

Gossip — words that hurt, words that heal



Jo Ann
Volk Lederman

FAMILY MATTERS

Dear Jo Ann,

I am a 60-year-old professional woman. I have been practicing my profession for 25 years and have had the pleasure of watching it grow. It has come to my attention that a slightly younger woman, in my profession has been maligning me personally to others. I do not speak about people unkindly and have certainly never harmed her. In fact, I hardly know this woman, although we worship at the same place. Why do people speak about others behind their back? What can I do?

Signed,
Ann V.

Dear Ann,

You are facing a malignant person who may be unaware of the consequences of her behavior, or has no desire to change. The word malignant starts with the word malign, which according to Webster's dictionary means 'to speak evil about, slander.' This woman must feel empty and powerless if she is trying to create attention to herself by diminishing you. Clearly you pose a threat of some kind. Are you more successful professionally than she is? Would there be a payoff for her to attempt to diminish your reputation? Words are powerful, powerful enough to lead to creation of new thoughts, and to love (my choice for words), or to hatred and pain, as this woman has chosen. She uses words irresponsibly. Rabbi Telushkin describes the consequences of gossip best in the following story taken from his book *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*. Set in 19th century Eastern Europe, the story tells of a man who (just like the woman you describe) went through a small community slandering the rabbi. One day, feeling suddenly remorseful, he begged the rabbi for forgiveness and offered to undergo any form of penance to make amends. The rabbi told him to take a feather pillow from his home, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the wind. The

man did as he was told and returned to the rabbi.

He asked, "Now am I forgiven?" "Almost," came the response. "You just have to perform one last task: Go and gather all of these feathers."

"But that is impossible," the man protested, "for the wind has already scattered them."

"Precisely," the rabbi answered.

I suspect that your 25-year identity as a well-regarded professional is already established or this woman wouldn't be working so hard to devalue you. I would also suspect that her reputation as a gossip has long been established as well. Frankly, I'm surprised that anyone bothers to listen to her, and that she hasn't become *persona non grata* even among her friends. People who gossip lack substance and credibility.

You are not helpless. You have choices.

You can put it in its place and walk away now. She's not on your level. You've already written this letter and she may just see this and be recognized by her friends.

You can call her and tell her that while you hardly know her, it has come to your attention that she speaks about you behind your back. Ask her what you have done to provoke this. Placing your call will put her on notice that you know and may have the further consequence of establishing rapport. This would be my choice.

You can call an attorney. I called two for this column. They recommended that you write her, stating what has been said in writing, and ask for acknowledgement of her statement and to provide a written retraction.

Living needs to be a conscious act. To try to destroy somebody's good name is a form of character assassination. Eleanor Roosevelt phrased it best when she said, "Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people."

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