

I recently posted a story on the OU web page about an imaginary Divine web site. I received much interesting e-mail from people who read the piece. A number of individuals wrote that they had often wondered what it would be like to receive e-mail from Hashem. To accommodate their curiosity, I present the following story, which contains an important lesson as well. Appropriately, the story is entitled:

An E-Mail From Hashem

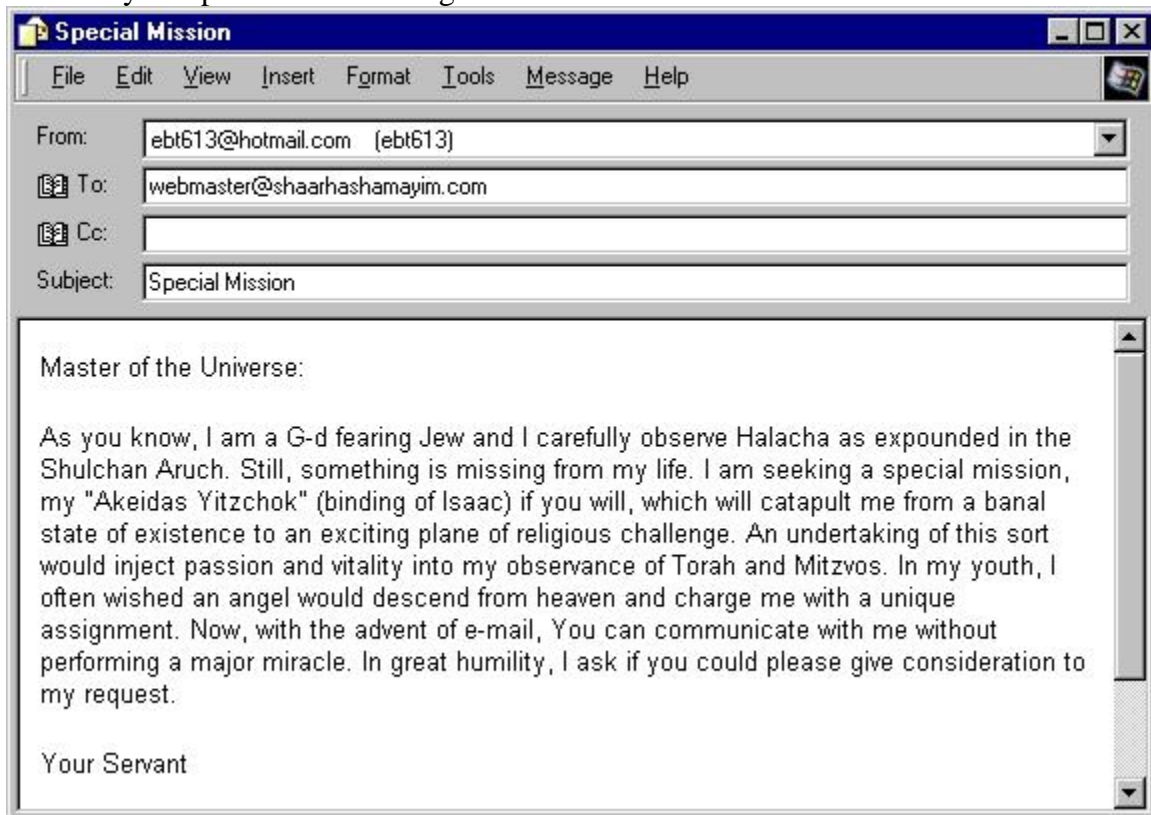
Rabbi Yaakov Luban

Dear Rabbi Luban,

It was with great interest that I read your story about a man named Harry who imagined that he stumbled upon the web site of Hashem. I would like to share with you my experiences that were triggered by reading your intriguing tale.

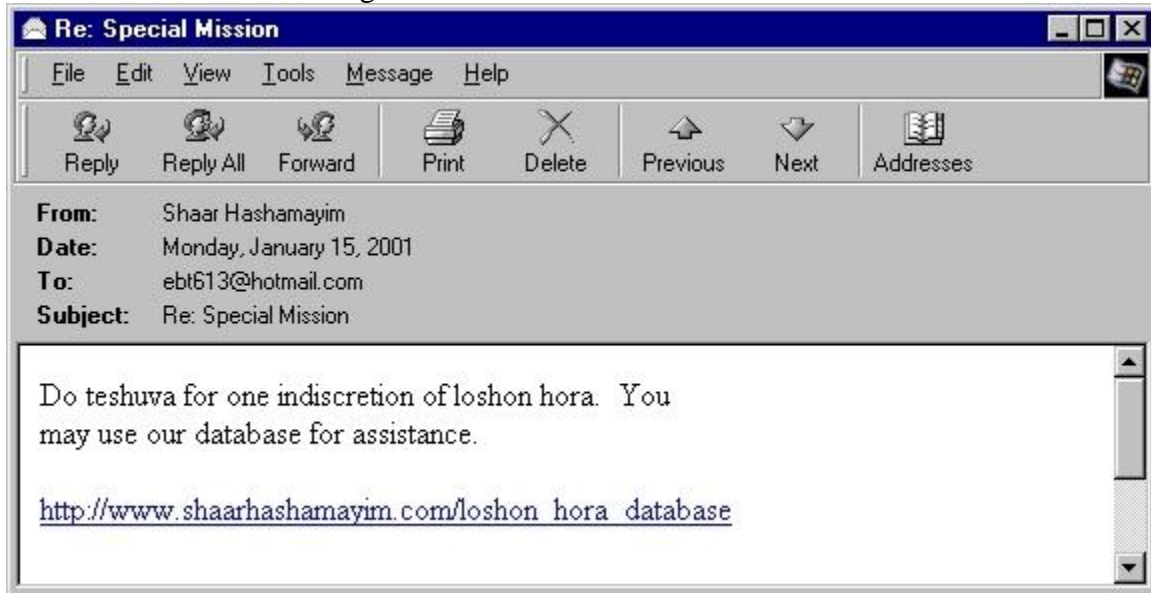
For many years I had wondered what it would be like to receive e-mail from Hashem. The thought suggested by your article that there is a web site called Shaar Hashamayim (Gates of Heaven) fascinated me, and gave my mind no rest. If such a site existed, was it not conceivable that e-mail could be sent from the heavens to mankind? After days of contemplation and consideration I finally decided to attempt communication with this heavenly abode. It seemed to me that sending e-mail to the Almighty was less radical than beaming messages to green Martians and other cosmic creatures, which many New Age adherents are known to do.

Suppose you had an opportunity to e-mail Hashem – what would you write? Believe me, it's not an easy decision. I considered the matter with extreme care, and eventually composed the following letter:



I pressed the send button, and my e-mail quickly disappeared into celestial cyberspace.

I recognized that G-d does not generally directly respond to earthly communications. Nonetheless, I was excited about my e-mail and harbored a faint hope that I would receive a response. I checked my messages regularly throughout the day. When I went to bed that night, I tossed and turned and had difficulty falling asleep. Finally I dozed off into a troubled slumber. In the middle of the night I awoke with a jolt. I had a strange feeling that something had happened, and I quickly raced to my computer terminal. I'm sure you can appreciate my excitement when I spotted e-mail from the Shaar Hashamayim webmaster. My hand shook as I tried to steady the mouse and double click to open the e-mail that would surely change my life. I was completely unprepared for the content of the message.



What! This was it, the answer to my lofty spiritual quest? Teshuva for one little teeny episode of loshon hora? What an enormous letdown! I had imagined an exciting and dramatic assignment, such as, “Climb the Himalayan Mountains and save a lost soul who has joined a oriental cult”, or, “Leave home, move to Siberia and open a yeshiva for the great-grandchildren of Jews who participated in the Communist Revolution.” My extreme disappointment notwithstanding, I knew I could not ignore e-mail from Hashem, and I would have to follow this Divine directive without question.

At the bottom of the e-mail was a link to my “Loshon Hora Database”. I clicked on the link and found a record of all the episodes of loshon hora during my lifetime. I was stunned to find that the count was over 50,000, which represented an average of five loshon hora indiscretions per day for the past 30 years (I am 43). Though I was always careful never to violate halacha, loshon hora is, well, you know, a different category so to speak (no pun intended). After all, everyone needs to gossip a little. Still, I was taken aback at the sheer magnitude of the entries in my file. I wondered why Hashem’s e-mail instructed me to do teshuva for only one episode of loshon hora, when there were so many? This seemed like a good question, but who was I to question the Divine will?

I scrolled down the list and randomly highlighted one incident of loshon hora.

November 2, 2000	Victim: Herby Blank	Action: Besmirched professional reputation
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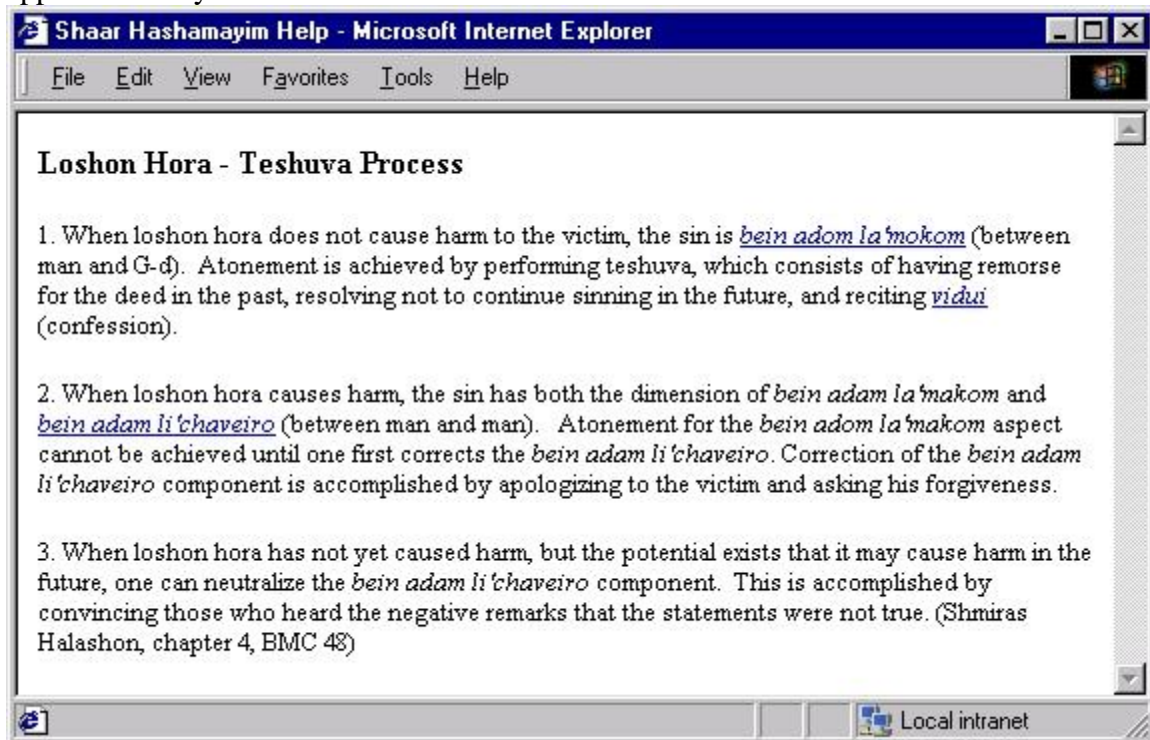
I didn't remember the episode clearly, even though it had occurred just a few days ago, so I double clicked and watched as the Real Player deployed and provided a video playback of the event.

Herby Blank was a good friend. Though a certified CPA, Herby found it difficult to earn a living. Recently, I tried to help Herby and hired him to prepare my taxes. When Herby sent me my return, I was extremely upset to find that he calculated that I still owed \$5500 to Uncle Sam. I was so angry, that I called my friend Steve, who was considering using Herby's professional services as well. "Herby did my taxes and it's no wonder he can't earn a living. He's a terrible accountant. I'll bet he can't add 2+2 without a calculator."

Subsequently, Steve shared my evaluation of Herby with just a few of his closest friends, who in turn told a few members of their intimate circle of acquaintances, and so forth.

Now I had to repent and do teshuva for this misdeed. I would soon discover, however, that this was not a simple matter.

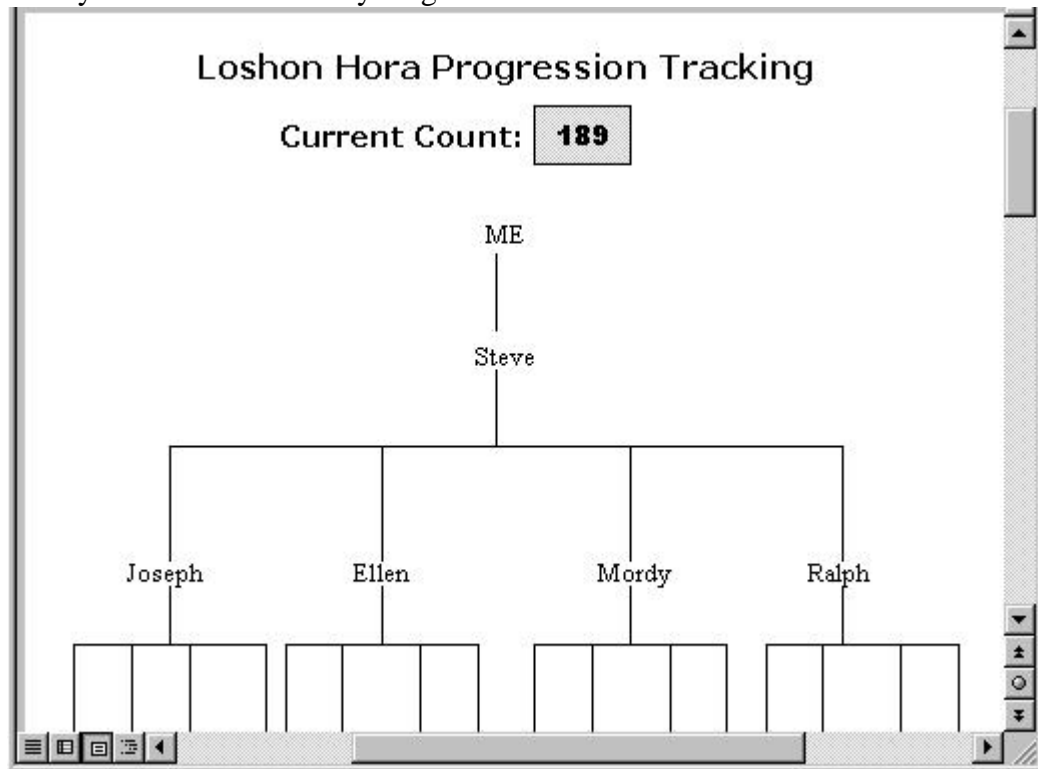
I clicked on the Help link to understand the teshuva process. This is what appeared on my screen:



I now had a problem, as none of the approaches outlined above seemed feasible. I could not ask Herby to forgive me (option 2) because he was a close friend, and I didn't want him to know that I had damaged his reputation. On the other hand, I was not able to follow option "3" because I wasn't sure if I had already caused Herby a financial loss. Furthermore, even if Herby had not yet lost any clients, it seemed impossible to retract my statement, as I had no way to determine how far my remarks had traveled and spread.

Then I remembered that Hashem's e-mail offered me assistance from the Shaar Hashamayim database. I checked the toolbar and found an option called "Loshon Hora Progression Tracking". A click on this link opened a screen that resembled the fine branches of a spreading tree. Next to each branch were the names of the people who heard and repeated my evaluation of Herby. The good news was that the database

reflected that at the moment, Herby had not yet lost any business because of my loshon hora. Since my comments were still fresh, I had a window of opportunity to retract my statement before Herby actually lost any clients. The bad news was that the list of people who heard my loshon hora was very long.



I scrolled down the screen and traced the entire path of my derogatory remark. To my shock, a new branch appeared as I was viewing the screen. Someone had just repeated my comments. My loshon hara was alive, still growing and expanding its tentacles, as it continued to spread its ugly web of slander. All told, my negative assessment of Herby had now been repeated 189 times.

Now I was really in a quandary. How was I going to retract a comment passed on to 189 people? Many of the names on the tree were totally unfamiliar, and I couldn't see myself contacting people I didn't know.

I remembered a famous story I heard as a child years ago about a man named Yankel who loved repeating slanderous remarks. As he grew older, he began to realize that one day he would have to appear before the heavenly court and account for his misdeeds. Finally, Yankel approached the local Rav and asked how he could repent and be forgiven for all the gossip he has spread over the years.

"No problem", said the Rav. "Just take a thick goose feather pillow and climb to the top of the tallest roof in town. When you are at the summit, bang the pillow with all your might against the chimney."

Yankel thought this advice was very strange, and could not see how this action would atone for his crime. Still, the Rav had ruled, and who was he to question the wisdom of the learned Rabbi. In truth, Yankel was delighted with the Rav's simple prescription for atonement. "I never realized how easy it is to perform teshuva for loshon hora," Yankel thought to himself.

Yankel grabbed a thick goose pillow and quickly climbed to the roof of the tallest building in town. With all his might, he swung the pillow two or three times against the

chimney. Suddenly, the pillow burst open and the wind carried away the feathers all across town.

Yankel ran back to the Rav and reported his success.

“Oh, there is one more thing you must do,” said the Rav. “Go retrieve all the feathers and bring them to my office”.

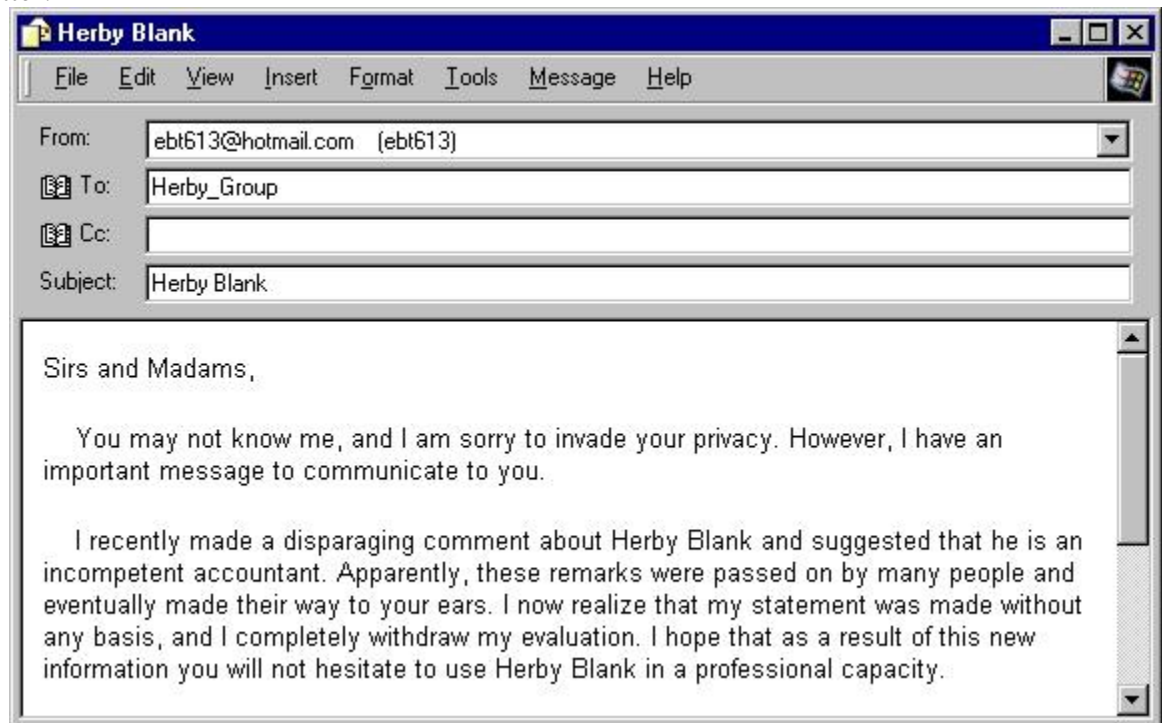
“That is impossible,” said Yankel. “They have traveled all over town, and I have no way to collect them.”

“Well then”, said the Rav, “and how do you expect to repent for the years of loshon hora when it’s impossible to retrieve all the words of gossip you have spread throughout the city?”

I now had the same problem as Yankel. How could I retrieve a remark that was repeated to 189 people?

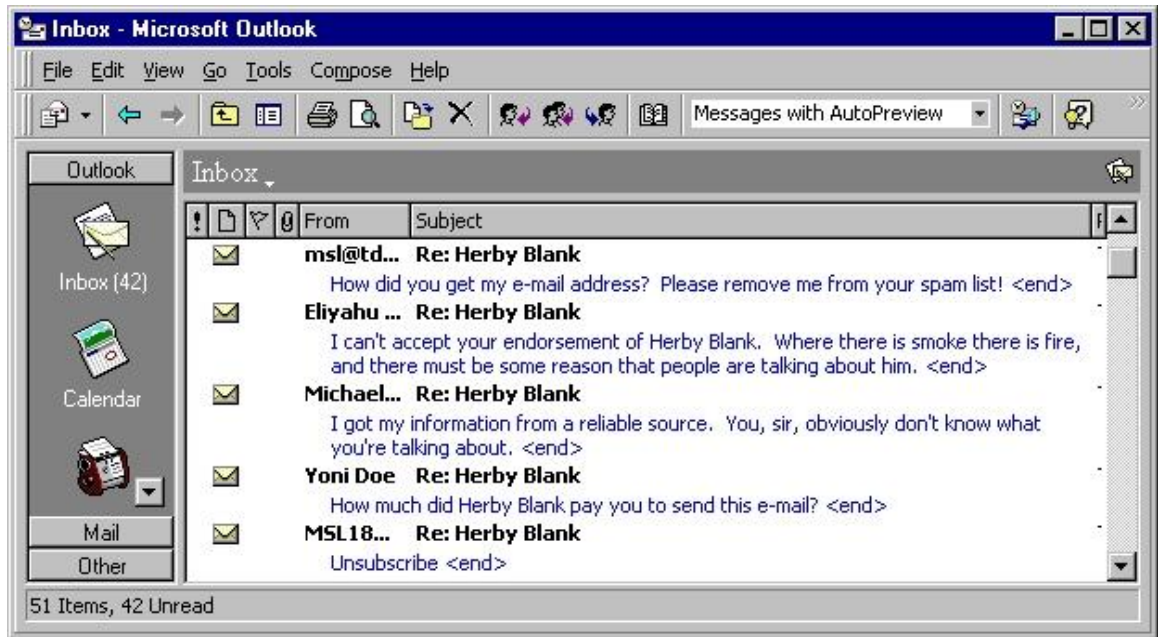
Then it hit me – a brilliant idea! Yankel didn’t have e-mail, but I did. Why not e-mail the 189 individuals? The beauty of e-mail was that I could send an impersonal communication without having to make a single phone call.

I quickly accessed all the e-mail addresses from the hypertext links in the Loshon Hora Progression Tracking link in the Shaar Hashamayim database and composed this e-mail letter:



I sent my e-mail to the 189 people and breathed a sigh of relief. I was quite proud of myself. Through the miracle of modern technology I was able to correct what Yankel could never have accomplished.

My joy was short-lived. Within a few moments I began to receive e-mail responses from my new pen pals. Here is a sampling of what they wrote:

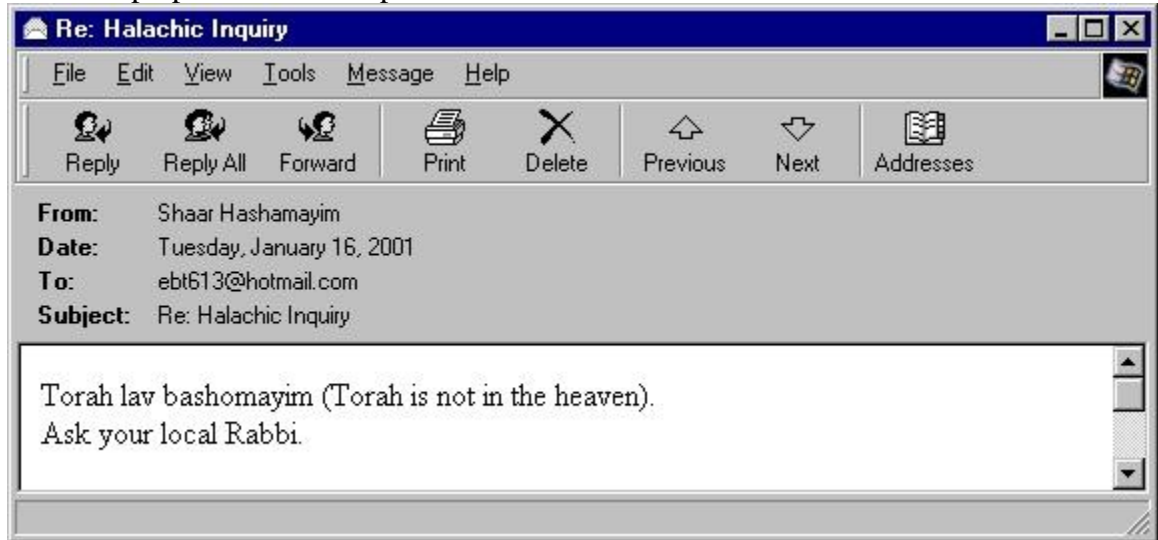


It was obvious that I had achieved nothing with my e-mail. People's minds were made up, and I could not convince them otherwise. The damage I had done to Herby's reputation was clearly irreversible. I checked the web site regularly, and within a few days Herby began to suffer actual business losses as a result of my oft-repeated remarks.

There seemed to be no other choice. To fulfill my Divine mission I would have to bite the bullet and ask Herby for forgiveness. But then I wondered if this was an ethical approach. Herby would no doubt be upset to learn that I stabbed him in the back and sullied his reputation in the eyes of 189 people. Was it fair to add insult to injury and cause pain to Herby so that I could attain personal atonement? I remembered my Rabbi discussing this very issue in a class. The Chofetz Chaim, Rav Yisroel Meir Kagan z"tl, allowed disclosure to the victim of loshon hora in order to achieve atonement (*Shmiras Halashon* 4:12), while Rav Yisroel Salanter z"tl reportedly held that such action would cause pain and was therefore not permissible. What was I supposed to do? I was fortunate that I could pose my *sheila* (question) directly to Hashem, and composed this e-mail:



I was not prepared for the response:



(“*Torah lav bashomayim*” was a reference to an episode related in *Baba Metziah* 59b. The Talmud relates that *Rebbi Eliezer* and *Rebbi Yehoshua* were engaged in a heated debate about a halachic issue. *Rebbi Eliezer* predicted that various miraculous events would occur to support his position. Finally, a heavenly voice proclaimed that the halacha is in accordance with *Rebbi Eliezer*. *Rebbi Yehoshua* dismissed these Divine proofs and proclaimed that the Torah is not in the heaven. Once G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish people at Sinai, the authority to rule on halachic matters was transferred to the Torah scholars of each generation.)

I followed the e-mail instruction and called my local Rabbi to pose the *sheila*. Unfortunately, the Rabbi would not give me a straightforward response. He said, “On the one hand, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan authored the *Shmiras Halashon*, the standard work on loshon hora. He single-handedly spearheaded a revolution to be more careful about this mitzvah. How can we rule against him? On the other hand, Rav Yisrael Salanter was the father of the mussar movement. He focused, in particular, on exercising extreme caution with regard to human sensitivities. Can we ignore his position? Look, who am I ‘to place my head between the mountains’, and take sides in a dispute between two great luminaries.”

This left me quite unsettled, but I was now feeling the pressure to fulfill my Divine mission. I decided to make my way to Herby’s home, not yet sure what I would do. Perhaps I could delicately and diplomatically explain what I did without hurting his feelings. My plan was quickly shattered.

“Herby, I’ve got something important to tell you,” I stammered. “I need to let you know...I mean I’m not sure how to say this...it’s just that, well, you know how sometimes...no that’s not it, listen, we’ve always been good friends...let me put it this way...”

Herby looked at me with bewildered astonishment and interrupted my stumbling remarks. “Listen, get your thoughts together. It so happens I’m glad you’re here. You know I have always had a rough time making ends meet. I don’t know why, but recently things have gotten worse, and it has become even more difficult for me to attract clients. I’m quite embarrassed, but I need to ask a great favor. I feel I can ask you because you’ve always been a loyal friend. Could you lend me \$5,000 for a few months?”

“Well of course Herby. It would be my pleasure,” I responded.

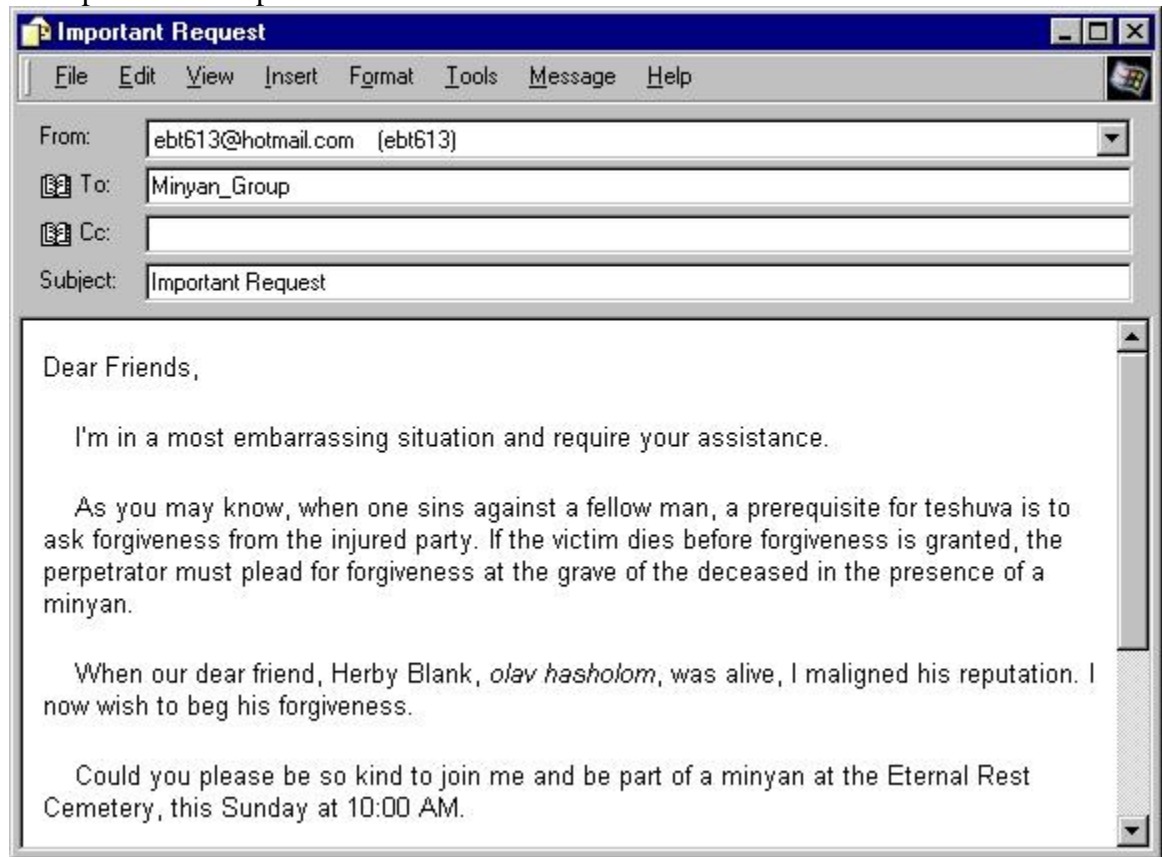
“I wish everyone was as thoughtful as you,” he countered. I felt like a heel.

That was it. Plan B was dead in the water. There was absolutely no way that I could let Herby know what a two-faced friend I really was.

I was now in real trouble, and could not see any way to fulfill my e-mail directive from Hashem. I never imagined it would be so difficult to correct one single incident of loshon hora.

Unfortunately, the opportunity for teshuva indeed presented itself a few weeks later, under the most tragic of circumstances. Herby Blank was jogging when he suddenly suffered a severe heart attack. He was rushed to the hospital and died two days later. There was now a new avenue open to me for teshuva, for the halacha allows one to ask forgiveness from a deceased person in the presence of a minyan (ten male adults).

I composed and dispatched this e-mail to ten friends:



Sunday came and I made my way to the Eternal Rest Cemetery. It was a chilly, gloomy day in the late fall, and the weather matched my mood exactly. You might think it is easier to apologize to the deceased than to a living person, but that is not the case. Aside from the extreme embarrassment of apologizing in a cemetery before a group of ten men, it is eerie to stand at the foot of a grave and say you're sorry to a departed soul. I never could have maintained the fortitude to go through with this ordeal were it not for the e-mail from Hashem, which compelled me, onward.

I walked up to Herby's tombstone, surrounded by ten somber men who wished they were somewhere else on that Sunday morning, and removed my shoes and socks, as the halacha prescribes. The ground was unpleasantly cold and clammy under my bare feet, and my eyes began to swell with tears. For the first time during this entire ordeal I began to feel the intense pain I had caused Herby with my careless remarks. Without any

thought, I had uttered words that brought significant harm to a good friend. I had jumped to a conclusion about Herby's lack of competency without any basis. I remembered the time Elliot Steel, a coworker, did that to me. He went to my boss and criticized my work in ways, which I felt were unfounded. I was furious, and to this day I can't bring myself to fully forgive Elliot for the damage to my reputation. I was ashamed that I performed an almost identical injustice to Herby. What a hypocrite I was! I also wondered if the lost income that Herby sustained because of my callous comments added stress to his life and ultimately contributed to his heart attack and demise. If the pen is mightier than the sword, then words have the power to kill. Was I a murderer?

Quietly, I whispered words that I knew were completely inadequate.

"Herby, I'm so terribly sorry. I sure wish this never happened."

Then I swallowed hard and said aloud the formula prescribed in *Shulchan Oruch (Orach Chaim 606:2)*:

"I have sinned to the G-d of Israel and against Herby Blank, of blessed memory, by maligning his reputation as a professional accountant".

The ten men responded aloud:

"You are forgiven, you are forgiven, you are forgiven."

The ten men, who were as uncomfortable as I was, quickly made their getaway from the cemetery. I, too, made my way home, glad that this painful ordeal was finally over.

The entire experience of the past few days had taken their toll. In particular, the trip to the cemetery had drained my last ounce of strength. I came home so thoroughly exhausted that I immediately went to bed and fell into a deep stupor.

I finally woke up the next morning, somewhat refreshed, and made my way to shul. As I sat down to daven I was startled to see a figure, who from the back, resembled Herby Blank.

This was most discomfoting, as I was hoping to put this entire episode behind me. Then the man turned around and I was shocked, as never before, to see that indeed it **was** Herby Blank. "He hasn't accepted my apology and has come out of the grave and risen from the dead to pursue me", I thought in horror. This was all too much for me to handle, and I fainted right on the spot.

When I finally came to, Herby and a group of friends were standing around me.

"Are you alright," they anxiously asked.

"Herby, why are you here?" I was petrified.

"Why shouldn't I be here? This is where I always daven."

"But the heart attack," I began to say.

"What heart attack?" he asked with incredulous surprise.

Slowly the veil lifted, and reality re-emerged. It had all been a dream. Herby had not died, I had not been to the cemetery and there was no e-mail from Hashem. The trauma of the dream had been so profound that I didn't realize that I was dreaming, as one usually does when they wake in the morning.

In time I returned back to myself. I finished davening and went to work. Surprisingly, I was disappointed that the experience had not occurred, and I had not received e-mail from Hashem.

When I arrived at work, Shlomi Brown greeted me. "Heard the latest about Max?" he inquired. Max, a worker in our office, was a master of the faux pas, and he was a frequent subject of ridicule.

I was about to give my standard response, "I can't believe it. What did he do now?", when suddenly, I stopped dead in my tracks.

I saw visions of feathers, wafting in the wind, floating all over the town. I pictured myself with a butterfly-net in hand, running in every direction, frantically swinging the net and missing the feathers. I ran faster, but tripped over tombstones in a cold and dreary cemetery. In desperation I shot e-mails at the feathers, 189 all told, but the e-mails bounced back to me unopened, as the feathers continued to dance away. Then I watched in disbelief as the feathers transformed themselves into piercing arrows, which lodged their sharp points into the hearts of innocent bystanders.

I quickly ran away from Shlomi, as if he had the plague or some other incurable disease. 50,000 times was enough, and I wasn't going to stumble into the quicksand again. I was no fool.

Then I made my resolution: No more loshon hora. I knew it would be very difficult to maintain this decision, but I was determined to see it through.

At that moment it dawned on me that I had found a spiritual mission without the benefit of an angelic revelation. No need to travel to far-flung places and slay fiery dragons and powerful demonic forces. The everyday drama of life, with all its richness and complexity, offered myriad opportunities and was challenging enough.

I walked outside and saw that it was a beautiful, sunny day. I looked up to the clear blue sky and offered a brief prayer.

“Master of the Universe. I didn't get your e-mail, but Your message arrived. Thank you, Hashem!”

Sincerely Yours,
An E-baal Teshuva