With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

When Spider-Man's creator Stan Lee put the words, "With great power comes great responsibility" into the mouth of Peter Parker (a.k.a. Spider-Man), he meant to imply that if you've got super-human abilities, you also have greater than average responsibility. However, I believe that there are many contexts in which this saying applies directly to all of us.

It is commonplace to point out that computer technology has begun (and will continue) to transform our society. As with every transformation, certain aspects speed ahead while other aspects lag behind. In the case of computers, technology continues to advance, but consideration of how we use technology to communicate with others has lagged behind. The internet allows us to communicate with people on the other side of the globe. Individuals can have contact with large numbers of people with one click of a button. To connect with masses of people once took a television broadcast. Now all you need is a computer and an internet connection.

Interestingly, it is the very power of this technology that creates its own difficulties. This was made clear to me again just recently. Over the past few days, I received the same email from several people. These people had taken the time to forward an email that they had received. I was only one of a long list of people who were receiving the message. The message said that Great Britain had removed all Holocaust education from their public schools because of a concern for the sensitivities of Muslims in the schools. The email asked me to pass on the message to 10 people that I knew. The hope was that public pressure would convince Great Britain that this was a terrible mistake. Well, of course, I should pass it on. Except for one thing---the email message was at least misleading; at worst, it was false. There was a kernel of truth to the story. Some teachers in one school in Northern England had in fact decided not to teach about the Holocaust for the reasons stated in the email. This is not good and (certainly based on all of the publicity) I imagine that someone will be looking into this. But this was not done by the entire country. In fact, reports claim that Holocaust education is already mandatory in much of the country and was about to become mandatory even more broadly throughout Great Britain.

I highlight this story because email gives us great power to communicate ideas broadly. But it also gives us the power to pass on falsehood (knowingly and unknowingly). I have no doubt that the people who forwarded this to me did so without knowing the full story and wouldn't have done so if they had all the information. But that is precisely the point. It is critical for us to take responsibility for the information that goes through our computers and out into the world. (With a bit more space we could also focus on the propensity for language and attitude to get out of hand in email in a way which we would never accept in person.)

Jewish tradition has always taken words seriously. And the rabbis showed tremendous concern about issues of *lashon hara*-gossip and other improper speech. They believed in

the power of words to help and to harm; to build and to tear down. But just imagine how much harder it was to 'get the word out' 2000 years ago! The power that we have to disseminate information through email and social networking sites like myspace.com is far greater than could be imagined by the rabbis of the Talmud. The internet makes it possible for the wrong information to get 'out there' very, very quickly. Modern technology has given us great power. With that power, comes the challenge and responsibility to use that power with care.