

EDITOR'S NOTE

“HE LOVED PEOPLE”

A playboy Senator of the 1950's, once touted as Vice Presidential timber, now virtually forgotten, is talking about his more famous companion in dissipation. He fondly reminisces:

He loved people, not in the intimate sense, perhaps, but he loved their humanness. He loved conversation. The more personal and gossipy, the more he loved it. Whenever you had inside, salacious stuff, he wanted to hear it.

I showed this encomium to a few rabbis. You may be comforted to know that none of them would praise a congregant in these words because they do not consider such conduct admirable. Truth be told, however, many of us occasionally enjoy hearing dirt about others. We are not proud of it. Regarding such conversation as vicious, from time to time we feel impelled to analyze our attraction to salacious stuff. And because we also fear the effects of such talk, we speculate about its attraction to others. The reasons are endless. The intellectual desires to satisfy his, or her, curiosity about other people's lives; the misanthrope quests for reasons to think ill of his neighbors; the politician needs to know, and exploit, their small and great weaknesses; and the weak person yearns (and who does not feel weak and inferior sometimes?) to find some ground for feeling superior. Then there is sheer boredom, and the necessity of making small talk in a variety of social situations that neither encourage serious discourse nor permit the vacuum of shared silence.

To all these sensible excuses for dirt-mongering and dirt-consumption the retired statesman adds a new motive. He says that his much-mourned friend's appetite for salacious information was no more and no less than an expression of his love of people.

This is a high form of praise indeed. Loving people is a more ingratiating trait than malice, manipulation and inferiority, and it is a warmer, fuzzier notion than mere intellectual curiosity.

There are two things about this that arouse my curiosity. First, that bandying salacious stories about is a way to show love for people is not suggested as an apology for the eulogized person. It is not as if the dead

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statesman were condemned for his behavior and his surviving colleague tried to make the best of the reprehensible facts by transforming an apparent vice into a virtue. To the contrary, he volunteers his recollection as if it were something to be proud about. Second, he expects his audience to sympathize and to share in the celebratory glow.

Is he wrong? Often, when invited to hear the complaints of the insulted and the injured, self-righteously and gracelessly recounted, we recoil in distaste. Disengaging as fast as we can from the entreating fingers plucking at our sleeve, we may even congratulate ourselves on avoiding *lashon ha-ra* (evil gossip). Yet, in the presence of a charming rogue, full of scandalous tales, do we not often feel as if we had been honored by inclusion in a delicious, convivial club? Is his company not all the more pleasurable because he is urbane and tranquil, free of the urgency of palpable resentment or the pressure to set wrong right? The anger of a person preoccupied with a wrong isn't sophisticated or relaxing, but the unencumbered enjoyment of scandal is cool.

Now in this case the lover of people is less admired for purveying salacious information than for hearing it. He is the ideal listener, the kind who makes you feel as if you were the cleverest person in the room, or in the world. He hangs on your words, throws his head back and roars at your wit; with every gesture and glance he leads you on: Do tell; do tell more. So pleased are you at his pleasure in your company that you fail to notice that you are revealing things you didn't really intend to, while he does not quite reciprocate in kind. It is like a friendly poker game where the liquor flows freely but your adversary, who seems to be matching you drink for drink, sips slowly, keeping his head and counting the cards, while you are losing yours. The man who loves people also loves to use the information he has gleaned to his advantage: what you offer him will likely bait other confidences; or else, when he needs to assert his control over you and yours, it can be brought up again to haunt you. In an obscure way you realize all this, and yet the man who loves people continues to enchant you.

It would be superfluous for me to remind you of what you know already, that Judaism does not endorse this man's style of loving people. You would call it preachy if I contrasted his love of people with the Torah's prescription for the man who loves life: "Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceitfully" (Psalm 34). One reason it is so difficult to preach about these ideals is that almost all of us fall short of them. Another is that there truly is a delicate balance between idle and malignant gossip, on the one hand, which we should

abhor, and the desire for insight or the most minimal need to protect oneself, on the other hand. There are situations when failing to know enough about other people, their vices and their designs, is infinitely more dangerous to our spiritual health and to that of our community, than unjustified prying into others' affairs.

I have chosen to meditate on the man who loved people precisely because he values salacious stuff immediately and spontaneously, without feeling the need for the excuse that hearing it is *l'tsorekh* (that it fulfills some legitimate need). His indulgence in dirt is luxuriant and exuberant rather than furtively grudging. I don't know how prevalent this personality type is within our community: in the pure form I have found such individuals few and far between, though their extroversion may lend them disproportionate conspicuousness and power. In any event, the attractive public image of such people corrodes our own efforts to lead better lives. Observing the phenomenon in its unadulterated form may help us confront its more subtle and ambiguous manifestations.

Observing the man who loved people also offers a kind of therapy, in addition to insight. Rabbenu Yona of Gerona (*Shaare Teshuva* III:202) holds that the special severity of *lashon ha-ra* is connected with its repetitive nature. This is true whether the only reinforcement of the habit is inertia or whether it is, as in the case of the man who loved people, an essential ingredient of an individual's approach to life that cannot be abandoned without becoming a different kind of person with a different kind of lifestyle. Yet the political leader who loved people is different from the person who occasionally or regularly indulges in gossip or bad-mouthing, precisely because he exemplifies, not a series of actions, but a way of life. For the garden variety offender, overcoming the impulse to *rekhilut* and *lashon ha-ra* is a tale of many particular challenges in myriad situations: sometimes we succeed in responding properly; sometimes we succumb. *Lashon ha-ra*, from this perspective, is like overeating or laziness. Our victories, like our defeats, are incremental; they are rarely final. To the extent that "loving people" is part of one's self-image and *modus operandi*, it is much more a question of all or nothing.

It is easier to separate ourselves decisively from vice when we recognize in it a way of life that is inherently alien to everything we believe in. Thus turning away from the man who loved people is more like choosing to keep kosher. Once vigorously affirmed, the decision is likely to be secure—we are generally not tempted by each rasher of bacon or morsel of shellfish, because what we have rejected is being the kind of person for whom such delicacies are a live option. We can move on

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to other day by day struggles that are harder to resolve conclusively, and as we engage them our solid achievements of self-control and self-creation provide a foundation upon which we can build.

The public relations branch of modern Orthodoxy often proclaims that we Orthodox Jews fit in very well with upper middle class American culture. Of course we have our restrictions about food and work schedule, all negotiable with a modicum of good will. The more politicized among us may fret about whether, in the light of our commitment to Torah, we can consistently subscribe to liberal positions on family life and so forth. The intellectuals are similarly concerned about the ability of our youth to withstand antagonism to belief in *Torah mi-Sinai* and our other cognitive commitments. Otherwise we do not feel threatened and we do not feel compelled to define our way of thinking and living in opposition to that of the surrounding upper middle class culture. Let me suggest that we will not constitute a dignified, self-respecting religious community until we comprehend, fully and explicitly, what distinguishes us from the man who loved people and the culture he represents.

Shalom Carmy