

The Drive-By Sin

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

We are deluged by rumor, gossip, tall tales masquerading as truth. Good names are sullied and reputations ruined at the careless push of the "Send" button. In an age of loose talk, Jewish teachings on improper speech have never been more important.

Life and death, Proverbs proclaims, are in the power of the tongue. The ancient Aramaic translation of the Torah refers to human beings as "the speaking animal." In Genesis, God creates the world through words. Words not only create a world, but can destroy it — sabotaging relationships, betraying friendships, hurting others both close and far away. All the usual excuses — "That's just what I heard" "I didn't mean it unkindly" "But its true!" — are clumsy dodges by which we allow ourselves the fleeting pleasure of being "in the know" while doing lasting harm. Gossip is the drive-by sin; once the damage is done, we are already gone.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin reminds us of three questions we should ask before passing on tales: Is it true? Is it fair? Is it necessary? If not, then don't repeat it. God credits us for what we say and also for what we resist saying.