

The Evil Tongue

Rabbi Sholomo Ben Levy

Did you know that there are more commandments in Torah that forbid evil speech than there are against eating pork? The nineteenth century rabbi, Yisroel Kagan, better known as the “Chofetz Chayim,” identified thirty-one prohibitions against spreading gossip. Perhaps there are more warnings about this sin than eating swine because when you violate dietary laws you harm only yourself, but when you convey hurtful or derogatory information about others you harm three people immediately: (1) you damage your own soul, (2) the person who listens becomes an accomplice to the act, and (3) the victim of the evil report is injured.¹ If the damage were only limited to those three it would be serious enough, but each act of evil speech adds a little more poison to the relationships within any congregation, organization, or community that is not on guard against the evil tongue.

This lesson on lashon harah (לשן הרע literally “evil tongue”) is intended to educate our community about God’s laws on this subject. A thorough study of what constitutes evil speech and an understanding of the very limited circumstances under which you may convey negative information about any person will help you to “keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking deceitfully” (Psalm 34:13). Once we understand that evil speech is a cancer that is spread mouth to mouth then we will be as careful about the words that come out of our mouths as we are about the foods that go into them.

The Torah says, “Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people” (Lev 19: 16). Most people incorrectly believe that this commandment refers to telling lies, and as such the crime of lashon harah does not apply to them because they only speak the truth about other people. Wrong! The sin of lashon harah refers to using truthful statements in order to harm or defame others. It also includes sharing negative information about people for amusement, entertainment—and more perversely—deriving pleasure from the failures or misfortunes of others. These are very serious spiritual matters that should not be taken lightly. If what was spoken or written contained any falsehoods, exaggerations, or distortions of the truth, then all those who repeated it are guilty of an even graver offense; i.e., violating God’s ninth commandment given at Mt. Sinai, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.” (Exodus 20:16)². Telling lies is considered *Motzi Shaim Ra*. Speaking ill of other people is the very definition of lashon harah. Often they go together. Both are prohibited.³

A true statement may nonetheless be evil. For example, calling an overweight girl “fat” may be true, but it is also harmful and heartless. The Torah teaches us this repeatedly. “Remember what the LORD thy God did unto Miriam by the way, when you come forth out of Egypt” (Deut 24:9). Miriam did not tell any lies about Moses; he was married to an Ethiopian woman. However, her *motive* for broadcasting that fact was to undermine the respect that the people

¹ Talmud Arachin 15b.

² In some Bible translations this law is found in verse 13.

³ Chofetz Chayim, *Guard Your Tongue* (New York: Bnay Yakov Publications, 1975), p.29.

had for Moses by appealing to their prejudices and lurid interest in the private lives of others. Remember that at the final judgment God “*recounts to a person his conversations.*” (Amos 4:13)

Men often gossip as much as women. Most of the men that Moses sent to survey the promised land spread an “evil report” upon their return. Although they exaggerated their claims, as often happens when essentially true: the land was strong armies and some of their thick that people actually lived on men that did bring up the evil plague before the LORD” (Num sharing this information and the were both evil. Joshua and Caleb but rather than joining in the “evil and told the people another truth, awaited us on the other side of the learn two important lessons: the the information is derogatory and impede the progress of our people. The epidemic of lashon harah is a major reason our ancestors spent forty years wandering in the wilderness. And it is at the heart of many of our problems today.



telling a story, their report was inhabited by powerful nations with cities were protected by walls so them. Yet the Torah says that “those report upon the land, died by the 14:37). As with Miriam, the motive for effect of their negative truth-telling saw the same things as the other men, report,” they focused on the positive the truth of the milk and honey that Jordan. From these examples we truth of a statement is no defense if the consequences of these acts

Rashi argued that the Hebrew word for “talebearer” (רוכל) refers to a peddler who goes door to door selling his wares. Those who are in the habit of spreading lashon harah, often do so casually in the course of their daily conversations without realizing it. They eagerly seek out “juicy” bits of information and gladly share these with their willing customers, making each feel special by saying “I’m only telling you this” or “don’t tell anyone else.” You know who the chronic talebearers are in your midst. And you should know that those who gossip to you are also gossiping about you. If in the past you have been one of them (and I think we have all committed this sin), then avoid trafficking in lashon hara in the future. “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful” (Psalm 1:1). Today, merchants of lashon harah may be heard conducting their business on the sabbath, traveling from one congregation to another, sending slander over the Internet, and broadcasting it over their cell phones. Technology allows lashon harah to travel faster, often anonymously, and infect more people than ever. Even popular radio and television programs are purveyors of it. Schools and work places abound with it. We are bombarded with lashon harah to the point where for many negativity of speech and behavior passes as normal. It is for times like these that we must apply the Torah’s admonition, “רק השמר לך ושמר נפשך מאד / Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently” (Deut 4:9).

The Talmud says that the tongue is so dangerous that God locked it behind teeth and lips that we may keep it under control. The book of Proverbs says, “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD” (Prov 12:22) Be on your guard at all times. Sometimes lashon harah can come from the most unexpected sources. Rabbis have been known to utter them, teachers

and parents are not immune, and some elders may have been speaking it all their lives. Here are several ways to identify lashon harah when you hear it. Ask yourself:

1. Is the statement negative or derogatory in any way?
2. Is it being said “behind the person’s back,” secretly?
3. Does the teller have a malicious motive such as envy or hatred?
4. Does the teller have a reputation for tale bearing?
5. What effect will this information have on others and our community?

Your conscience, which is the voice of God within you, will tell you if the words are lashon harah or not. Most negative speech will be lashon harah. At this point there are certain things you must do. Just as adultery involves two people, the sin of lashon harah requires one who speaks and one who hears. The Torah says that if a woman does not resist or “cry out” then the adulterous act was consensual.⁴ Likewise, if lashon hara is spoken in your presence and you do not “cry out” against it then you are complicit in the act. You did not rob the bank, but you drove the get away car. Without your silent participation—or perhaps with your gleeful encouragement—the crime was committed. And the Torah says, “*Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt*” (Lev 19:17). Here are some effective ways to admonish those who are involved in lashon harah. Gently say, “Please, I do not wish to hear lashon hara.” This is excellent because their likely response will be “What do you mean?” This creates an opportunity to teach them Torah. By intervening in this way you not only stop them from committing a sin, you cause them to receive a blessing. The other method is quick and easy. With the index finger on your lips say “Guard your tongue.” If the person is wise he or she will get the message and desist. At the very least the person will know not to peddle their venom in your presence. Make the gossip understand that he or she insults you by assuming that you are the kind of person who enjoys lashon hora. What you should NOT do is tell the subject of this gossip what is being said about him or her and by whom. Rather than being the good sheriff you would be inflaming the situation and committing a new act of lashon harah rather than preventing one.⁵

Not all acts of lashon harah are equal. Even if you “tell a person to his face” something that is derogatory, it is wrong; yet, it is far worse if you say it behind his back. Of this common practice the Torah says, “Cursed be he that smiteth his neighbor secretly” (Deut 27:24) and “You shall not hate your brother in your heart” (Lev. 19:12). Similarly, speaking lashon harah against any person or making such generalizations against groups is disgraceful. However, speaking evil against a rabbi, teacher, or leader is beyond contempt because you not only harm that person but all those who depend on that person for guidance. Again, the Torah is very clear on this point. “Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm” (1 Chr 16:22). It is also written, “Do not blaspheme God or curse a leader of your people” (Exodus 22:28). Chafetz Chaim explained it this way, “Speaking lashon horah about a Talmid Chochom, in his presence or absence, is an extremely grave sin. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 99b)

⁴ Deuteronomy 22:22-27

⁵ Informing the person is lashon hara because you are revealing negative information about the gossipers. Although it is true, it is evil and wrong. If the gossiping continues then you should inform your rabbi of the problem without volunteering details.

states that disgracing a Talmid Chochom is punishable by the lost of *olam habah* [the world to come].”⁶ In the same context, speaking ill of the dead is reprehensible.

There are a number of very limited circumstances in which it is *necessary* to speak lashon harah. Rabbi Mark Dratch categorizes these exceptions into five categories: (1) In order to protect others from harm. (2) When teaching people what not to do. (3) In the process of bringing about repentance. (4) When clearing one’s reputation in a Bet Din hearing. (5) When the intent is purely *to’elet*, which means “positive, constructive, and beneficial...and free of all personal animosity.”⁷ Some practical examples of these exceptions would include victims speaking about their physical or sexual abuse. Another example might be if the person who painted your house did a poor job and your brother inquired about hiring this person to paint his house, you would be obligated to warn your brother about your specific experiences related to the painting. You may not say “Joe is a terrible painter” to people who had not inquired about Joe’s painting ability. One must be very careful that you are not using one of these exceptions as a disguise to engage in lashon harah. The exceptions are all very rare, occur under extraordinary circumstances, and are committed with great reluctance.

Avoiding lashon harah is not the same as suppressing your negative feelings, though in the beginning it does require exercising control over your negative impulses. The spiritual development that we are after starts with policing your own thoughts and not allowing negative feelings to accumulate in your mind and heart. Hence, you do not need to suppress negativity, nor do you need to “express it” constantly because this often spreads it rather than eliminating it. Instead, you build up an intolerance for lashon harah and a greater awareness about the evil tongue. You teach others by your example. Start a conversation on a positive note or quickly change the subject of a negative one. Yes, be witty, funny, and charming but do so by always having a cheerful compliment on your lips or encouraging story on your mind to fill a social void with love.

The reward for silencing the evil tongue is greater than we can imagine. It denies the adversary his most powerful weapon. Changing how we talk about each other requires improving how we think. If we can put the evil tongue out of our midst then we will discover that the world we seek already exists. God spoke this world into existence by saying “Let there be light.” Let us repair the world and let us start by speaking anew.

יהיו לרצון אמרי־פי והגיון לבי לפניך יהוה

“May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be acceptable to you God” Psalm 19:14

⁶ Chofetz Chayim, *Guard Your Tongue* (New York: Bnay Yakov Publications, 1975), p.99.

⁷ Rabbi Mark Dratch, “Let Them Talk: The Mitzvah to Speak Lashon Hara” 19 January 2006. www.JSafe.org 10 September 2009.