

Are Blogs Kosher?

Rabbi Mark Dratch (05/25/2006)

Free-wheeling blogs — unrestricted news, opinion, and discussion Web sites that break, make and spin the latest on any number of topics — have been proliferating for years. Now there are a number of Jewish sites that scrutinize everything from Israeli politics to shul gossip.

They're the new "Bubbie Hotline."

Several of them have recently brought to light a number of rabbinic abuse cases and have succeeded in generating community interest and outrage, forcing a few rabbis from their positions, and casting aspersions on the characters of others.

To some, these sites are cesspools of unfettered, unaccountable tripe and vilifying slander that malign individuals and besmirch the community. To others, they are the Hyde Parks of protest and free speech, a place where victims can finally speak without fear of counter attack, and interested parties can press for justice by doing end-runs around denial and cover-up.

So are these blogs kosher — are they the right place for discriminating Jews to "chew the fat?"

There are serious issues to contemplate. Consider lashon hara, defined as reckless and harmful speech. The Torah prohibits it. Morally sensitive people are appalled by it. And the blogs seem to be full of it. Because there is no accountability, especially from those who leave anonymous comments on the threads of others' sites, anybody can say anything about anyone. And sometimes they do. With the peck of a few letters on a keyboard, information is posted that anyone with a computer and Internet access can read, and lives and reputations can be destroyed. All of this with no due process or accountability and with no real chance of rebuttal. On some blogs you can find "dirt" that even some of the less reputable newspapers wouldn't publish. And consider Chillul Hashem, the concern of scandal and communal disrepute. What will others say about the Jews and the Jewish community?

These concerns are serious ones and cannot be easily dismissed or pushed aside. They deal with fundamental precepts of Jewish law and the very bases of moral decency.

But denial and cover-up and dismissal of complaints and victimization of vulnerable children and adults are also serious and cannot be easily dismissed or pushed aside. Too many innocents have felt unheard, ignored, rejected, and sacrificed on the altar of public and private reputations. They have been silenced in order to protect the image of a community whose perfection exists only in their imaginations.

Too many times Jewish law and Jewish values are misapplied, misinterpreted and misappropriated in order to achieve these reprehensible ends.

There are reasons that victims, along with their supporters and advocates, have turned to the blogs, Web sites, newspapers and magazines. And that's because too many times they first turned to rabbis and Jewish institutional leaders to complain about the abuse and violation they suffered — and they were abused again.

Can these blogs be more responsible? Yes, and they need to exercise much greater care in upholding standards of decency, fairness and justice because they, too, can be responsible for harming innocents. And Web surfers should not necessarily believe what they read on them. In fact, they should take much of what they see on these sites with less than a grain of salt.

But the blogs are here and, for now, supply a valuable service. In a community that was responsive and accountable the excesses on the blogs would be unnecessary. At the moment, there are those who feel that they have no other choice. Innocents — victims and potential victims of abuse and the values and reputation of a compassionate and valuable community — are being hurt by a community that could and should do better.

All is not bad in our community, not by a long stretch. In the past decade scores of social service programs have been started that support and advocate for victims of abuse. The Rabbinical Council of America passed new guidelines for dealing with allegations against its members and has stood strong against harsh and unfair criticism. Some rabbinical schools are focusing a bit on issues of abuse and rabbinic boundaries. And JSafe was established to create a mechanism for accountability and responsibility and to provide education and

support for victims, rabbis and institutions. But there is still too much denial and obfuscation

The rabbinic bon mot, "All Jews are responsible one for another," is more than just a nice slogan; it is a religious obligation. Judaism holds all of its adherents — clergy and laity without distinction — accountable for the spiritual and physical well-being of others. This is most certainly true when it comes to our children. They depend on us to care for them, to protect them and to nurture them. Not only do we have an obligation to them as humans deserving safe and secure lives, but as Jews in whose hands lay the destiny of our people. Safety? Security? We owe our people and future no less. We owe each and every son and daughter no less—and much, much more. n

Rabbi Mark Dratch is the CEO of JSafe, an organization founded to deal with abuse in the community.