

# From the desk of Rabbi Baumann



## WHEN LEADERS FAIL—PART II

Dear Parents,

Erev Shabbos Parashas Vaera 5782

The ability to hold two seemingly conflicting perspectives at the same time is a task that many find difficult. The overpowering presence of mass media and social media only serves to make nuanced points of view and in-depth understanding that much more elusive. We live in the age of the sound bite and tend to view people and events as either all good or all bad. The Torah cries out loudly and clearly that life is about finding balance and that the world is a very complex and narrow bridge.

Our need to develop a multi-pronged perspective has never been more urgent. The tragic climax this week of the gut-wrenching situation involving author and teacher Chaim Walder has engendered seemingly polar opposite reactions. Do we focus on the Torah's imperative to judge people favorably (*Vayikra 19:15, Rashi*) or do we focus on the Torah's imperative to protect people from harm? (*Vayikra 19:16* – the very next Pasuk!) Does the reluctance to vilify the accused automatically harm victims and survivors?

The Torah is broad and the Torah is deep and it addresses each component on its own merits. This horrific situation presents us with 'teachable moments' that we need to grasp onto, for ourselves and our children. No one has the right to judge another person. That is reserved for our *Batei Din* that operate within the laws of the *Shulchan Aruch*. To definitively conclude in our mind that a fellow Jew is a wicked person based upon media reports, rumors and even statements of one valid witness (instead of the required two), is against the Torah. Anyone who has learned *Sefer Chofetz Chaim* on the *Halachos* of *Lashon Hara* knows that one may not believe negative information about a regular person (*Beinoni*), let alone someone heretofore regarded as a G-d fearing person.

The lesson regarding the 'Judge People Favorably' side of the equation is unequivocal. We cannot judge the man. It is not the right of any person, other than judges on a *Beis Din*, convened as a *Beis Din*, to make conclusions about other people. If we do, and we broadcast those beliefs, we may be guilty of *Hamalbin Pnei Cheviro B'Rabbim*, embarrassing one's fellow in public, an egregious sin for which even (our own) death does not atone.

The laws of *Lashon Hara* are so important, and so integral to the health and success of every individual and every family and community, that this point needs emphasizing, despite our overwhelming desire to identify with victims and survivors. The lesson about not conclusively judging others is something we and our children need to think about and train ourselves in. All those lessons from *Sefer Chofetz Chaim* are being put to the test right here and now. The instant communication afforded by social media makes it that much harder to stop, pause and remind ourselves of what the Torah says about rushing to judgment.

The second Torah imperative is to protect others from harm. Information can be shared to help others avoid getting into a potentially troublesome situation, and if numerous conditions are met, may be exempt from the prohibition of *Lashon Hara*, and should be shared. The concept of *Toeles*, a constructive purpose, can be applied to scenarios such as warning someone about the dishonesty of a proposed business partner, the emotional instability of a suggested *shidduch*, or the inappropriate behavior of a potential teacher, tutor, youth leader etc.

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It is no contradiction to take precautions to protect from an alleged predator, while at the same time not actually believing conclusively that the person is a predator. This can be explained with the following example. Reuven wants to enter a business partnership with Mr. X. Shimon tells him that Mr. X is known to be a thief. However, there are three people in town with the name Mr. X, and Shimon is not sure if this proposed partner is the one. Therefore, there is a one-third chance Reuven's Mr. X is a thief. On a one-third chance, it would be wholly inappropriate for Reuven to conclude his Mr. X is indeed a thief. However, to gamble his life savings on only a two-thirds chance that he is dealing with an honest person is not a situation he would agree to.

We must protect ourselves and especially our children from people who might take advantage and cause harm. That imperative, to protect and to be cautious must be our focus, rather than dwelling on the character and alleged improprieties and sinful behavior of anyone, including Chaim Walder. It is important to use this opportunity, in a calm and encouraging manner, to remind our children that no one has the right to touch, look at or talk about the parts of a child's body that are covered by a bathing suit. They are never to get in a car or go anywhere with anyone unless the parent/guardian gave specific and express permission to go with. Parents are to be mindful to not allow their children to go to friends' houses where there is an older sibling or relative unless they can be assured there is adequate parental supervision.

One big question on everyone's mind is – what to do about the books. From what I can glean, there is no clear, definitive *Psak*. The question governing this very rare occurrence was already raised generations ago concerning the works of Rabbis who fell and violated the very tenets of *Halacha* that their *Seforim* dealt with. Our situation has an additional factor. The name of this author will from now on, always conjure up an association with sexual abuse and suicide. There is a chance that having the book around will cause our child or perhaps an abuse survivor to be traumatized or revolted by the thought that we are OK with him learning proper interpersonal behavior and emotional regulation from someone who seems now to be the antithesis of those lessons. That chance more than offsets any value that the books can offer. In my home, the books have been removed. It is ultimately, a personal decision.

Before leaving this topic of the impact of questionable books, it must be stated that questionable video games that glorify violence, immorality and suicide are equally harmful to children and just as Walder books may create harmful associations, so too, please beware the negative power of video games and extensive internet exposure.

Let us move forward and dwell on healing and prevention of future travesties. By following the *Halacha* and training our children to be safe, we can navigate this incredibly painful episode and fulfill both imperatives of the Torah – judge others favorably, while taking every precaution to protect from potential harm.

May Hashem help us stay strong in our commitment to *Halacha* and vigilant in protecting our children.

Best wishes for a Shabbos of healing,



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