



Beth El
SYNAGOGUE

Shalom Chaverim

Generally, when we teach about lashon hara, the laws of forbidden speech, we focus on refraining from speaking. Knowing that words can hurt, we practice holding our tongues. But words can also heal. Sometimes we need to speak up. Under what circumstances can we pass on negative information? When, if ever, is it appropriate to pass on a rumor?

What if, for example, a friend wanted to renovate their house but had chosen a contractor you had heard did shoddy work? Can you say anything? What if a relative was going to use a financial manager you had heard had a poor track record? What if you heard that your friend's job was at risk?

In each of these cases, you heard these things second-hand. You don't know the facts. So perhaps you should remain silent and avoid spreading rumors. On the other hand, you don't want to see the people you care about get hurt. We say in the ashmnu, "yaaznu ra," which means, "we have given evil counsel." The idea here is that it is wrong to advise others to do things not in their best interest. It would be wrong not to warn them about potential risks.

Rabbi Telushkin outlines an intermediate moral position, one that neither permits random spreading of rumors nor categorically forbids them. He says you should tell them what you've heard but with the caveat that you do not know definitively if it is established fact.

For example, in the case of the money manager, you might say something like, "Before you invest money with so-and-so, make sure you check with others about their experience. I don't know for a fact but have heard that his record is spotty."

It is a tricky balance. The operative principle is that the information must be relevant and useful. Absent those, the rumors should not be shared.

Underlying this teaching is the notion that even when it comes to passing on a rumor, there is an ethical and an unethical way to act. How have you done in this regard this past year?

Shannah Tova!

