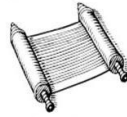


CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

RECLAIMING SCRIPTURE'S EVIL TONGUE

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

In [this past Sunday's NYTimes](#), Cynthia Ozick argues that the narratives of Scripture, by their very existence, contradict all the anti-gossip laws and moralisms in Scripture. Ozick asserts that gossip is the source of all literature:

The instant Eve took in that awakening morsel of serpentine gossip, Literature in all its variegated forms was born,

and that gossip is at the core of being human:

To be destined to live without gossip is to forfeit the perilous cost of being born human — gossip at its root is nothing less than metaphysical, Promethean, hubristic. Or, to frame it otherwise: To choose to live without gossip is to scorn storytelling. And to scorn storytelling is to join the anthill, where there are no secrets to pry open.

Or, to frame it otherwise: "[The Novel's Evil Tongue](#)" launches a direct assault on halakhic speech ethics, the "evil tongue" (=lashon hora) of its title.

As someone who finds great value in literature, and great beauty in the laws of *lashon hora*, I cannot accept Ozick's either/or. But I think her challenge does us a service by spurring a long-overdue revisiting of the overall intents and purposes of the Law in these areas.

Ozick's reading of the tradition she seeks to subvert might fairly be described as conventionally Orthodox. Halakhic speech ethics as popularly presented often reduce permissible conversation topics to the weather, and ban any interest in the motives or actions of our fellows. Think of the tale of an unrecognized Chofetz Chayyim thanking his peasant train seat partner for hours of conversation about the virtues of various manures for different crops.

Now I myself love hearing from people about their fields of expertise. But this popular presentation cannot be the whole story. *Halakhah* requires people to choose leaders, exercise financial prudence, save people from danger; none of these can be done without the kind of insight into human nature that cannot be gained without vast experience, and without testing our judgments against those of our peers. *Halakhah* requires us to study intensely the very narratives Ozick claims contract its norms.

I generally start classes on Jewish speech ethics with a selection from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. No one is better than Austen at explaining both the necessity for judging others and the harm caused when negative judgments are spread. No one is better than Austen at conveying the genuine moral anguish of a good person who must harm the reputation of one person in order to prevent them from harming others. But in the end Edward Ferrars must speak to save Marianne from Mr. Willoughby.

Ozick rails against the prospect of an innocent society, with no illicit sex or violence. Her only alternative is our tawdry reality in all its tawdriness. But it is the purpose of some fiction, and history, to show us our reality so that it might be improved, not toward "second innocence" but rather toward mature virtue. Fiction, history, and Scripture must be allowed to present the psychology of evil without being presumed thereby to endorse it.

A world in which we always judge not, lest we be judged, is a recipe for ISIS rather than Eden, since the others we ostriches refuse to judge will not refrain from judging, and executing, us. But that does not mean that we

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must convey *every* judgement to *everyone* as soon as it is formed.

Jewish speech ethics, including but not limited to the laws of *lashon hora* (true but defamatory information) and *rekhilus* (= gossip, or information that the teller has not verified), recognize that information about others often must be shared, and that evaluating the character of one's peers is an essential part of being human. We must judge,

and prepare to be judged, and recognize that many of these judgements will be current in society.

But we can have great art, and still eschew *People* magazine; we can ban slander and yet celebrate whistle-blowers; we can prevent serial date-rape without slut-shaming. Partial or acontextual truths can be worse than lies, and brilliant art can nonetheless be evil. Not all whispering snakes should be celebrated. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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