

## Sanctifying Digital Communication by Rabbi David Siff

Judaism has always recognized that communication is one of the places we are most likely to hurt each other. Language is the primary way we relate to each other, and according to the mystics and the literal sense of the torah, divine speech underlies and even forms the substance of creation.

There is a halachic term, lashon hara, evil speech. Lashon hara is more than just gossip. Lashon hara is any time I hurt another person with my words. They can be true or false, they can be an insinuation, a hint, even a non-verbal gesture. And there is an extensive body of literature exploring the details of what constitutes lashon hara.

We are still in an exploratory phase when it comes to texting and email, both as a society and as jews. The language of texting is evolving daily, now with innumerable emoticons. The Japanese site 2 channel has literally hundreds of emoticons! I am inviting us to explore how this body of wisdom applies to email.

One of the basic challenges of email is the fact that there is no face to face interaction. There's an enigmatic reference in Bereshit to eight kings who "reigned in the land of Edom before any king ruled over the Israelites" (Gen. 36:31). Isaac Luria, the founder of Lurianic kabbalah, taught that they died because they didn't look panim bepanim, face to face. For Luria, these 10 kings were an early model for the spiritual substructure of the universe; they did not survive, and were replaced by a universe in which spiritual elements do look in each other's faces. A universe of non-relation, of parallel play without true interaction, cannot survive; our universe is built on face to face relation. Babies know this; newborns are designed to focus on faces. It is one of our first instincts. What happens when we lose the face?

When we communicate electronically, we cannot convey a tone of voice or body language, leading the other person to guess at our affect. So a well intentioned, calmed "why did you do that" can come across as an accusatory "why did you do that?" I have heard that 90% of communication is body language [I think my other 90% rule applies here]. The Talmud says when we smile, the white of our teeth is like the white of mother's milk. Smiling is like giving someone mother's milk. So, the Talmud, teaches, we should have a generally friendly, smiling demeanor. We can't do that with emails. We can't smile, unless we put in an emoticon and look like it's written by a teenager. That's a problem.

We also lose the other person's facial gesture, body language. It is so easy to hurt another person in conversation; the Talmud says embarrassing someone is like shedding blood. If I see that I have upset you, and we are in person, I can modify what I've said, "oh, I don't mean it that way," or, "I'm sorry, that came out harsher than I meant." I can tend to your feelings. If you're not in the room, though, your feelings tend to fester, they don't get tended to.

We tend to correct ourselves in communication—it is a living dialogue which shifts in response to the other person's reactions. But when we email, which often happens very quickly, there is a permanent record, and if we try to change what we say, the person can point back and say, "look what you wrote." We need to be able to take back our words. It is said that god tried to create the world based on emet, on truth, but he realized it wouldn't work, so he cast it underground. Life requires kapparah, covering over,

forgetting. Our relationships could not survive the glaring light of constantly scrutinizing what has been said in the past.

Another challenge of email is that we tend to forget how many people we are talking to. There's a big difference between a small private conversation, and talking in front of 100 people. A few weeks ago, I was in the woods on my day off, so what do I do in the woods on my day off but check my email. Pam Saeks had relayed some of foundation's questions about the synagogue to the members of the group that requested the grant. I whipped off a quick email on my cell phone, giving the names of the cutting edge places we are modelling our approach on. The next day, Brian Jaffee, the CEO of federation says to me "great email." Apparently I wasn't able to see every name that was in the cc field!

Several years ago, CNN reported the story of Jamie Diamond, an employee at a public relations firm, who emailed his boss about how to deal with a client. His boss wrote back about the clients' incompetence and how they hindered the team's ability to get anything done. But, oops -- the clients received the email as well. They yanked their \$5 million account immediately

Fortunately, in my case, it worked to our benefit. But we often forget how many people we are talking to, and often include people who really don't need to be included.

According to Forbes, this is actually one of the biggest time wasters right now; many managers spend 20 hours per week on emails, many of which are just forwarded conversations they are being let in on.

The central example of lashon hara in the Torah is specifically about bringing a 3rd party into the conversation, who really should not have been included. The Jews are out in the desert, after Mt Sinai, and Moses decides that since he's always on call for god, he is going to live a celibate life, and separates from his wife Tziphora. Miriam, Moses' sister, feels bad for Tziphora, and goes to talk to Aaron, her brother, instead of Moses. For this, she is struck with leprosy, symbolic of lashon hara.

The central idea is that if we have something critical to say, we go directly to the person with whom we have a problem. This is the mitzvah of tochecha, loving rebuke done in a way which helps a person improve without hurting their feelings. Complaining to a 3rd party, even if they already know, is lashon hara.

Why is it human nature to complain to a 3rd party instead of the person themselves? Why was it totally natural for Miriam to go to aaron instead of directly to moses?

Perhaps because we are scared of telling the person, so it's just easier to tell someone else. Miriam was scared Moses might be upset, or she was scared she would hurt his feelings.

Perhaps because we don't believe the person will hear us—Miriam wanted Aaron to go together with her to Moses, to make sure he'd listen

Sometimes complaining to a 3rd party is actually a form of revenge: You hurt me, I just want to hurt you back by telling other people about you. We get angry and naturally want to lash out.

The guideline for rebuke is that we need to go directly to the person, and only bring in other people if the party proves recalcitrant. Miriam should have gone straight to Moses, and if he wouldn't listen, ask Aaron to talk to him too.

We also need to be sure of our motives: that we are doing it to help the person improve, and to repair our relationship, not to get revenge. Miriam talking to Aaron is just

venting—it's not actually helpful.

Let's imagine Miriam and Aaron had smart phones in the desert. There is such a temptation for Miriam to cc Aaron; maybe she's thinking that otherwise he might ignore it; maybe she really is friends with Tzipora and wants to embarrass him, or just lash out as much as she can. cc'ing is such an incredibly easy way to do lashon hara! I have noticed that the more upset people are, the more people they cc; really, *the more upset we are the fewer people we should cc.*

I'd like to offer some guidelines for us, both as individuals and as a community. I'd like to empower all of us to enforce these guidelines.

1. Notice when an email needs to be an in person discussion

If there might be substantive disagreement, we need to talk in person.

If somebody might be upset, it needs to be handled in person.

If you are upset, it should be handled in person.

If you are complaining about what someone did, it needs to be done in person.

2. Once we've had the in person meeting, don't go and kvetch about it on email afterward.

According to Halacha, once a court has made a decision, a member can't say 'I didn't agree'. Once the decision is made, you're not allowed to kvetch. It's pretty good advice.

3. Avoid Lashon hara by cc

Halachically, we are supposed to communicate negative information to the minimal number of people necessary to accomplish the result. If we have a problem with something someone did, we go to them directly. My advice is if it's negative, there shouldn't be anybody in the cc field. We need to question our motives very carefully when we add that cc.

4. Don't forward a private email

There's a halachic presumption that private conversations—things told to one or two people--are private. We need to be extremely careful forwarding someone's private email.

5. Cc for nice reasons too

a. take the time to copy someone's boss when they do something great

b. what a world it would be if everyone did something like that even once a month... or once a year.

Chofetz chayim's prayer:

Master of the Universe, may it be Your will, Compassionate and Gracious G-d, that You grant me the merit today and every day to guard my mouth and tongue from loшон hora and rechilus.

And may I be zealous not to speak ill even of an individual, and certainly not of the entire Jewish people or a portion of it; and even more so, may I be zealous not to complain about the ways of the Holy One, Blessed is He.

May I be zealous not to speak words of falsehood, flattery, strife, anger, arrogance, hurt, embarrassment, mockery, and all other forbidden forms of speech.  
Grant me the merit to speak only that which is necessary for my physical and spiritual well-being, and may all my deeds and words be for the sake of Heaven.