



Gossip Girls: Addressing Conflict, Aggression, and “Girl Bullying” That’s Not Fair! In Practice

Background:

It is no secret that gossip—*richilut*, *lashon ha'ra*—is prevalent in teen (and adult) communities. Many parents and educators struggle with how to address and combat gossip, aggression, and bullying among adolescents. Schemes, lies, and deceit dominate the plots of many of the TV shows, films, and songs targeted toward a teenage audience. It's certainly natural for tweens and teens to be curious about each others' lives and private views and behaviors—after all, tweens and teens define themselves largely in relation to their peers and rely on information about others to reassure them that they, themselves, are acceptable or normal or to help them assess where they stand in the social order. At the same time, however, gossip can cause severe pain and upset and is frequently used (especially by adolescent girls) as a form of social control. In extreme cases, the ridicule and ostracism prompted by gossip can lead young people to take their own lives to escape the pain. (Currently, six teens in Massachusetts are facing criminal charges over the physical and emotional bullying that contributed to the suicide of their classmate, Phoebe Prince). At the very least, gossip can create an uncomfortable and often unsafe learning environment and transgresses the ethical teachings of Judaism we want to cultivate in young Jews.

Lyn Mikel Brown, a researcher and expert on girls' development, argues that tween and teen girls' indirect aggression and gossiping tend to pit girls against each other rather than directing their anger towards the institutions and individuals that benefit from their infighting. By competing over boys and criticizing each others' appearances, girls' anger stays directed at other girls rather than, for instance, at the companies that target their anxieties in order to encourage their spending on cosmetics and clothing, or at the boys in their life who exhibit sexist or misogynist behavior.

In the Show:

- “Not Fair!” statement on scroll about sexual double standard (“women who have sex are called sluts while men are called cool”) and one about the term “gay” used as a slur - speaks to the power of gossip and social judgment to define us
- Girls #1, 2, & 3 gossip about two other girls (“4 and 5”) behind their backs
- They talk disdainfully about Different Girl
- Girl #3 is questioned about her friendliness toward Different Girl, this is treated as an implicit violation or threat
- The characters' generic identifiers (e.g., “Girl #1,” “Different Girl”) illustrate the pressure girls feel to conform, to live up to social expectations; being labeled “different” can be dangerous, marginalizing
- Girls envy Esther's handbag, Esther scares them off, won't allow them to touch it (underlying competition/aggression)

Activities:

- Text Study: study what classical Jewish texts have to say about gossip (see resource below).
- Build a *brit*: start by creating a group definition/understanding of gossip. Then have youth create a *brit*—commitments for how they will behave. Create a system for accountability. Follow up on it. Create culture of a gossip free zone.
- *Gossip Girl*: watch excerpts of *Gossip Girl* or other TV shows and discuss with students what they see going on. Since the show is supposed to depict the lives of girls at elite NYC private schools, ask teens if it seems like an accurate representation of that world. How so? And if not, why might the show choose to depict characters in the ways it does? Weave in Torah/Talmud/Jewish ethical teachings as part of the conversation.

- Chofetz Chayim's *6 Rules of Ethical Speech*: over six sessions, review the six rules of ethical speech and give students journal writing exercises for them to reflect on how they do or don't subscribe to Chofetz Chayim's rules. Allocate time each session for everyone to share what they have thought about each rule and reflection.

Questions for Discussion:

- Do you believe gossip is harmful or wrong? Is it sometimes okay?
- Why do people gossip? Why is celebrity gossip (in magazines, on entertainment TV shows) so popular?
- What role does technology play in the gossip that you or your friends engage in?
- When a friend says or does something that hurts you or makes you angry, do you find it difficult to confront them? What do you think would happen if you told the friend how you feel? What do you think is the best way to handle conflict?
- What do you think of the idea of "mean girls"? Why do so many tv shows, movies, novels, and advertisements depict girls fighting with each other? Who benefits from that "mean girl" stereotype?

Resources:

12 Ways to Prevent Girlfighting and Build Girl Allies (from *Hardy Girls, Healthy Women*): <http://www.hardygirlshealthywomen.org/docs/12WaystoPreventGirlfighting.pdf>

Are Girls Really as Mean as Books Say They Are?, by Carol Tavris. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 5, 2002.

From Adversaries to Allies: A Curriculum for Change (from *Hardy Girls, Healthy Women*): http://hghw.org/catalog/product_info.php?cPath=25&products_id=43

Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls and Raising Their Voices: The Politics of Girls' Anger, by Lyn Mikel Brown

Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls, by Rachel Simmons

The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness: Preparing to Practice, by Rabbi Rami Shapiro

Six Teenagers are Charged After Classmate's Suicide, by Erik Eckholm & Katie Zezima in *The New York Times*, March 29, 2010.

Classical Jewish texts compiled by Rabbi Bonnie Koppell

Chofetz Chaim's *6 Rules of Ethical Speech*