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What does Judaism say about gossip?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Yenta, the matchmaker from Fiddler on the Roof, certainly lived up to her name. She was the personification of a busybody who meddles into everyone's affairs, can't keep a secret, and indiscriminately passes along rumors to whomever she meets.

It's no secret, however, that Jewish teachings have long condemned gossip. Spreading misinformation certainly qualifies, but even spreading the truth before someone wants to share it, is considered an act of "lashon hara" or evil speech. It's also no secret that many people participate in this behavior despite the prohibition.

Gossip that is meant to be complementary is generally benign, but when it is derogatory it can become very destructive. Like the game telephone, whispered messages can be grossly misinterpreted. False ideas can take on a life of their own that become very difficult to negate. We protect our own dignity, not to mention that of the victim, when we refuse to join this hurtful chain of communication. We need to not just walk away but challenge it when we hear it. And even more important, we need to bring it to the attention of the one who is being talked about. All of this may take an act of courage, but this is another time-honored Jewish value that *is* worth preserving.