to educate themselves on these new forms of communication, and to bring forward or adapt traditional teachings regarding the power of speech. Rabbi Moshe Schwartz, Director of Jewish Life at Solomon Schechter High School noted:

*Psalm 34 tells us “to guard our tongue from evil and our lips from deceitful speech.” Perhaps that should be changed to “guard our thumbs from harmful messages.”<sup>10</sup>*

The phenomenon of unchecked *lashon hara* through the internet is not limited to the young. In particular, email, the medium of choice for adults, is raked with stories, jokes, accounts, observations, blogs and columns which are often not vetted for accuracy or taste. A May 2009 report by technology market research firm The Radicati Group estimates that there were 1.4 billion email users in 2009, expected to rise to 1.9 billion by 2013. The same source suggests that some 247 billion emails were sent each day during 2009.<sup>11</sup>

Increasingly, issues of confidentiality are raised as emails are CCed (carbon copied) or BCCed (blind-carbon copied, a mechanism by which the recipient of electronic mail cannot know who else may be receiving the message) without the author's permission. Often this

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Rabbi Moshe Schwartz, December 21, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Email marketing reports: Email and Webmail User Statistics, October 2009. Retrieved November 18, 2009 at: <http://www.email-marketing-reports.com/metrics/email-statistics.htm>



involves the spread of personal information which is intended for an individual, but is frequently passed to others. Chief Ashkenazi rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yona Metzger, provided a comment for this Senior Project through his aid Rabbi Shmuel Butman who conveyed the following:

*...the Chofetz Chaim said that Lashon Hara in writing is even worse than oral Lashon Hara, because there is a record and it cannot be denied. The Chief Rabbi asked to add to this that Lashon Hara in an email is even worse as emails have "no limits" and can reach hundreds and thousands of people, and the damage can be "astronomical."*<sup>12</sup>

Very little has been written by religious leaders on the intersection of gossip, slander, and the internet. A print and online literature review yielded only rare mentions of ethical or moral concerns. It is only recently that the media has initiated public discussion. It is therefore the intent of this project to explore some of the basic issues surrounding *lashon hara*, and the use of rapidly expanding internet technology. Specifically, is there a place for our ancient texts and interpretations in the governance of these new media; and if so, what are the methods which they can be conveyed to produce positive outcomes? In a society which increasingly provides more leeway for teenagers to pursue personal happiness and reinforce self esteem, are Judaism's firm and specific teachings regarding *lashon hara* relevant today? Or, in a Jewish world often absorbed in a battle over assimilation and declining affiliation, is the divide between these complex and restrictive laws and the freedom we afford individuals within modern society too great to bridge? Finally, what guidelines and strategies can be stewarded by clergy, parents, educators and others for the ethical management of these media? This project will discuss some of these issues with an eye to suggesting some educational strategies within a Jewish framework.

The following chapter will briefly explore the basis of the power of words and *lashon hara* within the Jewish tradition.

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<sup>12</sup> Email to Irwin Huberman, received August 13, 2009.

## **Chapter II: The Sources**

Scripture reminds us that the universe was created by God through speech: "By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made..." (Psalm 33:6); "With ten utterances the world was created" (*Pirkei Avot*, 5:1.). What has been termed as the "Golden Rule" within the Judeo-Christian tradition stems from Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself."

The ten utterances quoted in *Pirkei Avot* correspond to the expression "and the Lord said", which appears throughout the account of Creation in Genesis. The *Talmud* (Rosh Hashanah 32a) explains that the words "and the Lord said" appear nine times, and that the first verse of Genesis itself – "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth" – constitutes the tenth instance of the phrase. The terminology suggests that creation of the world was the direct result of divine words.

Similarly, "By the word of the Lord" implies that the commandment "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3) was not a statement of intent, but rather an immediate event: the text draws a direct connection between the word and the action, as it was written: "Let there be light – and there was light."

Leviticus 25:17 commands: "You shall not wrong one another." This has traditionally been interpreted as wronging a person with speech. It includes any statement that will embarrass, insult or deceive a person, or cause a person emotional pain or distress. It is interesting to note that the word *Di'ber* or "word" is similar in its *shoresh* (root) to *Davar*, or "thing". The Creation account reinforces that link between God's word and physical creation. Rabbi Yisroel Roll notes:

*...words come alive and “concretize” when they leave our lips and enter our jobs, our relationships and our marriages. Words have power, and when they are uttered they become the same as matter or objects.<sup>13</sup>*

Rabbi Roll, who conducts workshops on building child and teenage self-esteem, asserts that through words, humanity possesses the ability to either praise or push away from God. One of his messages to young people is to be, as “sparks of God,” aware of the power of words.

*Our purpose in life is to be as Godlike as possible. God is a builder. God is a creator. My job as a person is to emulate God. If God is a builder then I must be builder. If God uses words to build, then I must use words to build and not destroy.<sup>14</sup>*

In his commentary regarding the creation of humanity (Genesis 2:7) Onkelos (c.35-120 CE) notes the important connections between speech and the essence of life. He interprets the biblical phrase, “He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living thing,” as follows:

*And God created Adam, dust from the earth, and He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and it became within Adam a speaking spirit.<sup>15</sup>*

Rashi expands on the same phrase, *YaYehi Adam L’Nishmat Chayim* (“and man became a living thing”) by noting that while animals and beasts were called “living souls” (Genesis 1:24), the spirit of humankind was the most vital of all, because it added intelligence and speech to creation.<sup>16</sup>

In his accounts of the teachings of the great Sefad mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1575), the “Ari’s” disciple Rabbi Chaim Vital of Calabria noted a hierarchy of four realms within creation. The first three, inanimate (*Domim*, e.g. rocks), animate (*Ztomeach*, e.g. plants), and

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<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Yisroel Roll, Interview, December 24, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Roll, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Emmanuel Feldman (ed.), *The Ariel Chumash United Israel Institutes*, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> Feldman, p. 45.

animal life (*Chai*), reflected an ascension in complexity within God's creation. However, Rabbi Vital observed that the Ari did not name the fourth realm *Adam* (humanity), but rather *M'daber*, "the one who speaks." Indeed, Rabbi Vital argues that the power of speech itself is neutral, but that men and women "exercise" *Neshama*, our spirit, through thought (*machshavah*) and words; and, like any builder's tool, words can be used either to create or to destroy. Psalm 150 states that each *Neshama* or soul has the ability to be a builder through praise. The Birnbaum *Machzor* (High Holiday Prayer Book) translates the final line: "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord."<sup>17</sup>

As will be discussed later, an argument frequently used when justifying *lashon hara* through text messaging and other internet media is that the impact of words have been diminished by the very volume of text messages, emails and other forms of electronic communication. Is it therefore a valid defense that the sheer volume of words has diminished the harm that an individual word or phrase may create? In the Talmud (*Arachin* 15b), Rav Chama likens the tongue to a "sharpened arrow." It can therefore be argued that far from defusing the potential for *lashon hara*, these new media create the potential for many more arrows to be flung into the world, each possessing the potential to strike a human target.

In the twelfth century, Maimonides set parameters which defined *lashon hara* in everyday terms. Within *Mishnei De'ot* 7:5 (laws of philosophy), Maimonides states:

*Anything which, if it would be publicized would cause the subjects physical or monetary damage, or would cause him anguish or fear is Lashon Hara.*

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<sup>17</sup> Philip Birnbaum, *High Holiday Prayer Book*, p. 160.

Proverbs 18:21 creates a benchmark for proper speech in stating that “death and life are in the power of the tongue.” The founder of Chassidic Judaism, Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760) expanded on this verse to reinforce that words are a precious commodity. He taught that every person is allotted a given number of words and that when their quota is reached, they expire. Thus, by guarding one’s tongue, one assures longevity.<sup>18</sup>

The Baal Shem Tov also taught that one’s soul is mixed with good and evil, in order that a person may exercise free will. Therefore, he noted, when one speaks holy words, a person draws new life from holiness; and when one speaks evil, one draws new life from the root of evil and the Other Side. As such, the Baal Shem Tov taught that all aspects of human life, good and evil, depend upon one’s speech.<sup>19</sup>

Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague (The Maharal, 1520–1609) wrote on Proverbs 18:21, citing several rabbinic sources that equate human life with the uniquely human power of rational speech. The Maharal taught that a person who desists from evil speech can be said to possess a life-giving medicine. Conversely, those who abuse that power by indulging in inappropriate talk poison their spirit rather than healing it or imbuing it with life.

The Maharal taught that one’s behavior in life cannot be random; rather it must be based on a consciously-developed life pattern, hence the need for study, guidance and instruction.

*We cannot be casual and we cannot allow ourselves to improvise from step to step, from deed to deed. The evil impulse was not meant to reduce us to depraved creatures....but it is in that encounter that man earns his highest reputation – he develops a sound moral character and becomes truly human.*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Baal Shem Tov.

<sup>19</sup> Shirat Devorah Online, retrieved December 18, 2009 at:  
<http://shiratdevorah.blogspot.com/search/label/Baal%20Shem%20Tov>

<sup>20</sup> Ben Zion Bokser, *The Maharal: The Mystical Philosophy of Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague*, p. 71.

The Torah itself is not passive in its approach to *lashon hara*. The *Tanach* and associated commentaries provide numerous examples of negative speech. For example:

- Sarah is accused of slandering Abraham when she speaks of her husband's old age and his lack of potential to father children (Genesis 18:12-15: *Talmud Jerushalmi*, (TJ), Pe'ah 1:1, 16a);
- Joseph is punished for slanderous reports he spreads about his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah (Genesis 37:2: TJ Pe'ah 1:1, 15d-16a);
- Miriam is banished to the outskirts of the camp for slandering Moses (Numbers 12:1-15);
- The ten spies (and the Children of Israel) are punished for negative reports regarding the land of Canaan (Numbers 14:36-37);
- Korach and his associates are swallowed by the earth for the slander of Moses (Numbers 16:31-35);
- David's kingdom is divided due to David's paying attention to slander (Talmud Bavli, TB Shabbat 56a-b);
- The murder of Isaiah by Manasseh was deemed warranted due to Isaiah's slurs against the Jewish people (Isaiah 6:5, TB Yevamot. 49b);
- King Jeroboam was worthy of being counted with the Kings of Judah because he did not give heed to slander against the prophet Amos (Amos 7:10-11, TB Pesachim 87b);

The story of Do'eig the Edomite (I Samuel Chs. 21-22) is often used to illustrate the harm that can be done by tale-bearing. Do'eig observed Achimelekh the Kohein giving David bread and a

sword, which in truth was an innocent act intended to assist a leading member of Saul's court. Do'eig reported this to King Saul who misinterpreted this account as proof that Achimelekh was supporting David in a rebellion, and proceeded to slaughter all but one of the Kohanim at Nob.

The rabbinical tradition, then, is firm in its condemnation of *lashon hara*, linking misfortunes which descended upon the Jewish community to evil speech. Afflictions such as plagues (Abot de Rabbi Natan 19), the withholding of rain (TB Ta'anit 7b), and respiratory diseases (TB Shabbat 33a-b) are linked to slander. As well, numerous Biblical commentators, when interpreting Leviticus accounts of leprosy (*Tzara'at*), attribute the affliction to a malaise of the soul, linking it to *lashon hara*. *Arachin* 15b confirms *lashon hara* as one of the causes of this Biblical malady.

In one of the most frequently quoted Talmudic observations about *lashon hara*, *Arachin* 15b causes harm on many levels. It states:

*In the West (Israel) they said: The tongue of person three (the gossipmonger) kills three. The tongue kills the one who speaks the Lashon Hara, the one who accepts it and the one about whom it is said.*

In the same *sugya*, Rabbi Yochanan in the name of Rabbi Yose Ben Zimra declares: “whoever speaks *Lashon Hara* is regarded as though he has denied the fundamental tenet (the existence of God).” Reish Lakish adds that “whoever speaks *Lashon Hara* piles up sins until the heavens,” and Rav Chisda, in the name of Mar Ukva, said that “whoever speaks *Lashon Hara* deserves to be pelted with stones.”

In Sotah 42a, the Talmud states that habitual speakers of *lashon hara* are not tolerated in God's presence. Sanhedrin 31a tells the story of a student who revealed a secret that he had heard twenty-two years earlier, and was immediately banished from the house of study. According to

the Talmud (Gittin 55b), it was the slander of Jews by Jews that brought about the destruction of the Second Temple. The Talmud punctuates its unambiguous condemnation of *lashon hara* in Sotah 10, where it states emphatically that “that it is better for one to throw one’s self into a fiery pit ... than to embarrass a fellow (whiten his face) in public.” This prohibition is referred *halbanat panim*.

The Talmud therefore takes the issue of *lashon hara* very seriously. Not only is the misuse of words of concern, but also the violation of a number of Talmudic principles. Some of these principles include:

Violation of Privacy:

Rabbi Yochanan, citing Numbers 24:2, notes that in the desert, as Balaam observes, the tents of the Israelites were arranged “tribe by tribe.” This, says Rabbi Yochanan, “indicates that he (Balaam) saw that the doors of their tents did not exactly face one another.”<sup>21</sup> From this, the Talmud outlines a series of laws regarding the construction of homes, fences, windows and doors to ensure privacy from house to house. These laws are intended to guard against *heyzek re’e’ah* (damage from viewing).

About one thousand years ago, Rabbeinu Gershom (960-1040 C.E.) expanded these principles, declaring a prohibition against one person reading another’s letters. During Rabbeinu Gershom’s time, it was customary for Jewish traders in different countries to communicate in writing, and often their letters contained sensitive business information. As a safeguard against any invasion of privacy, Rabbeinu Gershom expanded the concept of *heyzek re’e’ah* to prohibit

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<sup>21</sup> Baba Batra 60a.



looking at or opening another's mail. Rabbeinu Gershom's prohibition points to Judaism's overall respect for the privacy and integrity of interpersonal communication.

### Causality:

The Talmud, to varying degrees, holds a person responsible for the causal effects (*gerama*) of their actions.<sup>22</sup> Examples of *gerama* include placing a ladder by a pigeon loft, thus enabling a weasel to climb up and eat the pigeons; sending a burning object through a minor or an incompetent person, which in turn causes damage; inciting another's dog to bite a third person, frightening a person to the extent that he or she suffers injury; or leaving a broken vessel on public ground so that the pieces cause injury.<sup>23</sup>

In each of these cases, while it was not the specific intent of the perpetrator to cause damage, their action produced harm, and in turn Jewish law holds them accountable. As such, whether it is the intent or not of an individual through *lashon hara* to cause someone physical or emotional harm, the Talmud assigns accountability.

### Mutual Respect:

In a famous statement quoted by *Sifra* on *Parashah Kedoshim*, Rabbi Akiva comments on the verse "*V'Ahavta L'rei'acha Kamocha*" -- "You should love your friend as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) stating "*zeh k'lal gadol batorah*": "This is a central principle in Torah." Although some dispute this assertion (Ben Azzai), at minimum the principle of mutual respect weighs heavily within the Jewish tradition.

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<sup>22</sup> Baba Kama 48b, 60a, Baba Batra 22b

<sup>23</sup> Baba Kama 24b; 55b–56a

It is safe to assume that no one themselves wishes to become the subject of public embarrassment or humiliation; therefore it is reasonable to assume that causing emotional pain to others is a severe matter within the Jewish tradition.

### Ona'at Devarim

The sin of deliberately hurting another's feeling is referred to as *ona'at devarim* ("infliction of words") and is linked to Leviticus 25:17, which states that one should "not aggrieve his fellow." This is interpreted to indicate words or gestures which make others feel shamed, humiliated, or unimportant, including name-calling, criticism, ridicule, sarcasm, teasing, and other forms of humiliation. Indeed, while often words exchanged either in person or electronically can cause unintentional harm, there are cases in which *lashon hara* can be used intentionally to inflict pain, or to promote self interest.

Throughout Jewish tradition, respect for another's feelings and their privacy, along with an understanding of the potential to cause harm to someone else, or cause them to harm themselves, is entrenched. Our tradition reinforces for how careful one has to be with words, as one never knows what a person's reaction may be, in particular with regard to gossip or slander. The reaction can be devastating. Indeed, our tradition warns us that words cannot be trifled with.

Jewish law (*Hallachah*) also takes a very dim view of slander. *The Shulchan Aruch* devotes an entire chapter to "Tale-bearing, Slander, Vengeance and Bearing a Grudge". The *Shulchan Aruch*, expanding on Maimonides' law from centuries earlier, defines *lashon hara* as follows:

*If one utters slanderous words, either in the presence or in the absence of his fellow man, or if one tells things that, if circulated may cause some damage, either to the person or*

*the property of his fellow man, or even if only for the purpose or frightening him, this constitutes slander.*<sup>24</sup>

The tradition of condemnation towards *lashon hara* within the *Tanach*, *Talmud*, commentaries, and law is clear. There exist as well countless *midrashim* and other interpretive exegetical texts on this subject. This emphasis has also been transferred to lore, through one of the most popular Chassidic stories, which recounts the story of the rabbi and the gossipmonger. Within Jewish tradition, the story of the villager who comes to his rabbi to ask for forgiveness for the sin of *lashon hara* is legendary. Its message is so striking that it was adopted by the award-winning 2009 film *Doubt*, which tells the story of a progressive Catholic priest who is the target of rumors spread by a senior nun that he had committed sexual indiscretions with a young parishioner.

The original 19<sup>th</sup> century Chassidic tale describes a villager who goes through the community spreading malicious lies about the rabbi. Later, wracked with remorse, the man approaches the rabbi and begs his forgiveness, saying he would do anything to make amends. The rabbi tells the villager, "Take a feather pillow, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the winds." When the villager returned to tell the rabbi that he had completed the task, the rabbi further instructed, "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."<sup>25</sup>

Jewish liturgy is keenly aware of the power of speech. Of the forty three sins enumerated in the *Al Chet* confession recited on Yom Kippur, eleven of these are sins committed through speech. The power of speech, and threat of gossip is so significant that at close of the each *Amidah* (silent reflective prayers within the Jewish prayer service), we are reminded to "guard

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<sup>24</sup> Ganzfried, Rabbi Solomon (translated Hyman E. Goldin), *Doer of Jewish Law: Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, Hebrew Publishing Company, New York, 1961, Page 98.

<sup>25</sup> Chassidic folk tale.

our lips.” Adapting Psalm 34:14, God is asked to “Keep my tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking lies....Help me ignore those who would slander me. Let me be humble before all.”

During Yom Kippur, a line in the *El Mi Mi 'Go 'Aley* prayer warns its audience further of the power of speech. The Conservative Machzor translates:

*In traps I've been ensnared by old and young, but none have trapped me better than my tongue.*<sup>26</sup>

In its overall discussion of the power of *lashon hara*, the Talmud makes a case that the impact of evil speech is not just found in conversation, but also within the power of the word. In Sanhedrin 30b, it notes the importance of judges who are overruled two to one in a *Beit Din* (rabbinical court) in not publishing their dissenting view. The Talmud notes that a printed minority position would lead to gossip and additional divisions.

Throughout the Jewish tradition, rabbis, commentators and lawmakers have emphasized that the domain of *lashon hara* extends to the written word, suggesting greater urgency in the examination, within traditional contexts, of the accelerated use of the printed word during the last decade be examined. While modern rabbis are still gaining an understanding of how the internet affects the power of speech and how individuals and communities communicate through these new media, there exists a rabbi within Judaism's recent tradition who made the subject of *lashon hara* his primary life concern. His insights can assist this research as the gap between Judaism's established traditions and new challenges presented by modernity is bridged.

The Talmud describes the antidote for one who is inclined towards *lashon hara*: Torah study, and an attention to humility.<sup>27</sup> In Judaism, there exists no better embodiment of the combination of Torah and humility than Rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen Kagan, who not only

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<sup>26</sup> Rabbi Jules Harlow (ed.), *Machzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*, p. 395.

<sup>27</sup> TB, Arachin 15b

compiled and solidified Judaism's collective approach towards *lashon hara*, but also made the proverbial reference to proper speech part of the very name he carried until his death in 1933.

The following chapter will discuss the content and impact of the Chofetz Chaim.

### **III. The Chofetz Chaim**

Since Talmudic times, many rabbis and other scholars attempted to provide, within larger works, lessons and guidelines regarding *lashon hara*. Maimonides, Joseph Karo, the Vilna Gaon and other rabbis and poskim (Jewish legal decision-makers) attempted to provide specific guidance and legal direction. However, there have been few texts dedicated exclusively to this topic.

It took the efforts and passion of a remarkable rabbi who lived during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to devote direct and consistent focus to the subject of *lashon hara*. This rabbi, under five feet in height, became one of the *gedolim* (great forces) of modern Jewish thought and *halachah*, and directed considerable attention on assembling scriptural references, defining the parameters of *lashon hara*, and formulating a code of laws regarding proper speech. He became one of the most influential rabbis within Orthodox Judaism during his lifetime, taking a central leadership role in the World Agudath Israel movement in Eastern Europe.

His name was Rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen Kagan, commonly known as the Chofetz Chaim. Born in Zhetel, Poland in 1838, he was taught until the age of ten by his parents, and then moved to Vilna to further his Jewish studies. Opting not to become a pulpit rabbi, the Chofetz Chaim settled in Radin, Poland and subsisted on a small grocery store which his wife managed. As his reputation grew, students came from across Europe to study with him and by 1869 his small but prestigious seminary became known as the Radin Yeshiva.

The Chofetz Chaim's greatest legacy was contained in the 21 books he published. His first work, *Sefer Chofetz Chaim* (1873), is widely regarded as the authoritative source within Judaism regarding the laws of slander and gossip. The title of the book was inspired by Psalm 35, Verse 13 which reads, “*Mi Ha’Ish Heh Chofetz Chaim....*” (Who is the man who desires

life...) and concludes, as previously mentioned, with the instructions to “guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech.”

Rabbi Kagan assembled texts and sources from the Torah, Talmud and from the *Rishonim* (early commentators) regarding the severity of Jewish law on tale-bearing and gossip. The *Sefer Chofetz Chaim* is divided into three parts:

- *Mekor chayim* ("Source of Life"), the legal text;
- *Be'er mayim chayim* ("Well of living water"), the footnotes and legal arguments; and
- *Shmirat ha-lashon* ("Guarding of the Tongue"), an ethical treatise frequently printed in the *Sefer Chofetz Chaim* on the proper use of speech.

Following the publication of his book, Rabbi Kagan became known simply as the Chofetz Chaim. His career as both a religious and political leader is well documented, and lasted until his death in 1933 at the age of 95.

It is worthy, however, to note some aspects of his career, which help illuminate the importance he placed on instructing the common everyday Jew. While the Chofetz Chaim's knowledge of Talmud and other texts was extensive, his attention was consistently focused on teaching laws of proper behavior. For example, rather than spending most of his afternoons expounding on Talmudic texts for his advanced students, the Chofetz Chaim would often assemble residents of towns and villages and teach basic *Parshanut*, the weekly Torah portion and commentary.<sup>28</sup>

During the First World War, he published a book of practice for front-line Jewish soldiers, who fought day to day far removed from Jewish institutions and kosher food.

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<sup>28</sup> Rabbi Berel Wein, *The Chofetz Chaim Destiny Foundation Lecture Series* (2002).

Rabbi Kagan's motivation for writing the *Sefer Chofetz Chaim* was based on a series of incidents he observed early in his career. According to historian and lecturer Rabbi Berel Wein, the Chofetz Chaim observed a battle in his village regarding whether to retain the local rabbi, and this resulted in deep-seated hatred and conflict, pitting friend versus friend and family member versus family member. The conflict so upset the Chofetz Chaim that he began writing the *Sefer Chofetz Chaim*<sup>29</sup> which has since served, particularly among Orthodox Jews, as a reference guide to proper speech.

In brief, the Chofetz Chaim postulates that by providing the Torah on Mount Sinai, God granted a system of laws and beliefs designed to elevate the human personality. These laws include the principles of *shmirat haloshon* – harnessing the power of the tongue. This includes how to speak of others, how to see and judge them, how to empathize with them and when appropriate, how to criticize them, and taught that adherence to the laws of proper speech empowers prayer, motivates effective learning and opens the gates to God's divine protection. The Chofetz Chaim expounded extensively on two aspects of speech. These were:

- **Lashon hara** - any derogatory or damaging (physically, financially, socially, or stress-inducing) communication. One who tells disparaging things that are false is referred to as a *motzi sheim ra* (one who spreads a bad report), considered the lowest of the low;
- **Rechilut** - any communication that generates animosity between people. These words are regarded as *Rechilut* even if their content is true, or someone has persuaded the speaker to say it, or it is communicated in a form other than speech (e.g.. writing, gestures, eye rolling) and even if names are not mentioned (but can be deduced).

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



The Chofetz Chaim did, however, identify a number of cases in which evil speech is permissible, in particular when it is spoken for positive reasons, as in matters relating to business or marriage in order to protect an innocent party. In recent years, a number of *responsa* have been written within the Jewish community which extends this to suspected or known cases of sexual or physical abuse. A number of websites have been established by such organizations as the *Jewish Coalition Against Sexual Assault/Abuse* to discuss *lashon hara* and sexual abuse within a halachic context.<sup>30</sup>

The Chofetz Chaim identified the following 31 commandments relating to *lashon hara*.

Negative Commandments relating to *lashon hara* include:

1. "You shall not go about as a tale-bearer among your people." (Leviticus 19:16)
2. "You shall not utter a false report." (Exodus 23:1)
3. "Take heed concerning the plague of leprosy." (Deuteronomy 24:8)
4. "Before the blind do not put a stumbling block." (Leviticus 19:14)
5. "Beware lest you forget the Lord, your God." (Deuteronomy 8:11)
6. "You shall not profane My holy name." (Leviticus 22:32)
7. "You shall not hate your brother in your heart." (Leviticus 19:12)
8. "You shall not take vengeance ...." (Leviticus 19:18)
9. "You shall not ..... nor bear any grudge." (Leviticus 19:18)
10. "One witness shall not rise up against a man for iniquity or for any sin." (Deuteronomy 19:15)

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<sup>30</sup> "Lashon Hara and Sexual Victimization" (2006). The Awareness Center, Inc. (The Jewish Coalition Against Sexual Abuse/Assault). Retrieved January 5, 2010 at <http://www.theawarenesscenter.org/lashonhara.html>.

11. "You shall not follow a multitude to do evil." (Exodus 23:2)
12. "You shall not act similar to Korach and his company." (Number 17:5)
13. "You shall not wrong one another." (Leviticus 25:17)
14. "(You shall rebuke your neighbor) and you shall not bear sin because of him." (Leviticus 19:17)
15. "Any widow or orphan shall you not afflict." (Exodus 22:21)
16. "You shall not pollute the land wherein you are." (Numbers 35:33)
17. "You shall not curse the deaf." (Leviticus 19:14)

**Positive Commandments relating to *lashon hara***

1. "Remember what the Lord your God did until Miriam by the way as you came forth out of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 24:9)
2. "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18)
3. "In righteousness shall you judge your neighbor." (Leviticus 19:15)
4. "If your brother be waxen poor and his means fail him when he is with you, then you shall uphold him." (Leviticus 25:35)
5. "You shall rebuke your neighbor." (Leviticus 19:17)
6. "To Him shall you cleave." (Deuteronomy 10:20)
7. "You shall fear My sacred place." (Leviticus 19:30)
8. "Before the gray-haired you shall rise up, and you shall honor the face of the old man." (Leviticus 19:32)
9. "You shall sanctify Him." (Leviticus 21:8)

10. "Honor your father and mother." (Exodus 20:12)
11. "The Lord your God shall you fear." (Deuteronomy 10:20)
12. "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall talk of them by the way when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up." (Deuteronomy 6:7)
13. "From a false matter you shall keep yourself far." (Exodus 23:7)
14. "Walk in His ways." (Deuteronomy 28:9)

Each of these passages and their practical relevance to daily life is expounded upon in *Guard Your Tongue*, a practical translation by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, based on the Chofetz Chaim and published in 1975. The book extends examples originally provided by the Chofetz Chaim into more modern circumstances, and newer media such as the telephone.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the most important contribution of the Chofetz Chaim to the current discussion regarding modern communications technology comes from a *hallachah* which is stated in the *Sefer Chofetz Chaim*. Reiterating the longstanding position of Jewish scripture and commentary, he focuses on Deuteronomy 28:25 which states, “cursed be he who strikes down his fellow countryman in secret.” And from that, the Chofetz Chaim posits the following law:

*Lashon hara is applicable if it is verbal or if it is in writing and it applies whether it is direct or whether it is by hint.*<sup>32</sup>

Within Judaism’s various movements there exist a variety of opinions regarding the binding nature of *hallachah*. For those who believe that *hallachah* is binding, the Chofetz Chaim, drawing on a variety of ancient sources, clearly states the authoritative law with regard to the oral and printed word. For those who regard *Hallachic* writings as part of the compendium of

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<sup>31</sup> Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, *Guard Your Tongue*, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Chapter 1, *Hallachah* 8.

Jewish thought, the work of the Chofetz Chaim continues to stand as a strong moral beacon for everyday speech and conduct.

The next section moves the discussion forward by more than sixty five years, to discuss the issue of *lashon hara* with an eye to assessing current practices and trends associated with Internet-based media. This form of communication has increasingly joined the spoken word as society's major forms of interaction. Who are today's users, and is there room to bridge the divide between Judaism's *Halachic* tradition and the modern world of text messaging and Internet use?

#### **Chapter IV: From Theory to Reality**

It is one thing to speak of *lashon hara* in the abstract. After all, tradition as studied today is full of instructions, laws, declarations and advice surrounding the use of proper speech. But how is theory joined to practice, particularly in view of changes within society's communications patterns?

Whereas defaming an individual during medieval times was often completed within a small communal environment, the internet revolution has facilitated a significant alteration of the definition of community. Many new media such as text messaging and live chat (including programs such as Microsoft's MSN; ICQ; AOL Instant Messenger; and Yahoo!) have enabled the formation of both selective and widespread communities called "friend lists."

Not only has this altered the contemporary definition of friendship, but it has created the potential to formulate virtual villages radically different from those which rabbis, teachers and commentators referred to in ancient times. That is, while gossip and slander could spread quickly within the walls of a seminary, within a village, in the marketplace or door to door though peddlers, modern technology allows users to grant access to friends who are able to read vast amounts of information contained on websites such as Facebook, MySpace or Twitter. By sending a request to be added as a friend, users ensure that virtual villages are created, expanded, altered and modified every day. At the touch of a finger, emails, text messages, random thoughts, observations, news, concerns and most of all *lashon hara* can be spread exponentially as friends lists are combined.

Statistics show that following the recent collapse and illness of pop star Michael Jackson, most young people learned of the celebrity's death not by television, radio or newspaper, but rather through text messaging, occurring within minutes of the initial reports. Billions of text

messages were sent to youth in classrooms or on the school bus keeping teenagers up to date with Michael Jackson's demise in a way which far outpaced the media used by their parents. At one point, 65,000 messages were being sent per second.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, with hundreds of text messages and dozens of emails sent and received each day by those wired into modern technology, the capability exists for each of us to become "the peddler" as cited by Talmudic sources, each possessing the potential not only to pass on positive news, but also to spread according to the Talmudic definition, "vermin."

With hundreds of friends on each text or email list, in the face of a medium so powerful, so swift and so extensive, what is being said across electronic lines, and who is in control of the message? It is an accepted principle within the marketing world that the "credibility of the message is linked to the credibility of the messenger." This is why certain trusted celebrities such as Sally Struthers and Sarah McLachlan have been successful raising funds for foster children and animal shelters respectively, or why admired professional athletes are used to market cars, running shoes or deodorant. It is one reason what when such popular endorsement figures such as golfer Tiger Woods or former football star O.J. Simpson fall from favor, or their reputations are besmirched, companies sever ties with them.

During the 1960s, society was rife with role models for young adults. In the United States, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Neil Armstrong, Mickey Mantle, Muhammed Ali, John Lennon, and Gloria Steinem were popular. For Jewish youth, Moshe Dayan and Golda Meir were individuals to look up to. In Canada, the unorthodox style of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau inspired young adults to become involved in the political process. Increasingly however, role models are scarce. In interviews with a number of teenagers and young adults,

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<sup>33</sup> Associated Press, *The Insider*, "Jackson death was Twittered, texted, and Facebooked", retrieved on October 28, 2009 at: [http://www.theinsider.com/news/2312568\\_Jackson\\_death\\_was\\_twittered\\_texted\\_and\\_Facebooked](http://www.theinsider.com/news/2312568_Jackson_death_was_twittered_texted_and_Facebooked).

few were able to name a public figure they looked up to. Aside from some mention of popular rap singers and one reference to Barack Obama, a variation of the following comment was heard repeatedly. “I don’t believe in very many people, except my friends.” Many noted a cynicism regarding politicians both here and in Israel, fueled by a plethora of moral scandals. Some observed that “sports figures are only in it for the money.”

But by selecting the members of one’s friendship circle, a person, young or old, can create their own virtual village within an increasingly complex and interactive network. An informal survey of teenagers with text messaging or Facebook capabilities showed that on the average a person’s friend list exceeds two hundred and fifty members. Most friends also have access to their friends’ Wall, a place within Facebook for “friends” to post comments, observations, and other material, for good or ill. The phenomenon of “cyber-bullying”, referring to the classic tradition of *lashon hara*, is rife on such forums. As posited by Maimonides, Joseph Karo, the Chofetz Chaim and others, it promotes the emotional harm of others. The Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada on its website *My Privacy, My Choice, My Life*, defined cyberbullying as follows.

*Cyberbullying involves the use of technology, such as cell phones or the internet, to harass another individual on purpose. Although you may not walk away with bruises or a black eye, cyberbullying can often be much more psychologically damaging than its physical counterpart. Today’s youth are experiencing cyberbullying at an alarmingly increasing rate. Why? Probably because when people believe that they are acting anonymously they are more likely to say hurtful things because they think they won’t get caught.*<sup>34</sup>

The Cyberbullying Research Centre recently published a report on teen cyber harassment, and has documented thousands of cases in which feelings have been hurt or reputations ruined by items

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<sup>34</sup> Youth Privacy Canada, “The changing face of the bully”, retrieved December 18, 2009 at: <http://blog.youthprivacy.ca/index.php/tag/cyberbullying/>.

posted on Facebook or MySpace, or in which private information (truthful or not) has been spread through text messaging networks.

This type of information spreading, whether true or not, violates countless Jewish principles regarding proper speech. Judaism also values privacy as one of its most important principles. Within Jewish tradition, all things are considered to be secret or discreet unless a person specifically says otherwise. Within the Torah, God consistently says to Moses, "Speak to the Children of Israel, saying..." or "Speak to the Children of Israel and tell them." As such, it is inferred that Moses requires divine approval or instruction before he speaks to Israel with regard to God's commandments.

This imperative can be extended to the use of texting, Facebook and other media. Frequently, a young man's sexual identity can be called into question through comments spread by text messaging. Manhood and heterosexuality are seen as desirable male attributes within a typical teenage social network. A girl's physical appearance and her actual alleged sexual reputation are central in many forwarded texts.

Consider the following two case studies involving sexual preference and physical appearance. The first involves a young man who was "outed"<sup>35</sup> as gay through his school's social network.

*I arrived at school one day and there were snickers and eyes lowered wherever I went. Two weeks earlier I had talked to someone in confidence about feelings I was having and the next thing I knew everyone knew I was gay. I told one person, and she shared with two friends and before I knew it everyone knew. I am glad that I am "out" but I believe it was my decision on when, how and if to do that. Although most people have been good to me, I have friends who were outed before their time and they have been beaten up.*

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<sup>35</sup> Being "outed" refers to the announcement that a man or woman is a homosexual; ideally, the individual in question chooses the circumstances for this announcement. Often, the announcement is made on his or her behalf, with or without his or her consent.



The second is a typical case of *lashon hara*, quoted on *Cyberbullying.us*, which demonstrates how devastating a comment on someone's Facebook Wall can be.

*I still cry when I think of what she said. After awhile [sic], you start believing all of the things people tell you that aren't true. When I look in the mirror I wonder if I'm fat (I'm not) after what my ex friend said.*<sup>36</sup>

The question remains why a young person would not remove the comment from their Wall, or the evil speaking friend from their list. Rina, an 18-year-old Long Island college student, explains:

*You can take someone's comment off your (comment) wall, or set your privacy settings to restrict them, but to take someone off your "friends" list is seen as acknowledging they've hurt you. It also starts text arguments which are never good. You can erase the message, but you don't usually block the person.*

It is clear through the previous two examples that the nature, complexity and immediacy of internet communication is vastly different from what rabbis and *hallachists* have heretofore considered.

Before examining the connection between rabbinical directives regarding *lashon hara* and the internet, it is necessary to examine the details of other modern cases studies involving use of these media. The following brief accounts were collected during interviews with teenagers and adults both in the United States and Canada, who either approached or were referred to the author, or who contacted the author while researching this topic. Some details of these cases have been altered in order to protect identities and confidentiality. Each one presents cases of *lashon hara* and *Rechilus* which in many ways are thematically consistent with those mentioned

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<sup>36</sup> Cyber-bullying Research Center. Retrieved December 10, 2009 at: <http://cyberbullying.us/>.

in the Talmudic tradition. However, the following examples (with some details omitted) contain details which *Rishonim* and *Acharonim* could have never envisioned.

- 1) Sexting: A 13-year-old girl, similar to the practice of her friends, poses nude for her boyfriend, who forwards these photos to friends. Subsequently, these students forwarded them to others, and eventually all students with cellular phones receive a copy. The young woman took an overdose of medication, and ultimately required institutional care. In Talmudic terms, the causal effect (*gerama*) of spreading private photos is clear.
- 2) Legal activity: A group of 10-year-old girls are given cell phones by their parents “in case of emergencies.” Within weeks, each has a text messaging list which encompasses more than 200 names. When a new girl moves into the community, a battle ensues between two girls to make the newcomer their “best friend.” One girl text messages the school that her friend’s mother “beats” children who visit their house. The case eventually involved police, social services, the school, and the court system. It was stated by the falsely-accused parent that neither police, social services, nor the school had any understanding of the medium of text messaging. “These are weapons of character assassination which we are putting in the hands of 10-year-olds without any instructions.” In this manner, giving an adolescent a cellular phone with text messaging capability is not dissimilar with the Talmudic example of placing fire in the hands of a minor.
- 3) Sexual reputation: A breakup occurs between a 15-year-old girl and a 16-year-old boy. Details of their apparent intimate activities are texted to a network of 100 of the boy’s friends, and within minutes, the information is at the fingertips of 800 students.
- 4) Random comments and privacy issues: A student, expressing frustration regarding one teacher and a particularly difficult assignment, texts a message to his friend stating,

“death to Mrs. B.” The message is forwarded to the school office. The teacher approaches the legal system and gains a limited restraining order.

- 5) Lashon hara in one’s presence: It is common practice for a young person to be speaking with someone face to face while text messaging at the same time to a third party in the room or elsewhere about that person. “Sometimes I will be talking to someone annoying and texting my friend in the corner how annoying that person is.”
- 6) Derogatory comments surrounding weight: “I was called a fat pig by one of my friends who I was fighting with and that ‘went viral’ (received widespread distribution) throughout the school.”
- 7) Derogatory comments surrounding sexual reputation: “Word went out that I was a slut and I was pregnant. Even though people know what kind of person I am and that it was not true, it still hurts.”

Outside of use by teenagers, there are issues affecting parents. Many parents are aware of the messages being spread through these media, but are reluctant to confront their children.

- 8) Hands-off approach: “I look at my daughter’s cell phone all of the time and am shocked. But I pick my spots. I do not want to be shut out of my daughter’s life. I figure she’ll figure it out herself.”
- 9) Acceptance: “In our day, we used the princess phone to talk about others. It’s part of growing up.”
- 10) An attempt to confront: “One mother picked up [her] daughter’s cell phone, reviewed her text messages, and saw ‘her entire life.’ Included in the average three hundred text

messages per day, there were photos of her daughter drinking and partying at college.

Diane recalls that:

*There were sexually explicit conversations and sarcastic hurtful comments about others. My friends advised me to stay away otherwise I would be 'blocked.' But I sat down with my daughter and told her about the damage she was causing to others and herself, after all these messages and photos can remain forever. My daughter was infuriated. She blocked me from her Facebook and we are still rebuilding our relationship. But I still feel it was something I needed to do as a parent. Most parents want their children to like them so much that they have stopped being parents. I saw the lashon hara and I had to do something.*

Diane still monitors her daughter's Facebook presence through a neighbor who is still on her daughter's list. "It's funny," says Diane. "She cleaned up all her party photos after our argument. Maybe it was worth it."

A number of teenagers, parents and educators offered additional comments of interest about the content of text messages, Facebook postings and emails. Some of these include:

- "I went to Hebrew day school and I know about *lashon hara*, but this is different because it is so fast and there are so many messages."
- "I like text messaging because it means I don't have to get into awkward person-to-person discussions. It's quick and easy."
- "My whole world is documented from the time I got my cell phone. It's crazy (it's good)."
- "Texting means I don't have to talk to people. I can chat, listen to music, do my homework and text all at the same time."
- "Once you send your text message, it so quick and mindless, it's like it never happened."

- “It’s easy to get into a fight because there is no way of hearing tone. Then your argument is recorded on your cell phone and sometimes is spread to others. Then everyone knows.”
- “The texting happens so fast that I don’t even think about what I said. But then I get this bad feeling inside and think, ‘Was that *lashon hara*?’”
- “Sometimes I send something and think, ‘Why did I say that? And I feel bad.’”
- “My parents send me a text message sometimes and I think, ‘Isn’t that cute?’ But they don’t get it and I’m not sure I want them to.”
- “I like it because you can [say] things to your friends which you can’t say to anyone else.”
- “There are so many texts sent that one or two *lashon haras* get lost in it all.”
- “When I say ‘I hate that girl,’ I don’t mean anything by it.”

Increasingly, within the use of text messaging, voices of concern are emerging.

Teenaged users generally agree that boys often use the medium to flirt or to set up dates or meetings in hallways, and girls often use it to comment on issues such as clothing, appearance, popularity and sexual reputation. In addition, comments are emerging from the generation which was the first to use the medium. “Sally” is a 21-year-old college student, who noted:

*I see my younger sister on that thing all the time. Whether it’s on the computer or on her cell phone. There are no interpersonal skills, no interest in using language other than abbreviations, and texts. They text and text and text, at supper, at restaurants, in the car – everywhere we go. They are losing the ability to communicate normally.*

Michael Hirsch, Student Life Coordinator at Solomon Schechter High School in Glen Cove, New York, observes an increasing deterioration in students’ interpersonal skills. “Kids

hide behind their computers and say things they otherwise don't have the nerve to say." Hirsch also cautions parents to pay attention to the photos and messages which are posted. "Children and teens are innocent and so are parents," he says. Hirsch cautions that there are predators and other undesirables who are looking to exploit this naiveté. Glen Cove Solomon Schechter School guidance counselor Bonnie Cahn observes not only a deterioration of social skills, but also a complete lack of discretion with regard to what is often posted. "There are no filters," she says. "Rumors are started and then just get out there."

The impact of these new media is not completely bad, notes Cahn. As will be discussed later, there is some sociological value to these new networks, and to some extent, some degree of non hurtful "gossip" can be healthy. There are also cases where social networks have brought communities together.

Phil Essex, a parent of a 17-year-old living in Sea Cliff, New York, recalls one case in 2009 when a motor vehicle collision which occurred late one evening sent two students to the hospital. Before school convened the next morning, all students in the school were aware of the incident, and were meeting to plan ways to visit and otherwise support the injured students. "On that day, text messaging served as the school's *shofar*," Essex recalls.

## **Chapter V: Email and Internet**

Ethical topics relating to online media are not limited to the young and their use of social networks: issues of *lashon hara* exist within use of email and websites as well. For the most part, email is used within the adult world to communicate specific ideas or information. Still, questions arise regarding the accuracy of material shared, the privacy of email senders, and the evaluation of individuals, services, and products. Perhaps the most obvious exemplar of these issues is mass-distribution emails.

In March 2003, an email began circulating throughout the Jewish community aimed directly at the reputation of the Starbucks Coffee Company. According to the email, which was distributed to millions of electronic addresses, Starbucks had decided to withdraw its support of Israel, and the email author attributed the decision to Arab pressure, and Starbucks' alleged anti-Israeli stance. The news release, emailed by an impassioned Israel supporter, termed the decision "disgraceful" and concluded with the following declaration.

*Let us as Jews, let them know that we will not patronize their stores for their position on Israel. When they lose enough business, maybe they will get the message that we as a Jewish population will not tolerate their actions.*

The email was retracted soon after, but not until it had induced widespread outrage throughout the Jewish community. The email continues to circulate to this day, and is regularly forwarded by Jewish leaders, including rabbis. The author has personally received a forwarded copy by a respected rabbi, with encouragements to share it with congregants.

A simple check of Israeli business publications reveals that Starbucks had launched a joint venture with the Delek Group of Israel to operate six Starbucks stores in Tel Aviv as the

Shalom Coffee Company. A mutual decision was made on March 31, 2003 to dissolve the venture due to "on-going operational challenges in the market". In short, the stores were not making money. Starbucks issued a statement saying it planned to return to Israel when market conditions became more favorable. It was further observed by *Boycott Watch*, a website that examines the nature of product boycotts, that the founder and chairman of Starbucks, Howard Shultz, is a prominent and highly respected member of the Seattle Jewish community, as well a supporter of Israel.<sup>37</sup>

The rapidity with which this email was originally distributed, and the fact that it continues to be forwarded, points to an ethical dilemma within the Jewish world. On one hand, it is important that Jewish people be aware and vigilant regarding the business practices of American and international companies; on the other, there must be an equal responsibility to ensure the veracity of information communicated. The question becomes one of who shoulders the greater responsibility: the sender of the information, or the recipient.

The case of the erroneous Starbucks boycott provides a classic example of *Rechilus*. The effects of this widely distributed email no doubt cost Starbucks operators money, and caused stress and wasted time at both the franchise and head office levels. The Chofetz Chaim cautions against making a statement which would harm the livelihood of either the manufacturer or the storekeeper.”<sup>38</sup>

Similar emails have been sent within the Jewish community, and beyond. For example, in February 2009, an email began circulating that the Boston Red Sox baseball team had postponed their home opening game because it fell on the second night of Passover. It did so,

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<sup>37</sup> Boycott Watch. "Correcting a false boycott email: Starbucks pullout from Israel was simply and clearly a business decision" (September 2003), retrieved July 24, 2009 at: <http://www.boycottwatch.org/misc/starbucks1.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Rabbi Shimon Findelman and Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz, *Chofetz Chaim: A Lesson a Day*, p. 92.



according to the email, because three of its starters and many owners of private boxes were Jewish. In fact, as the Jewish press noted, the Boston Red Sox in 2009 did not have three Jewish players, and that the home opener had never been scheduled on the second night of Passover.<sup>39</sup> The email both enraged non Jewish Bostonians and caused rejoicing on some Jewish blog sites. “I’m so proud of my Jewish people,” exclaimed one blogger.<sup>40</sup> The email continued to circulate during the 2009 Passover season.

In 2007, another email began to circulate within the Jewish community regarding an apparent decision by school boards in London, England, based on Muslim pressure, to remove the Holocaust from its curriculum. It called on Jews to make their opinions known to the British authorities. In fact, the email inaccurately quoted a *London Times* story which reported that some teachers, who are not knowledgeable with regard to the Holocaust, have been dropping “controversial topics such as the Holocaust and the Crusades from history lessons because they do not want to cause offence to children from certain races or religions.” The email, although disturbing in nature, continues to circulate throughout the Jewish community.

Meanwhile, the original British email has been re-tooled and renamed with the subject being the University of Kentucky. One internet myth expert claimed that the letters from UK had been mistransposed; but the website *Boycott Watch* concludes that this is not the case since the two emails are otherwise identical and circulated months apart. “This was not a matter of mis-

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<sup>39</sup> *The Jewish Chronicle*. “Red Sox hoax is no Passover miracle but Grabow may be” (April 2009), retrieved June 19, 2009 at: [http://www.pittchron.com/pages/full\\_story/push?article-Red+Sox+hoax+is+no+Passover+miracle-+but+Grabow+may+be-%20&id=2135972-Red+Sox+hoax+is+no+Passover+miracle-+but+Grabow+may+be-&instance=secondary\\_stories\\_left\\_column](http://www.pittchron.com/pages/full_story/push?article-Red+Sox+hoax+is+no+Passover+miracle-+but+Grabow+may+be-%20&id=2135972-Red+Sox+hoax+is+no+Passover+miracle-+but+Grabow+may+be-&instance=secondary_stories_left_column)

<sup>40</sup> Weblog, “What is the point, Jeff?” Entry “Red Sox Opener Postponed for Passover?” Retrieved December 14, 2009 at <http://jefflong.blogspot.com/2009/02/red-sox-opener-postponed-for-passover.html>.

transcription via email. It was a deliberate opportunistic copycat hoax by simply changing a name,” it concludes.<sup>41</sup>

The Chofetz Chaim stresses the importance of accuracy within communication: “One does not have the right to exaggerate or alter facts.”<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, throughout the Jewish world, emails similar to those quoted above continue to circulate. Often, they are presented to rabbis with urgent pleas to circulate the information – or misinformation – to their congregations. Often, these emails are factually flawed, outdated, or skewed.

As carriers of the Jewish written and oral tradition, which extends from Mount Sinai, through the rabbis, commentators and poskim, it behooves us all, rabbis in particular, to verify sources before they pass emails on. The Chofetz Chaim, and those who preceded him, stressed the importance of correcting *lashon hara* when it comes to one’s attention, or at minimum to refrain from passing it on. The action of forwarded material to secondary recipients also presents issues for Jewish leaders, parents, teachers and others. It opens a difficult discussion over the prevalent practice of cc’ing (carbon copying) and bcc’ing (blind-carbon copying – see Chapter I) electronic mail. Is it fair to assume that when an individual sends an email to a second party, it is ethical and within acceptable Jewish practice to forward this email to a third party without prior approval? In particular, while some send emails to user groups under bcc in order to protect the confidentiality of each email address, others use bcc as a “side whisper” to a third party without letting the primary recipient know that a third party or parties are aware of the message.

Contemporary practice would seem to indicate that the practice is within proper moral bounds. But according to Jewish law, as discussed earlier, a person's privacy should always be

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<sup>41</sup> Boycott Watch. “UK Schools and the Holocaust Curriculum” (December 2007). Retrieved August 17, 2009 at: <http://www.boycottwatch.org/misc/UK-Holocaust2.htm>.

<sup>42</sup> Findelman and Berkowitz, *Chofetz Chaim: A Lesson a Day*, p. 142.

respected. Taking this into consideration, should there be an expectation that when a person emails a second party, particularly on a sensitive matter, that that email remain confidential? It is common for email users to state “I am always careful what I write in case it is forwarded.” But should there be an automatic expectation of privacy? Is it the responsibility of the sender to state his or her request for privacy and confidentiality, or should it be the obligation of the recipient to request permission before an email or text message is forwarded? These are ethical discussions within the context of *lashon hara* and *Rechilut* which have yet to be fully explored within Jewish organizations, movements, and clergy association. The Chofetz Chaim, who in his writing favored a “silence is golden” philosophy, cautions against the repetition of remarks regarding an individual. He writes, “One who conveys information to others has no control over who will hear it and in what setting it will be repeated.”<sup>43</sup>

Finally, some attention should be focused on the posting of derogatory information on websites which ask for comment on businesses, organizations, and individuals. Recently, I attended a conference of Jewish professionals, and one lecture failed to hold the audience’s attention; a laptop began being passed around the back of the room. A site called [ratemyteachers.com](http://ratemyteachers.com) had been accessed, and unsigned evaluations of the lecturer as being “boring” and “uninteresting” were being circulated. Was this indeed *lashon hara*, or was it as the Chofetz Chaim alluded to in his discussion about business partnerships and marital engagements, part of an individual or public right to be informed? Indeed, was this an accurate and balanced assessment of the speaker, or a unsigned forum for disgruntled students to vent anonymously?

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 86.

Furthermore, do websites which rate restaurants, hotels and other services present the opportunity to libel competitors by virtue of their anonymity, or do these websites afford the opportunity to benefit consumers with valuable and balanced information within an increasingly complex marketplace? If we permit an open marketplace fuelled by the internet, which does not demand accountability or personal identification, are all forms of communication, criticism, rumor, complaint, and gossip, signed or unsigned permissible, particularly under Jewish law?

Finally, contrary to the warnings and teachings by our rabbis and poskim, is there a place for gossip within Jewish society and beyond? The recent growth of gossip-related websites, television and radio programs, magazines, and other media has been well-documented, and it appears that the lowering of personal privacy barriers, and the availability of gossip within all media, has sent a clear signal to young users of the internet. As one young user of social networks noted, “When there is a fight going on between people in the school we can all follow it. It’s entertainment. It’s kind of like passing notes in class, but everyone gets a copy.”

## **Chapter VI: A Role for Gossip?**

While attending a recent shiva minyan, I met a woman who revealed in conversation that she was the managing editor of, as she called it, “a gossip magazine” with a weekly circulation of more than 1.25 million. Intrigued, I asked whether she was proud of her work, since, often, publications like hers revel in the misfortunes of others.

The editor replied, “It’s what people are asking for. It lifts them up, knowing that famous people have the same troubles at work or in relationships as they do.” She also revealed that no story is reported unless it can be confirmed by two unrelated witnesses.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin observes that society’s “endless tales about the ‘misery of the rich and famous’ seems to make people feel better about their own lives.” Rabbi Telushkin notes also that when a clergy person or other public personality is caught or rumored to be involved in a scandal, particularly one of a sexual nature, it removes moral pressure from less public figures. “If the individual making moral demands on us can be shown not to abide by such demands himself, then this seems to free us from moral responsibility.”<sup>44</sup>

Circulation statistics show the top three glossy celebrity magazines total more than six million copies per week. The *National Enquirer* newspaper sells approximately one million editions per week. And there are many other gossip publications, television programs, radio and internet sources which draw tens of millions of readers, viewers and listeners every week.

It remains to decide which of these publications, if any, constitute *lashon hara*. Deborah Tannen’s 1990 book *You Just Don’t Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*, provides some insight into why texting and social networking appear to be more popular among girls than

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<sup>44</sup> Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, p.37.

boys. Tannen asserts that teenage girls are more likely to reveal a friend's secrets than boys. The reason is that boys' status tend to be more based on athletic or physical conquests, while girls' status are more often linked with a rank within specific popular peer groups. Girls attain higher status or self-esteem by befriending others of high status, for example cheerleaders, or other peers who are popular with boys. One way to achieve this status, or to compensate for its lack, Tannen argues, is to prove oneself as having been entrusted with secrets,<sup>45</sup> often relating to revelations about a girl's sexual reputation or physical appearance.

Acceptable gossip for men is often associated with sports exposes. In 2009, after releasing his book *The Yankee Years*, former New York manager Joe Torre was severely criticized for revealing matters of a confidential nature occurring in the team clubhouse, despite emphasizing loyalty among Yankee personnel.<sup>2</sup> Torre revealed that he felt the team's general manager Brian Cashman had "betrayed" him in negotiations following the 2007 season. Torre also highlighted the fact that teammates had referred to superstar Alex Rodriguez as "A-Fraud."<sup>46</sup>

The etymology of the word gossip is "godsib" or "god" and "sib," meaning "akin" or "related";<sup>47</sup> it has also been a term ascribed to a sponsor at a baptism. In medieval and early modern Europe, "gossips" were the women selected from a local parish or neighborhood to aid midwives and attend women in childbirth. The word "gossip", then, once carried a kindly, intimate, and friendly connotation, although the laboring woman occasionally had limited input into who her gossips would be, and ran the risk of having attendants who were hostile to her.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*, p. 107.

<sup>46</sup> Joe Torre and Tom Verduci, *The Yankee Years*, p. 247.

<sup>47</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (1996).

<sup>48</sup> See Linda Pollock, "Childbearing and female bonding in early modern England", *Social History* 22:3.

During this period, the duties of a new wife or woman parishioner were referred to as “daily gadding with ... gossips to banquets and bridals,”<sup>49</sup> the word generally being used to denote women’s relationships with other women. The currently understood definition of gossip has since become the convention, largely applied to women talking to one another, often about one another. As such, women then attracted the judgment of men, who judged their communication as “idle talk” that in which men should avoid engaging. Rabbi Yochanan is quoted in Pirkei Avot 1:5:

*....engage not in gossip with women. This applies to one’s own wife; how much more then to the wife of one’s neighbor. Hence the Sages say, whoso engages in much gossip with women brings evil upon himself, neglects the study of the Torah and will in the end inherit Gehinnom.*

But gossip is not restricted to women. Men also gossip. There are ways in which gossip can be seen as a natural human phenomenon, one which can promote intimacy and affiliation as well as providing important social information.

Gossip serves to remind members of a given community of the importance of its norms and values. In this way, it can serve as a “powerful mechanism of social control”.<sup>50</sup> In some societies, gossip was used to punish the transgressor. The social impact on the perceived transgressor could span from mocking and name-calling to exile from the community.

Fame brings a loss of the expectation of privacy. Although celebrities complain about the pursuit of the media, many manipulate gossip about themselves to remain in the public eye and sustain interest in their projects. For the general public, idle talk or even malicious gossip regarding celebrities or the actors in a favorite television program can provide a relief from the

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<sup>49</sup> See David Cressy, “Purification, thanksgiving, and the churcing of women in post-Reformation England”, *Past and Present* 141.

<sup>50</sup> Jack Levin and Arnold Arluke, *Gossip: the Inside Scoop*, p. 125.

pressures of day-to-day life. The relatively new phenomenon of “reality” television, too, taps into the public’s desire to observe the private moments of “real” individuals, however staged or manipulated the content of the program.

Gossip about the private lives of celebrities can contain details which can embarrass, but it can also reveal positive information about personalities we would not have otherwise known. Through celebrity media, for example, we can learn how some celebrities use their influence and wealth to promote charitable causes. We learn that celebrities can demonstrate courage when they can fall on hard times and have successful comebacks. Or they can demonstrate self-improvement by addressing alcohol or drug abuse, emerging from the rehabilitation process with renewed courage and vitality, and often with renewed success. Actors, politicians, or sports figures become our heroes and villains as we recount stories about them. Levin and Arluke note:

*Many of the people who serve as role models for our everyday achievements—Babe Ruth, John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe and so on-- have become national heroes through their exposure in the mass media and in the talk of ordinary people. More important, some of these heroes, through the medium of gossip, have grown into legendary figures ... They have become part of what we call our culture.*<sup>51</sup>

Gossip can also teach employees what traits are expected, what other employees have experienced, what is valued by the organization, who and what to avoid and who to emulate.

In social settings, such as school or work, gossip can promote intimacy and belonging, letting a person know he or she is now part of a particular group. We learn to assess “who is trustworthy and who is not trustworthy through gossip, which can be necessary for monitoring social relations and assessing moral value.”<sup>52</sup> Some experiences that people have may make

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<sup>51</sup> Levin et. al., *Gossip: the Inside Scoop*, p. 192.

<sup>52</sup> Shermer, Michael, *The Science of Good & Evil*, p. 58.



them a subject of gossip, but can result in stories which “are told and retold, over a long period of time, whenever the cohesiveness of a group needs reinforcement.”<sup>53</sup>

Stuart Adam, professor emeritus and former Dean of the prestigious Carleton University School of Journalism in Ottawa, notes that at some level, information about celebrities and limited gossip can be a positive force in society. “It promotes an exchange of ideas, makes people accountable for their actions, no matter what their status, and creates a sense of community.” Experts argue that a healthy use of gossip can lead to development of positive role models, or exposure of those with unsavory values. Adam asserts, however, that when media fabricates stories, or concentrates on profit rather than public information and dialogue, then gossip serves as a “salacious” influence.

Much of gossip’s value depends on its intent. If gossip is proliferated for the purpose of harming another person or for self-aggrandizement, its results can be devastating. Nevertheless, there are forms of gossip which can strengthen communities and decrease personal isolation. In some ways, then, Facebook groups, websites or user groups are different than the “fan clubs” of yesteryear.

The challenge, therefore, is to ensure that in particular within the use of electronic media, that speech and the written are used for constructive rather than destructive purposes.

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<sup>53</sup>Levin et. al., *Gossip*, p. 125.

## **Chapter VII: Developmental Stages**

Within every generation, parents, teachers, clergy, and even older siblings express concerns regarding the capacity of the generation after them to function effectively and responsibly within society. It is common to look at an emerging generation and to express doubts over its future capacity to function, or to act responsibly. This current older generation is no exception, particularly as it assesses the uses of the highly powerful and influential internet. Whereas moral questions currently exist across all generations with regard to the proliferation of emails, blogs and other online information, the current 10-16-year-old demographic is perhaps one of the first generations in which young people, below and just beyond the time of puberty, are provided with tools of mass communication with little, if any, training or supervision.

The interests and behaviors of young people change as they begin to identify with peers and break away from their families, but as student rabbi Hayley Siegel notes, the invention and proliferation of social networking within recent years has altered this traditional configuration. Siegel, 26, who teaches and works with teenagers and young adults, observes with great concern the growth of social networking media such as text messaging and Facebook. “I understand kids’ need for privacy, but adults underestimate the ability of this medium to hurt people.”

Siegel notices that users of text messaging and other interactive media possess the ability to cause what she calls “lethal damage” through the power and proliferation of the written word, and this with a virtual lack of moral guidance by parents and other adults. She also notes a loss in the ability of teenagers to communicate in traditional ways, an observation supported by others. Janna, a 21-year-old, states:

*I think I have texting in perspective. I use it to communicate with friends, have fun and keep kind of a record of my life. I was brought up with it. But now, 10-year-old kids are*

*given this, and they are using it at the dinner table, in restaurants, in the car and wherever we go. We can never talk normally to my sister and her friends. They are lost and don't know how to communicate.*

Melissa, a 12-year-old self-professed “hypertexter”, supports that assessment. “I am addicted,” she says. “But why should I use phones or talk to anyone anyway, when I can talk to people quickly without having to waste time with “hello, how are you.” Melissa sleeps with her cellular telephone at her side, “in case I miss something going on.” Melissa sends or receives more than three hundred text messages per day, and describes herself as “typical” of her peer group.

The text messaging revolution has also developed its own internal language. Most websites estimate that more than 1,800 abbreviations are currently in use. These “time saving” acronyms include LOL (“laughing out loud”), BRB (“be right back”), LMAO (“laughing my ass off”), and AFK (“away from keyboard”), to name a few. A significant number of popular acronyms, used without thought by texters ten years old and younger, include WTF (“what the fuck”) and CRAFT (“can’t remember a fucking thing”).

School counselor Bonnie Cahn is concerned. “I have parents who approach me at parent-teacher conferences who tell me of stories of kids who have been hurt or offended by text messaging.” She also notes an alarming drop in social skills, as teenagers refrain from use of such traditional communications tools as land-line telephones and dinner conversation. Cahn notes that this is occurring at a time by which young teenagers have traditionally developed these interpersonal abilities.

Parents and older siblings repeatedly comment about a deterioration in social skills, including an inability to communicate in a social setting, such as a restaurant or at social functions, and a total obsession with nonstop text messaging in all public and private

environments. “There are no filters,” states Michael Hirsch, Student Life Coordinator at Solomon Schechter High School in Glen Cove, New York.

*The medium allows children to say things privately and publicly they would never say face to face. They can hide behind the computer and say “so-and-so is such a slut,” or “so-and-so is so annoying.”*

Whereas some argue that use of words which attack a person’s physical appearance, clothing or sexual reputation have always existed, the power of the written word, and its ability to be forwarded from person to person and network to network, makes this form of communication and this generation unique. “It is being used by some as an insidious, destructive tool,” notes student rabbi Siegel. “Our tradition tells us that *lashon hara* kills a person’s soul, and this is the case with texting, MySpace and Facebook. Many are being hurt by the power of words as use of this technology spreads like bacteria. The internet can be used as a tool of holiness (*Kedushah*) in order to heal the world, but very often I see the opposite.”

As earlier illustrated, children as young as ten years old are being handed cellular telephones, in most cases with a minimum of instruction. Marilyn, a Long Island parent describes her awakening to the issue.

*Like most parents, I gave my daughter a cell phone to call for emergencies or to keep track of her, but within months I noticed she was texting constantly. When I looked at her cell phone and read thousands of texts, it became clear to me that these children are being provided with tools of human destruction, without any guidelines or moral instruction. I asked myself “how do I handle this as a Jewish parent?”*

In many ways, the behavior of younger teens is understandable. According to behavior theorists, cognitive, psychosocial, and moral development occurs in stages which, when reviewed and understood, can help to predict certain changes and assist in better understanding them. Within their respective research, psychologists Lawrence Kohlberg, Jane Loevinger, and Erik Erikson identify a person’s various stages and the development tasks each individual must master before

moving to the next stage of maturity. The timelines of these stages are not absolute, and can be influenced by many factors, but for adolescents and teenagers, these developmental tasks tend to focus on searching for an identity outside their family.

Erikson's work has identified stages of psychosocial development, and places adolescent years under a category titled "Identity vs. Role Confusion." The question "Who am I?" sends the adolescent searching outside the family of origin. Withdrawing from family roles and responsibilities can result in a state Erikson describes as "psychosocial moratorium", resulting in role confusion. Devotion to causes and loyalty to peers can replace family roles, with idealism substituting for experience.<sup>54</sup>

In her discussion of ego development, Loevinger titles this stage "Conformity", characterized by the acceptance of stereotypes and confusing norms with rules. Security is in belonging, rejecting the "out" group. There is no "self" apart from others; sanction from the group is feared more than punishment from authority figures. Behaviors are judged by their consequences rather than their intentions.<sup>55</sup> The development of Facebook, MySpace and text messaging has reinforced this developmental trend by facilitating the creation of large networks with their own norms and language, open only to parents on only a limited and conditional basis.

Kohlberg continues this assessment of adolescent growth by focusing on moral development, with "Stage Three" being the period of living up to societal expectations and roles. This involves an emphasis on conformity, and learning that choices influence relationships.

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<sup>54</sup> See Erik H. Erikson, *Youth: Identity and Crisis* (Oxford, 1968).

<sup>55</sup> See Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development, Vol. I: the Philosophy of Moral Development* (San Francisco, 1981).

Moving from “What’s in it for me?”, the adolescent begins to understand how his or her behavior affects others.<sup>56</sup>

Parents can have a difficult time with children growing up and breaking away.

Psychologist Jan Gambier observes that

*Becoming an adult is not easy. In developing a sense of identity, a teen may try on several before finding the identity that fits. This explains girls who dye their hair orange, then purple. They are experimenting. Teens fight with their parents. This is a way to separate from their parents and establish their independence. They may not know what they want but they know what **they don’t want**. They don’t want to be like their parents. Unfortunately, many parents take this push away from them personally<sup>57</sup>.*

Parents can either be too strict, not allowing this process to occur normally and possibly creating rebellion or worse; or they can be too permissive in their need to win the adolescent’s approval, allowing too much freedom before the child has reached sufficient maturity to make sound choices.

There exists a subtle line between understanding child development and assuming a responsibility to guide it; increasingly, adults within American society have adopted a “hands-off” approach. The desire to retain a child’s affection, or fear of confronting them, has significantly reduced the amount of moral instruction offered in this generation. It is difficult for many parents to confront their teenagers on the misuse, or destructive messages spread through the internet. If it is indeed difficult to enter into a conversation with young people over internet use, how increasingly prohibitive would it be to insist on teaching the detail-laden lessons advanced by great rabbinical leaders such as the Chofetz Chaim or Maimonides?

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<sup>56</sup>See Loevinger, J.. *Ego Development* (1976); L.X. Hy and J. Loevinger, *Measuring Ego Development* (1996).

<sup>57</sup> *Psychology Today* (weblog): “What is a ‘Normal’ Teenager in the Age of High Tech?” (October 2009). Retrieved November 4, 2009 at: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-teenage-mind/200910/what-is-normal-teenager-in-the-age-high-tech>

Many parents have a difficult time saying “no” to their children. How can they assume a more significant and effective role in helping their children assume a morally responsible role within the use of modern technology? While there exist moral issues associated with the use of these media across all generations, teenagers’ use of these media presents a unique and significant challenge. Not only are young people far advanced in their knowledge of the technology, but they are also often operating these verbal weapons without supervision, and a lack of maturity or moral filters.

Is this an acceptable situation for rabbis, teachers, parents, and others whose traditional role has been to guide adolescent development? While it has been discussed and acknowledged that teenage networks have always existed, is the current social networking revolution different in nature? Is there a way to influence this change in which the world communicates within a context of patience, acceptance and Jewish value? Most importantly, what strategies can be adopted which will help adults “influence the game” without being shut out from it?

## Chapter VIII: Discussion

One of the most enduring qualities of the Jewish tradition is its ability to adapt to changing times. This dynamic quality, maintained by rabbis and commentators, has enabled the Torah to be interpreted *L'Dor Va'Dor*: “from generation to generation”. This tradition has also enabled the Torah to meet changing conditions over two thousand years, so much so that in some cases the laws of the Torah itself have been overruled. What endures, however, are adaptable principles and values such as “Love your fellow as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) and “love justice ... love goodness and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8), which have provided, among many other passages, a series of instructions and directions for living a satisfying and rewarding life.

The rabbis have consistently emphasized the importance of words, and the fact that action, both positive and negative, can emanate from the crossover between *Dibbur* and *Davar* (words and things). The Torah, the Talmud, commentators and lawmakers have expounded upon the importance of proper speech. Within small communities, or constricted surroundings, laws of *lashon hara* make good sense, as they inspire positive communal behavior, and help to assure the Jewish community’s longevity and sustainability. Maimonides, Joseph Karo, the Vilna Gaon and the Chofetz Chaim devoted considerable attention to the concept of proper speech, in the interest of assuring *Shalom Ba'it* (peace in the house) both within one’s home and *Adam L'Adam* (from person to person). These efforts culminated with the extensive and detailed work of the Chofetz Chaim, who identified a multitude of actions and activities which related to the thirty-one speech related mitzvot (commandments).



In previous generations, it was a simpler task to “place a fence” around all human activity, and to identify and legislate actions which related to *lashon hara*. It is one reason why today, within the Orthodox community in particular, groups exist within many synagogues which study the extensive writings by the Chofetz Chaim. Within Orthodoxy, which often seeks more active involvement in Jewish daily life, the words of the Chofetz Chaim are still weighed and practiced.

However, within more contemporary Judaism, there exists more of an emphasis on overarching principles rather than individual laws governing personal activity. While Orthodoxy espouses a clearly *hallachic* view of Judaism, the Reform movement does not, relying more on contemporary interpretations and general guidelines. Although the Conservative movement claims to be a *hallachic* movement, it currently faces an internal struggle between these two poles, clinging to *hallachah* within the context of modernity. Nevertheless, the reality is that within American Jewry, approximately 80 per cent of affiliated Jews associate with movements outside of Orthodoxy. While many wings of Orthodoxy have sought to limit, control, or outlaw certain forms of electronic communications, the internet has become a locus of liberal Judaism, as adults and children seek a balance between their traditions and an increasingly modern, complex and fast-moving world.

Children are encouraged to receive education from the best schools our country offers. Children are often encouraged, if not pressured, in their infancy to master skills which will help them develop more quickly, and assist them in achieving success through passing aptitude tests and entering the best universities. Social networks and affiliations are encouraged, and the internet holds the key to this upward climb. Since its inception, the internet has provided a world of information, linking bodies of knowledge and empowering users. Over time, with the

development of email, internet users became able to participate in immediate exchanges, messages, photos, complex files, databases, countless other media.

With the expansion of technology into chat sites, text messaging and social networks such as Twitter, MySpace and Facebook came the potential for users to instantaneously share thoughts and observations to the point that billions of text messages are shared each day in the United States alone. By far, the most frequent users of this texting technology are teenagers and young adults. The medium of texting and social networking enables this demographic group to evolve a live and ongoing chronicle with others, and, through “friends lists” and other networks, to share these observations, concerns, and impulses with large groups, who in turn possess the ability to forward these comments almost ad infinitum.

Ethicists have just begun to examine some of the moral issues associated with this widespread and unbridled exchange of information. Discussion of such issues as the forwarding of private emails, distributing extra-contextual news reports, or seeding websites which rate individuals, products, and services, are beginning to emerge at professional conferences and other forums. Indeed, the Internet has provided the potential for everyone to be an expert or an authority on any topic. In many churches and at a limited number of synagogues, congregants are encouraged to Twitter or “tweet” their opinions regarding the minister’s or rabbi’s sermon, and this is used to facilitate further study.

However, there remains a class of internet users who possess the complex and powerful tools of mass communication, but have neither the maturity, nor frequently the supervision and moral guidance required to use them. This project has outlined just a handful of tens of thousands of documented cases in which *lashon hara*, distributed naively or deliberately by

teenagers or pre-teenagers, has facilitated severe emotional or, in some cases, physical harm to friends, peers or strangers. Explicit photos of minors are routinely shared, along with news, accusations, commentaries, random thoughts and gossip.

Television channels such as MTV or YouTube (a website for uploading and viewing personal videos) provide messages and images which inspire the exhibition of suggestive or sexual behavior at an increasingly young age. Within this context, parents provide teenagers with the powerful tool of the cellular telephone, which also facilitates text messaging and social networking. Often a cellular telephone is ostensibly provided to enable parents to contact their children or vice versa, but increasingly, students are entering the powerful world of text messaging among their peers, gaining the ability, as the Talmud notes, to use words as “arrows.”

Some may argue that the social networking revolution is part of an ageless trend as teenagers go through a predictable process of separation from their parents. However, what is different about this generation is its ability to cause permanent damage through the volume and content of words, and to cause harm before children are able to develop filters. Within modern society, text messaging, gossip, and entertainment are intertwined, and this combination has, in many circles become lethal. What is most disconcerting is that for the most part, clergy, teachers, parents and other adults are generally unaware of the psychology associated with these media.

There exists the potential for adults to inappropriately intrude or over-moralize with children regarding these media. There also exists the potential for young people to exclude adults from this form of communication, thus driving these networks into more secretive use. Yet, in view of the potential for the internet to facilitate *lashon hara*, a harmful practice well-documented in the Jewish tradition, continued passivity, naivete and apathy seem unacceptable.

Every generation within Judaism possesses the right, if not the responsibility, to *drash* (interpret) the Torah so that it remains relevant to new generations. The communications revolution fuelled by the internet demands that those in positions of influence, wisdom, respect, and authority become aware of these exponentially growing media. Based on discussions and best practices, there exist some suggested strategies for the management of this relatively new, but already massive and influential form of communication. The closing chapter will discuss some of these best practices and suggested strategies.

## **Chapter IX: Recommendations**

As communicated by many educators, parents, and internet users themselves, there exists a pressing need for adults, particularly those in positions of influence, to become more actively involved with the many communications media associated with the Internet. Within an environment where email is often “passé,” teenagers, particularly those on the cusp of maturity, have assumed almost complete control of these expanding media with a minimum of parameters. As discussed, there exists a complex balance between becoming involved and inhibiting this medium which, when managed correctly, can be used as a constructive communications tool. While many students have learned the concept of *lashon hara* in synagogue, at school, or at home, many have failed to make the connection between the theoretical and the practical.

“Parents are sleeping regarding this lethal form of gossip,” noted one educator. “It is the dagger of daggers, and kids cannot be left to their own devices.”

The following are recommendations which may be applied.

- The subject of *lashon hara* should be brought forward at professional conferences involving clergy and educators. Clergy and educators need to become increasingly aware of the capacity of these media, and the moral issues surrounding them.
- The subject of *lashon hara* also needs to be discussed by rabbis and other professionals with school principals, teachers, and synagogue committees. It is important that adults be aware of both the nature and potential impact of internet media.

- Before providing a young person with a cellular telephone, parents should discuss the medium with their children and provide general ethical guidance. Where appropriate, the medium of text messaging should be blocked or monitored.
- More senior and respected students (peers) need to influence their younger counterparts. At Solomon Schechter High School in Glen Cove, New York, a group of ten senior students has been established as part of a “peer connector” program. Discussions on topics such as *lashon hara* and text messaging are conducted by “opinion leaders” with their younger students.
- Synagogues and schools can create circles of adults to study and discuss *lashon hara* and appropriate ways to guard against it, and to influence those around them.
- Adults should be encouraged to open social networking accounts so that they can become aware of the potential of social networking media. Synagogues, clergy and other professionals should be encouraged to open accounts to communicate with students through their media of choice.
- Sessions can be facilitated with young adults regarding “What your Facebook says about you.” Many Facebook users are unaware that many photos, comments and interactions remain on permanent record, and can influence future education and employment opportunities.
- Rabbis, cantors and lay leaders need to consider various references to *lashon hara* and “bring them forward” through drash and sermons to initiate ethical discussions regarding these new communications forms.
- Student committees may be established to facilitate code of ethics to informally govern use of text messaging and other social networking media. It has been shown

within many educational environments that peer pressure can be used to promote positive values.

- Within a world which seems to tolerate BlackBerry and texting activity “anywhere, anytime,” parents can insist that all electronic devices be turned off during at the dinner table, in restaurants or in certain family or social settings, and these rules, once established, must apply as firmly to parents as to children.
- School principals, teachers, counselors and other educators need to be trained in both the use and social impact of internet-related media. This can be accomplished in cooperation with students.
- Anti-gossip schools can be established with the support of students.
- Discussion regarding *lashon hara* and the internet need to be introduced within adult professional groups and other appropriate forums in order to facilitate the moral management of these media within the workplace and at home.

It is a basic tenet of Judaism that the sanctity of the individual be protected at all times. Increasingly, gossip, texting, cyberbullying, sexting and other practices are breaking down traditional barriers of proper behavior. If we indeed believe that words have power, and that *lashon hara* and public embarrassment are distasteful, then adults need to “get into the game.” While the Chofetz Chaim sought to provide detailed instructions regarding all forms of speech and personal interaction, the reality of today’s complex and interactive society is that mission and value statements seem better suited to today’s social climate.

While there are literally dozens of laws regarding *lashon hara* in print or on the internet, Maimonides’s original definition still stands as a valid and practical yardstick:

*Anything which, if it would be publicized would cause the subjects physical or monetary damage, or would cause him anguish or fear, is Lashon Hara.*

The popular story regarding the rabbi, the gossipmonger and the pillow still holds true. Once gossip is spread about someone, it can never be reversed. Society's current ability to distribute gossip to an infinite number of persons demands more than ever we turn our attention to the proper management of these media. Who other than Jewish clergy, educators, lay leaders and other persons of influence to reinforce the Jewish bias towards using words to build rather than to destroy? The time is now to become increasingly active in the management of these media, and to reaffirm positivity and kindness to the power of the written word.

As poet Elise Sobel wrote:

*Cruel words like feathers fly  
Cruel words reach far and wide  
They leave the mouth a bitter rind  
May all your words, my friend, be kind.*<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Penninah Scharm (ed.), *Chosen Tales: Stories Told by Jewish Storytellers*, p. 95.



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