LASHON HARAH - GOSSIP

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

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"Do you know Nachor's grandson Lavan?" asked Yaakov. "We know him," they replied. "HaShalom lo?" retorted Yaakov. "Shalom!" they responded, "and here is his daughter Rachel coming with the sheep." (Bereshith 29:5-6)

Although this appears to be merely an innocent conversation, much was happening behind the scenes in this dialogue. When Yaakov asked regarding Lavan, "HaShalom lo?" he wasn't merely inquiring about Lavan's welfare; he was trying to determine whether Lavan was a man of peace (shalom), or whether he was prone to arguments and fights. The other shepherds did not wish to lie by saying that Lavan was a man of peace, yet neither did they want to tell the truth, for it was not a pleasant truth they had to tell. Therefore they responded with a single word, "Shalom," implying that a general state of peace reigned in the world. Immediately thereafter they changed the subject, pointing out that Rachel was coming.1

When people meet someone who lives in the same town as their friends or relatives, it is common to inquire about the current spiritual situation of those they know there. The answer one may give to such inquiries depends on the intention of the person asking. If he hopes, through the information he receives, to be able to help or correct the person about whom he is inquiring, then one is obligated to respond truthfully, even if the response involves derogatory information. If he is asking only out of curiosity, it is forbidden to say anything derogatory about the subject of the question. One must try to find some way to avoid answering the question without casting the subject of the question in a negative light.2

If we are aware that someone has stolen from or otherwise injured another person, we are obligated to display a passion for the truth, revealing the facts to those who are in a position to rectify the situation.3 However, in a case in which one person has refused to do a favor for another, but no one has actually been damaged, it is forbidden to tell others what happened, for that would be considered lashon hara.4

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1. Moshav Zekeinim on Bereshith 29:5-6.

2. Chofetz Chaim 4:11, footnote.

3. Sha'arei Teshuvah 3:221.

4. Chofetz Chaim 5:1.

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