

# UNSPOKEN WORDS

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

*"You shall not be a gossipmonger among your people, you shall not stand aside while your brother's blood is shed - I am Hashem!" (Vayikra 19:16)*

What is the conceptual connection between these two mitzvos, that they are bound together with the powerful punctuation of the phrase; "I am Hashem"?

A fellow came to the Rabbi on the eve of Yom Kippur and openly confessed that he had slandered him. In the spirit of truth and reconciliation the man asked the Rabbi for forgiveness. The Rabbi agreed to grant his personal forgiveness, but only on the condition the man followed one simple formula.

The Rabbi prescribed that he should go out to the center of town with a goose feather stuffed pillow. Then he should cut open the pillow and shake out all the feathers. After that he should report back to the Rabbi for one more step before forgiveness is granted.

The man assumed he must go through this absurd exercise to personally humiliate himself. How foolish he would look shaking out that pillow in the midst of all the hustle and bustle. What an opportunity for atonement! The fellow sacrificed his comfortable pillow for the task of gaining the Rabbi's forgiveness and shook out the thousands of feathers.

They floated about filling the whole marketplace as the rush of people and cars created great gusts of wind scattering the feathers to high and distant corners of the city. Then he reported to the Rabbi that the mission had been accomplished and he was ready for the final step before being cleared.

The Rabbi then told him that all he needed to do now was to gather all the feathers, and return them to the pillow.

The fellow was horrified. He told the Rabbi that it was impossible to retrieve all the feathers because they were now all over town and still blowing in the wind. The Rabbi told him at that moment, "that's what you did to me! If you retrieve the words and undo the harm that is still traversing the airwaves, then you can be completely forgiven!"

Slandorous talk is tantamount to murder. Destroying a person's reputation is like a suicide bomb. It kills the speaker as well as the victim and the receiver of the news. All are permanently stained in the process. This coarse equation is found in the verse at the top of the page. Passively watching your brother's blood being shed, and tale-bearing, are conceptually connected.

When someone remains silent and swallows a juicy tidbit, no person on earth will ever know or detect the enormous struggle and effort required to disarm - not detonating a loaded word.

Perhaps that's why the finale' of the verse is "I am Hashem". Similarly, when one opted not to risk and help save a friend, only The Almighty will know for sure if it was an act of discretion or cowardice that prevailed.

It's what resides at the core of silence that determines the innocence of a deed undone, or the golden quality of unspoken words.

Rabbi Lam, in association with "Foundations" and the "Aish Kodesh Institute" will be presenting a Unique Seminar Experience in Swan Lake, N.Y. The dates are Dec. 11-13. For details Please contact the Foundations office at Phone: (800)700-9577 Fax: (914)352-0305.

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