

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Socrates, Pope Francis and the Tongue

Rabbinic sages, both ancient and modern, give us countless lessons about how to live in modern life. Much of this wisdom is collected in both the Torah and the Talmud. *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of our Ancestors) and the books of Psalms and Proverbs provide quite a bit, as do individual scholars from the distant past, the recent past and even the present. When we combine the wisdom of our Jewish sages with lessons from other cultures, we can broaden and enhance our own knowledge and practice.

I recently read a story from Pope Francis, the current leader of the Catholic world. In it, he references the great Greek philosopher, Socrates. According to the story, a man approached Socrates to share some “news” he had just heard about another person. “Before you tell me,” said the philosopher, “I would like to test it with three sieves.” The three sieves, according to Socratic teaching are:

Is it TRUE? Is it KIND? Is it USEFUL?

If you are unsure of the answer to any of these questions, we should ask ourselves the question, “why say it?” Are we sharing this news because it is fun? Are we trying to make ourselves look good by making someone else look bad? Pope Francis states that gossip “fills our hearts with bitterness and poisons us.”

The Jewish concept is called *Lashon Ha-Rah*, or the evil tongue. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, also known as the *Chofetz Chaim* (pursuer of life), details many aspects of gossip, teaching that it is a sin as strong as murder. It is suggested that gossip kills three people: the person who speaks it, the person who hears it and the person about whom it is told. The teachings about gossip forbid speaking *and* hearing it. If we accidentally hear negative gossip, we are not supposed to believe it, or even investigate to see if it is true. This is both about preventing harm to others and protecting our own soul from the poison. Many teachers from various traditions have suggested that the resentment incurred with carrying a grudge is like taking poison and expecting someone else to die.

Why is this so much on my mind as we prepare for New Year? Many of us have felt the poison of judgment based on little information or misinformation. While we acknowledge God as the one True Judge, it is only human to form our own judgments, and we are often influenced by what we hear. If we can try to use the filters suggested through the Greek, Catholic and Jewish philosophy (as well as many others), we can come closer to keeping our own hearts pure and loving. Polite, respectful disagreements are much different than spreading gossip. One of my biggest red flags is when I hear someone express what another person thinks or feels. In addition to TRUE, KIND and USEFUL, I would suggest another filter: is this MY information, or does it belong to someone else?

A story from the Iraqi/Jewish tradition begs the question, “Which part of the human body is most important?” While the body parts vie against each other, the tongue refuses to speak, and when it does, tells a falsehood. The story concludes with acknowledging that every part is important, but the tongue can, without much effort, make things a whole lot better or a whole lot worse.

As we prepare for a New Year, let’s resolve to be careful about what our tongues say and what our ears hear. We can use words to tear others down, but wouldn’t we rather build each other up? That’s one of my primary goals for the New Year, and I hope you’ll share it with me.

L’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon