

RABBI'S MESSAGE

The Power of the Spoken Word

I wish I could pretend that the tragedy at Sandy Hooks Elementary School didn't happen. I wish I could say this was a completely unique happening in history and nothing like it will ever happen again. I wish I say confidently that we have been able to figure out what leads someone to commit such an act and we have learned how to prevent any future such incidents. I wish.

This is among many preventable tragedies that have occurred since the first killing in recorded history, when Cain slew his brother, Abel. Recent, modern killings are as difficult for me to comprehend as Cain's crime. Modern commentators have taken new views on Cain's murder. Some say he was provoked by Abel, or even by G-d. There are commentaries begin to *understand* Cain's action; but none that *justify* it. How could anyone intentionally act in a way that will end another person's life...let alone, end multiple lives? We may look to parents, teachers, rabbis, psychologists, physicians or other experts to help us answer this question; and all will be frustrated when there isn't a satisfying answer.

Judaism teaches that there is nothing more precious than human life. As horrible as this tragedy was, there is often a ripple effect of other problems that result from such an act. The students and teachers who survived the tragedy will be dealing with a wide variety of issues and will need extensive counseling to help sort through their feelings. Of course, like airports after the 9/11 attacks, security systems at schools will likely become stronger. Much of our reactions sometimes seem to amount to locking the barn door after the horse runs away. While appropriate security is a huge, vital issue, we must also address a bigger question: how do we create a society in which this cannot happen? How do we make certain that NO child and NO adult will have the desire to commit such unspeakable crimes?

And yet, bullets did not supply all the damage in this event. Some were victimized by words. The stories that sprang forth when the tragedy was first announced contained much misinformation. The attacker was named (incorrectly – his brother's name was given) and it was reported that his mother was a teacher at the school (not a teacher, nor a substitute nor a volunteer). The alleged attacker's brother had to vehemently profess his innocence on facebook; but damage had already been done. In addition to losing his mother and brother on the same day, this young man had the terrible misfortune of losing his reputation. Correcting an error like this is as easy as putting toothpaste back in the tube.

For those of us who are social creatures and information seekers (roughly 99% of the human population according to my unscientific count), one of the most difficult Torah regulations comes in as part of the "holiness code," Leviticus 19:16. It states, "Don't become a talebearer among your people and don't stand on (some translate "profit by) the blood of your neighbor. I am the LORD." Twelfth century philosopher, Rabbi Moses Maimonides says that a talebearer – even one who is telling the truth -- can "ruin the world," with such stories. He then says "There is a worse sin

included in this prohibition, namely *lashon hara* (evil tongue), which is someone who says bad things about a neighbor even if it is the truth. But someone who lies is a *motzi shem ra* (a slanderer).”

Telling true stories...what could be wrong with that? A *midrashic* passage from the fourth century states, “A person who involves himself in *lashon hara* makes himself worthy of death, as *lahson hara* is as serious as murder. One who murders takes just one life, while the bearer of *lashon hara* kills three: the one who says it, the one who listens to it and the one about whom it is said.”

Damaging someone’s reputation can be a life sentence. We must be just as careful with our words as with our deeds. In a moment of thoughtlessness, we can say something that has the potential of hurting another in ways that cannot be measured. Rabbi Jill Hammer, a modern author, makes this observation: “What if, when we plan to speak about someone, we ask ourselves, ‘Will what I plan to say create meaning or destroy it? Will my words strengthen my sense of G-d’s presence or weaken it?’” If we all make a sincere attempt to think before we speak, we will prevent a lot of collateral damage. Let’s pray that 2013 will be a year free from unnecessary violence – both physical and verbal.

L’shalom,

Dan Gordon