

Second Hand Smut – Hazardous to Our (Mental) Health By Rabbi Michael Lotker

A while ago, I was sitting having lunch in a fast food restaurant. Seated at the table next to me were four teen-aged (late high school or early college) young women. Well dressed, mixed racially (Asians, others), cute, etc. You know the type. As I was about to admire their youth, energy, enthusiasm and joy at being together with their friends, they ruined it for me, and I suspect, for everyone else within earshot. The problem was the foul language that spewed from their mouths. Sadly, I'm sure I you don't have to strain your imagination to guess the phrases. And, importantly, these girls were not angry, not cursing anyone or anything, and not actually referring to the sexual or excretory activities or elements that their words, taken at face value, would seem to represent.

If these young women had lit up cigarettes, people would have jumped down their throat. But fouling the air with their words elicited not a comment – alas not even from your rabbi, who did not want to seem like an old fuddy duddy or scold.

So what's my point? Simply that we strive to be aware and make those close to us aware how offensive our "second hand smut" can be. I am not a prude and I have been as guilty as the next person in uttering expletives from time to time. I can even tolerate and tell a joke or two that might strain good taste. But I do hope that I am aware of what I am saying, when I am saying it, and whom I might offend. What appalls me is the way this language is used in common, "polite" circles. So my goal is to make those around us, those close to us aware of what they are saying.

Of course my main (but not only) focus is on young people. I know how they will speak when they are with their friends but I want them to be aware of what they say. We adults should not allow our young people (children, grandchildren and their friends) to use this kind of language in our presence – period – end of issue. If someone were smoking in our presence we would ask them not to do so; we should use the same logic with offensive language. My goal is to help young people (and all of us) realize what we are saying in order to be able to control what we are saying. By the same token, we should certainly ask our adult friends to elevate their language when it sinks below a certain level. Avoiding offensive speech is a mitzvah that we can all aspire to.

I hope you will join me in this minor crusade to make our world just a little more pleasant as we prepare for the High Holy Days.