

## RABBI'S MESSAGE

### *Beyond Labels*

I once met a Unitarian minister who told me that, for him, the most challenging of the Ten Commandments was Number Nine: *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor*. We think of the word “witness” as having a legal implication, and that this commandment might have the limitation of applying to courts of law. But this minister’s interpretation of the commandment can blend into everyday society, and we all have multiple opportunities to violate it without even thinking about it.

Paraphrasing his description, he said that whenever we speak and represent what *we* think is somebody else’s view, we are bearing false witness. The more I thought about this, the more it occurred to me that almost anything said in the third person can be misinterpreted or misrepresented. It reminds me of one of the most potentially offensive four-letter words in our vocabulary: T H E Y.

When we presume to know what “THEY” think, and speak about our viewpoint about someone else’s philosophy, we are pretending that we absolutely know what is in somebody else’s heart. This can be harmful to individual reputations. The laws of *Lashon Ha-rah* – literally, “the bad tongue,” or negative gossip – prohibit us from speaking ill of others or even listening to such speech. The Holiness Code in the Torah includes, “*Don’t become a talebearer among your people and don’t stand on (some translate “profit by) the blood of your neighbor.*” (Lev. 19:16) It could be about the simplest thing, like “Bob thinks Shakespeare is the greatest playwright of all time.” Even if we heard Bob say it, it is up to Bob to share his opinion, not us.

Why is this so important? Because it extends to assumptions, stereotypes and prejudice. On a simple level, we create labels that paint all people with the same brush. Jewish people can be both victims and perpetrators of this kind of misrepresentation. If we hear something like, “Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the United States,” we are naturally offended, because the speaker obviously does not know how every Jewish person connects to national and religious identity. The same stereotypes exist with the following erroneous generalizations, each of which would be offensive to the people being talked about:

- Muslims are terrorists.
- Mormons want to convert us.
- Republicans are racist.
- Democrats want to limit our freedom.
- Homeless people are lazy and don’t want to work.
- Young people don’t respect their elders.
- Orthodox Jews are narrow-minded.
- Reform Jews don’t believe in God.
- Hockey fans are ignorant.
- Rich people are snobs.

Each of these statements can only be said in the third person, someone expressing an opinion about a group they don't belong to. Each is an extreme statement that leaves no room for nuance or conversation. When people have the opportunity to represent themselves, rather than be represented by others, the story is very different. The most sacred teaching in Judaism, Deuteronomy 6:4, begins with the word **SHEMA – LISTEN**. When we actively engage in listening, rather than sticking to preconceived ideas, we honor humanity...and we can learn as much about ourselves as about others.

Back to the ninth commandment, "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor." One might ask, "Who is your neighbor?" Are neighbors the people who agree with us about everything? I'm willing to suggest that everyone who shares the world is our neighbor. If we want our neighbors to understand us, we must also try to understand them. The same Holiness Code referenced above says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18) It starts with listening.

L'shalom,

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