

BEIN ADAM LCHAVEIRO IN THE CLASSROOM

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Recently the seventh grade in Yeshivas Beis Yehudah in Detroit, taught by Rabbi Yehoshua Schwartz, submitted the following questions dealing with interpersonal relationships for halachic clarification:

Question: Is one person allowed to say to another, "This pizza shop makes better pizza than the other one"?

Discussion: If the statement is being made in response to an inquiry by someone who wants to buy pizza, then it is permitted to answer: "I like the pizza in this particular store better," or "Such and such makes a superior product." Obviously, both of them need to take into account that different people have different tastes and what one likes another may dislike. Still, one may answer as to which pizza he likes better.

The same halachah applies if one is asked about the quality of service in one store vs. another, about the standard of kashrus, or about the tzenius of the proprietors or clientele. In all of these cases it is not only permitted but required to answer truthfully, without exaggeration, as to which establishment better meets the consumer's needs.

But merely speaking ill of a store's products or services needlessly can certainly be a violation of lashon ha-ra. Such negative comments can easily cause financial harm to the owner. Thus it would be forbidden to tell someone who has already bought pizza at a certain store that he purchased an inferior product, unless one is doing so to protect him for the future.

Question: How should a student answer his rebbe or principal if he is asked to point a finger at a wrongdoer?

Discussion: Generally speaking, a child should not be asked by his rebbe, teacher, or principal to point a finger at a wrongdoer because the severity of the prohibition of lashon ha-ra is thereby compromised in the child's eyes. In addition, a child who is forced by an authoritative figure to tattle on his classmates will be branded a tattle-tale and suffer the social consequences. A child who is instructed by a teacher to speak lashon ha-ra is not required to obey. If, however, the rebbe or principal feels that the information is vital for a beneficial and constructive purpose, it is permitted - and required - for the child to divulge that information.

Question: A teacher is pairing boys up to work on a project. Is a boy allowed to inquire about a

potential partner to determine if he will be able to work well with him?

Discussion: As long as the information is being asked solely for the purpose of discovering whether or not the boy will be able to work together with Ploni, it is permitted to do so. Of course, the respondent must be very precise in the information that he gives - he may not exaggerate in any way, and he may not give a bad report in revenge, out of spite or for any other ulterior motive. In addition, the respondent must assume that there is a reasonable chance that the information will be acted upon by the one who asked for it. If it is likely to be ignored, it is forbidden to relay it.

Question: Can a boy tell his friend: "Don't shop in that store: the merchandise is overpriced?"

Discussion: It depends on the specific circumstances:

If a boy is asked by another boy what store has the best price for a specific item, he must answer truthfully, even if the questioner is about to enter a particular store which charges more for the item and the truthful answer will cause that establishment to lose the sale. Of course, before one declares one store to be more expensive than the other, he must make sure that he is not exaggerating and that he is not saying so because of revenge, out of spite or for any other ulterior motive. It is also forbidden to make statements like: "That store owner is a thief"; it is merely permitted to say that one can get a better buy elsewhere.

If one's advice about prices is not being solicited, he may not advise another person not to frequent a particular Jewish-owned store even though he knows that the other person will overpay as a consequence of his ignorance. The exception to this rule is if the other person is a relative or a particularly close friend. Then it is permitted - and required - to direct him to the cheaper store. This is because the Torah obligates us to protect our relatives' or best friends' financial interests. [In a situation where the overpriced store owner is also a relative or a close friend, one should not get involved and remain silent].

There are certain situations where it is permitted to warn potential customers about an establishment even when one's advice is not being solicited. One such example is when one knows with certainty that a particular storekeeper consistently deceives his customers and cheats the public. It goes without saying that one cannot arrive at such a determination without discussing the matter with a communal rav or a beis din. One should then receive their permission to disclose the storekeeper's dishonesty.

Question: Is it a less severe prohibition to speak loshon ha-ra about a child than about an adult?

Discussion: No, it is not. It is forbidden to speak loshon ha-ra about adults as well as children. Obviously, only something that would harm a child or cause him distress or embarrassment would be considered loshon ha-ra; relating normal childish antics is permitted, since this does not have a negative impact upon the child.

In a certain sense loshon ha-ra spoken about a minor could be worse than loshon ha-ra spoken

about an adult. An adult has the halachic ability to grant mechillah (forgiveness); a minor may not be able to do so. Thus it may be more difficult to do teshuvah properly for speaking loshon ha-ra about a child than about an adult.

Question: Is it permitted for boys in a class to speak about a classmate's mental limitations?

Discussion: Obviously, a conversation about another person which involves discussing his weaknesses would be considered loshon ha-ra. But as we mentioned earlier, this is true only if the conversation is taking place for no reason other than to gossip. If, however, a class is looking for ways to help a fellow classmate who is struggling with his schoolwork, or if they are searching for a method to make him more social acceptable, it would be permitted to discuss his individual situation and to find ways to help him.

Question: A person asks a halachic question to a rav. Is it permitted for him to tell the rav, "I already asked Rav Ploni and he gave me a different ruling?"

Discussion: This is not considered loshon ha-ra since everyone is well aware that there are different opinions and that rabbonim may disagree.

There are certain types of questions, however, which - if submitted to one rav - may not be re-submitted to a different rav in order to obtain a more lenient ruling. This is a topic unto itself and requires a separate Halachah Discussion.

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