

Feathers

a Hasidic tale from Eastern Europe

A sharp-tongued woman was accused of starting a rumor: When she was brought before the village rabbi, she said, "I was only joking. My words were spread by others, and so I am not to blame."

But the victim demanded justice, saying, "Your words soiled my good name!"

"I'll take back what I said," replied the sharp-tongued woman, "and that will take away my guilt."

When the rabbi heard this, he knew that this woman truly did not understand her crime. And so he said to the woman, "Your words will not be excused until you have done the following. Bring my feather pillow to the market square. Cut it and let the feathers fly through the air. Then collect every one of the feathers from the pillow and bring them all back to me. When you have done this, you will be absolved of your crime."

The woman agreed, but thought to herself, The old rabbi has finally gone mad!

She did as he asked, and cut the pillow. Feathers blew far and wide over the square and beyond. The wind carried them here and there, up into trees and under merchants' carts. She tried to catch them, but after much effort it was clear to her that she would never find them all.

She returned to the rabbi with only a few feathers in her hand. Facing the rabbi, she said, "I could not take back the feathers any more than I could take back my words. From now on I will be careful not to say anything that would harm another, for there is no way to control the flight of words, any more than I could control the flight of these feathers."

From that day, the woman spoke kindly of all she met.

Marian Wright Edelman
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