

GOSSIP

When you live in a small community and see the same people every day, it isn't hard to notice their behaviors and notice what they are doing. As a good neighbor, it is life-saving to notice if a neighbor is ill and call 911, or if someone is breaking into the house next door and call the police. But to see certain behaviors, put your own interpretation on those behaviors and talk about them to a third party, that can be malicious gossip and it can be incredibly destructive causing the person being talked about emotional harm with hurt feelings or damaged reputation.

Gossiping appears to be one of those things that are common to human nature. We all love to sit around and talk about other people and their doings. So, how do we know the difference between harmless talking to a friend and malicious gossip? I think the primary differences are those of intent and content. We need to be very clear with our own motivation for discussing other people. Even if the information we are discussing is totally based in fact, if we are passing it along with the intention of lessening esteem for someone or tarnishing their reputation, it is still malicious gossip. When we are passing along rumor or misinformation that causes scandal or slander to another person that is also malicious gossip.

I heard a story once about a Jewish Rabbi who was newly appointed to a small town. One of the men in the town was very unhappy at having a new Rabbi and could not seem to accept him. The townsman began to talk about the Rabbi to his friends, questioning the Rabbi's motives and putting a negative spin on his behaviors and words. This went on for some time and resulted in a split in the community as some townsfolk believed the harmful rumors which seemed to grow in the telling. The townsman fell upon hard times and was having difficulty with illness and financial problems within his family. The new Rabbi, having heard of the difficulties, came to the townsman and offered him aid and comfort. The townsman was very grateful and he began to realize the enormity of his offence in gossiping and spreading rumors about the Rabbi. He felt great shame and went to the Rabbi and confessed what he had done, asking "How can I possibly make amends?" The Rabbi was sad but in his wisdom he instructed the man to take a feather pillow up to the top of the nearby mountain. "When you reach the top", he said, "open the pillow and release the feathers to the wind then return to me." The townsman did as he was asked. When he came down, the Rabbi instructed him "Return to the mountain and gather up every feather that you loosed to the wind." The townsman cried "But that is impossible!" The Rabbi looked at him sadly and said "That is how it is with spreading gossip".

If you have any question about whether you are spreading malicious gossip or having a harmless conversation, just ask yourself this question "Would I say the same thing about this person if they were present?" If the answer is no, then it is probably malicious gossip. If the answer is yes, then it is probably just harmless conversation.

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