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OUTLOOK // p. 32 | SCREENSHOT // p. 36 | WORLDVIEW // p. 38

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Beware Social Media Postings

Much has been written regarding the danger and harm of online connectivity, but let us address a related plague — social media postings. The purpose of online posting is to use the power of social media to express opinions or pass judgments about people, products, or groups, with the intent of influencing the public’s posture on said topic. The influence of a social media posting is incredibly powerful.

I would like to share two recent stories illustrating the catastrophic and tragic impact of social media postings which were brought to my attention.

A new kosher restaurant opened in a mid-sized Jewish

community. There were good feelings about the new establishment and people were very excited to have this new option in town. On the first Sunday the restaurant was open, the following message was posted on social media and was seen instantly by hundreds of people.

“They’re so unorganized that it just leads to chaos trying to eat a simple meal. It doesn’t seem like anyone here knows what they are doing. The canned greetings and schmoozing is so fake, contrived and totally unnecessary.”

Several days after the posting, my phone rings, and the owner of the restaurant tells me about the post and the significant financial loss that this negative review will undoubtedly cost him.

“This comment can’t be removed,” the owner painfully remarked, “and even if it can, the negative impact this will have on my new business for the weeks and months to come is impossible to erase. People read reviews, comment upon them, believe them, and act based upon them.

“The financial harm this review will cause is catastrophic. We are a new business trying our best, why can’t this individual give us the benefit of the doubt and recognize how hard we are trying to get things right in our opening weeks? Why didn’t this individual talk to me or discuss his concerns with me directly? I would have been more than happy to listen to his points and suggestions.”

The restaurateur then posed two questions to me, which was the intent of his call. One: Is there any permission, according to halachah, for someone to write such a post? Two: If the individual wakes up one day and recognizes his wrongdoing, and asks for forgiveness, should he, the restaurant owner, forgive him? Without getting into the halachic details of the issues, the answer I delivered to both questions was a resounding no. There is no halachic permission to write a negative review online about a Jewish business. Furthermore, the poster’s



harmful behavior is a transgression of epic proportions, and is nearly impossible to retract, and until very significant efforts are made by the perpetrator to correct his post, forgiveness need not be granted. (*Rema Orach Chaim* 606:1 with *Mishnah Berurah* 11)

The second story is about a couple that was disgruntled by the way they were being treated by an important communal institution. In their anger, they quickly took to social media and published a toxic posting on a large WhatsApp group about the institution and its handling of their affairs. The institution was horrified, especially because much of the contents of the posting were not true or were the couple's mistaken perception as to what had occurred. The institution struggled on multiple levels because of the attention the negative post received. They quickly had to decide whether to react, and how. Should they go public to explain what really happened? Would that clear their reputation, or would it just intensify the online debate? The institution made the wise decision to remain silent and allow the online mockery and talk around town to dissipate. This was a prudent decision, as responding to a negative review, post, or comment will only fuel the flames more and will not help the situation.

In the interim, as the institution recovered, the couple recognized their mistake in making this private matter public and the unnecessary damage it caused both to the institution and themselves. The impact of the couple's post caused them to lose standing with this institution, their friend group, and community. As a result, they had no other choice but to move out of the town because of the uproar they caused. Incredible damage from one "innocent" post.

There is a well-known saying: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me." While the first half of the sentence is true — sticks and stones will absolutely break bones, the second half of the statement is false, as names can destroy, damage, harm, and debilitate.

There is, however, another saying that is true, "The pen is mightier than the sword." This adage suggests that words have a greater and more lasting impact than physical force or violence. It highlights how writing can shape public opinion, challenge the status quo, and drive social change more effectively than military might. The irreparable impairment incurred by the posts in the above-mentioned stories is horrifying and heartbreaking.

Our rabbanim have opined at length about this and clearly posit that indeed, the power of the pen and the strength of the tongue is awesome. Shlomo Hamelech, the wisest of all men, teaches in *Mishlei* that "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (18:21). That means the influence of word usage can inflict death in the identical way that a sword can.

Before his passing, Yaakov blessed his son, Yosef, using the words "*charbi v'kashti*," which literally mean a sword and a bow. Yaakov was telling Yosef how he conquered the enemy with this weaponry. However, Targum Onkelos translates these words to mean "with my prayer and with my supplication." (Onkelos Bereishis 48:22) Yaakov passes onto the next world by teaching Yosef that the power of words is even more potent and powerful than a sword and bow. Yaakov tells Yosef that he conquered the enemy with words of prayer and not weaponry.

The Gemara states this explicitly as well. The destruction of the Beis Hamikdash was initiated because of the use of one powerful word, "*pok*," which means get out. The Gemara recounts that when Kamtza evicted Bar Kamtza from a party that he was not invited to, he exclaimed publicly, "*pok*" — get out. Bar Kamtza was so hurt and upset, that he went straight to the Roman authorities and gave slanderous reports of disloyal behavior among the Jews. This one word "*pok*" triggered the Romans' rage, which led to their destruction of the Beis Hamikdash. (*Maseches Gittin* 56)

The Rambam discusses the power of words in his famed letter to the Jews of Spain, *Iggeres Hashmad*, and states that while the power of the spoken word is awesome, the power of the written word is even more impactful. Hence, writes the Rambam, "everything that is written down must be reviewed a thousand times." Yet again, the pen is mightier than the sword.

We have seen this play itself out in recent history as well. The gas chambers in Auschwitz didn't begin with force and fire, but with words; harsh and evil words. It began with *Mein Kampf* and slowly trickled throughout German society. The tragedy of 9/11 didn't begin with flying planes as missiles, but with ugly words demonizing America and Americans. Words kill and words destroy. Yes, indeed, the pen is mightier than the sword.

Today, the ease with which one can publicly debase, defame, malign, and criticize by taking to WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, X, Snapchat, Reddit, and LinkedIn is frightening. While reviewing what we post online a thousand times is not something that can be expected, reviewing what we write a few times, or waiting a few hours or days to contemplate our post is certainly something that must be encouraged. Once something is on social media, there's no taking it back. The words articulated are engraved forever.

Man was given the G-dly gift of speech to express ideas, articulate thoughts, and communicate feelings. However, the power of speech is not just a gift, it is an awesome responsibility. Words can be weapons that diminish and destroy, or they can be instruments that encourage and uplift. There is too much hate speech, foul language, inappropriate word usage, social media outbursts, negative rhetoric, and downgrading vernacular being used in our online community. Instead, we must focus on using the faculty of speech to be a speaking spirit (Onkelos Bereishis 2:7), elevating ourselves and others with our remarks and expressions.

Think very carefully about what you write as the written word can sting and haunt forever. In a moment of rage or thoughtlessness, you may write something which you will regret, in this world and in the World to Come. 🕊

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