

LASHON HARA

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As we continue in our quest to walk the Torah Walk, I want us to look at what may be the hardest steps of obedience we face.

I want to talk about one specific sin.

I want to talk about something that each and every one of us does, if not once a day, many times a day.

This sin is so much a part of your life that some of you may still want to argue that it is not sin at all.

And we may not even have known that we were doing it for many years of our life.

Some might say that I'm actually adding to the sin base by calling it to your attention.

I believe that as we grow in knowledge and understanding of Torah, our responsibility to obey becomes higher – and the punishment for disobedience becomes greater.

In the Talmud (Shabbat 148b) it states: It is preferable for a person to sin without realizing that his action was prohibited, than to sin and realize it.

Does this mean we should remain ignorant of the Torah?

NO! Because we cannot walk in His presence without a knowledge of Torah.

But I think we all realize it in our spirit when we do this thing.

And when you commit this sin, it affects everyone that comes into contact with you.

It is such a serious prohibition, that when one does it, he or she violates no less than **thirty-one** commandments from the Scriptures.

That means **five percent** of the commandments allude to this one sin, and yet this sin is not a part of the Ten Commandments.

I know what you may be thinking: How bad can it be if it is not a part of the big ten?

What could possibly be worse than murder, when you actually take a person away from their life?

This action also takes a person away from his or her life, but keeps the person here in the world to suffer with the consequences.

Jewish tradition holds that it was this sin that was responsible for the destruction of the Temple, the continued exile, and why the world is still not whole.

I believe it is the main reason Judah and Ephraim have made very little progress in becoming a unified Israel.

So what is it?

It is GOSSIP.

In fact there are **three kinds** of gossip.

The first is called **Lashon Hara** - the evil tongue - this is when you pass on derogatory or damaging information about another person. Notice that I didn't say false information!

The second is called **Rechilut** - which is the term used for a report that someone has spoken or acted against the listener, and the report causes hatred.

The third is **Motzi Shem Ra** - which means to bring out a bad name, it refers to Lashon Hara that is not only derogatory, but is untrue, a false rumor, **a lie.**

All three forms of gossip are capable of destroying lives.

Many times, a person uses the excuse but it's true, it can't be Lashon Hara.

Truth can be Lashon Hara.

In fact, **most** Lashon Hara may be factually true!

So where do all of these laws against Lashon Hara come from.

The basis, of course is in the Torah.
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But the man who devoted much of his life to this subject, and put all of these laws together in a way that was accessible to the public is Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, born in 1839 in a small Eastern European town of Zhetel.

He wrote many books on proper behavior, but for this subject he wrote a book called the Chofetz Chayim that became the name by which he is known.

The name comes from a verse in Psalms that had a great influence on the Chofetz Chayim.

The title of this first book, "Chofetz Chayim" means "the desirer of life" -- borrowed from Psalm 34:12

Mi ha-ish, he-chofetz chayim, ohev yamim (x2) lirot tov? -- meaning:

'Who is the one who desires life, loving their days, doing good?'

The answer:

"N'tzor l'shoncha me'ra" – **guard your tongue from lashon hara, from evil speech.**

"usfatecha, midaber mirma" – **and your lips from speaking guile.**

"sur mera v'aseh tov; bakesh shalom v'rodfehu" – **turn from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.**

We learn from this Psalm that lashon hara isn't just another law to not do something: it's a way of life that treasures life; that is ethical; that seeks and pursues peace.

There's also the unspoken opposite: ignoring the rules against lashon hara and going on with our inappropriate speech, **is anti-life, anti-love, anti-peace.**

That's a heavy trip, but an important one.

I am going to use material and information from the Talmud and sages this morning because there is so little material otherwise that covers this subject.

Most pastors and leaders do not even know what this subject means.

In fact, just this week we have the revelation of who "Deep Throat" was in the Nixon era that was responsible for the downfall of his presidency.

Regardless of how you felt about Nixon, no one should be faced with unknown accusers whom they cannot challenge, as he was.

The Chofetz Chayim tells of a famous story in the Talmud (Avodah Zarah 19b) where Reb Alexandry called out in a crowded street, **"Who wants life? Who wants life?"** A large crowd gathered. They said to him, "give us life"!

As the Chafetz Chaim explained, when the people first heard Reb Alexandry's offer of life, they thought he was selling a drug or medicine that had the power to increase a person's life span.

But he showed them a spiritual drug that can, he believed, (and the Chafetz Chaim believed, who lived for a hundred years) actually give a person long life.

Reb Alexandry quoted Psalm 34:13-14, Who is the person who desires life and loves days that s/he may see the good? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.

Most of us never heard about "Lashon Hara" in our church lives.

We might have heard a sermon about not being a gossip, but very little instruction is given in avoiding being one or the damage to lives that it causes.

We probably felt like the sermon was not even for us, it was for that lady who was always gossiping about someone.

You remember her, don't you?

The primary Scripture we want to look at is Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:16
Do not go about as a talebearer among your people.

Being a talebearer means being a gossip.

We need to first understand the power of the spoken word.

The power we wield with our tongue is far beyond what we can perceive.

Ya'Acov understood this power.

Ya'Acov 1:26 says "If any man among you seems to be religious, and bridles not his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is vain."

The problem with breaking ourselves from Lashon Hara is that we often don't want to stop.

We enjoy talking about other people.

We rationalize that we are only telling the "news".

None of us in here would consider ourselves a "gossip", heaven forbid!

But might we be?

Lev 19:18 says; Love your neighbor as yourself.

How can we show love for our neighbor while tearing them apart with harmful speech?

By speaking or listening to Lashon Hara, we show that we do not love our neighbor as ourself.

As a kid I used to have a saying about words spoken against me. “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”

What an untrue statement.

Bones can heal but often the damage done by words lasts for years.

Sometimes for a lifetime.

Jewish tradition teaches that lashon hara can destroy many lives, even unintentionally, in one fell swoop:

The person speaking The person spoken about And the person spoken to.

You might speak Lashon Hara because it can make you feel like you have power over both the listener and the subject.

I believe real power lies in those who can hold on to the things I share with them about my life.

If I feel safe, then I can become close with you, if I am fearful that whatever I say to you will be repeated to people I don't really know, how can we ever connect?

Also consider this: if I speak Lashon Hara about others to you, why would you ever want to tell me anything about you?

People begin to wonder what you are saying about them when they are not around.

Hold onto what is said to you in confidence by others.

It will deepen your friendships.

It will show that you love them in your heart, because you know that your private thoughts and desires are sacred to you, and your friend's experience of his or her

life is sacred to you, too.

It will show that you obey Vayikra 19:12 Do not hate your brother in your heart.

The person speaking may get a short time at “center stage” as they tell the piece of gossip but soon people will begin to mistrust them.

People don't trust gossips and soon will quit confining in them.

The reputation of being a gossip is just as damaging as being a “loose woman” or “abusive man”.

A person may never be able to get rid of that stigma.

We need to realize that the person spoken about is being killed in everyone's eyes.

Whether the information is true or not, it is hard to take back defamatory words or to undo the character assassination already committed.

That person's reputation may be forever blemished.

The person spoken to is the most culpable although they may seem the most innocent.

All they did was listen, right?

They may be the most guilty because;

They have the power to stop the conversation by telling the speaker that they do not engage in gossip, but did not do so.

Ya'Acov 3:6 says “ And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity; so is the tongue among our members, that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is on fire of hell.”

Oh, the power of the tongue!

There is a story about the man that had spoken negative and false information about his rabbi. The next day, realizing what he had done, he came to the rabbi saying that he would go to all the villagers and tell them he was wrong in his statements and asked the Rabbi's forgiveness. The rabbi agreed to forgive him if he would come to the town square tomorrow and bring his pillow. He went home thinking that this could not be too much of a punishment if it involved a pillow.

That morning with all the townspeople there, the rabbi instructed him to open up his pillow and cast the feathers to the wind. As he began doing so the crowd began to catch some of them but the wind picked the feathers up and they were blown everywhere. This began to be fun and soon the pillow was empty with even some feathers stuck to him but with others out of sight as the wind drove them away.

He turned to the rabbi and asked "Is this all I have to do for forgiveness?"

The rabbi said, "Only one more step and you will be completely forgiven."

"Put all the feathers back into the pillow."

Then he began to realize the impossibility of taking back his words.

It is deadly sin to speak evil of another person.

Ya'Acov 4:11 says "Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaks evil of his brother, speaks evil of the Law (Torah).

As Ya'Acov said above, we are speaking evil of Torah.

Not only are we not to speak evil about another, we are not to speak evil about ourselves.

Speaking negative about ourselves soon has us believing what we are saying.

Any time we depreciate ourselves, our looks, our height, our talents or even our hair, we are saying that Yahweh made a mistake with me.

We begin to believe what we say about ourselves even if it is not true according to Yahweh's Word.

If it is negative, it does not need to be public knowledge.

We are to confess our sins to Yahweh and seek teshuvah from Him.

If it involves another person, go to them and seek their forgiveness privately.

It is not necessary to make it public knowledge.

If you must talk about yourself, only speak of positive things.

That does not mean to become a braggart.

Simply speak only truth that is positive.

In this way you begin to build yourself up in your spirit.

Remember also that **truth** is not a determining factor in lashon hara.

The definition of lashon hara does not reflect truth or falsehood at all, but the damage it can inflict.

But sometimes we speak lashon hara because we forget that in many cases, truth can be subjective (like “beauty is in the eye of the beholder) or elusive, in that we do not know the whole picture.

Vayikra 19:15 says “in righteousness shall you judge your kinsman.”

That requires that we have at least 2 witnesses to whatever happened. It commands us to give the benefit of the doubt.

Our Indian friends say that we are not to judge a man until we have walked in his moccasins.

That agrees with Torah.

Remember these four verses and their meanings:

Lo Teylech r'chil b'amecha, **Do not go about as a talebearer among your people.**

V'ahavta l'reyecha kamocho, **Love your neighbor as yourself.**

Lo tisne et achicha bl'vav'cha, **Do not hate your brother in your heart.**

B'tzedek tishpot amitecha, **In righteousness you will judge your neighbor.**

Incidentally, all four of these verses are in the section entitled - The Holiness Code - in the book of Yayikra,.

Didn't Yahweh tell us to be holy as He is holy?

As the Chafetz Chayim wrote: A person who is resolved not to speak evil will be free from all other transgressions between people.

He will not slander, embarrass, or insult anyone, and he will keep away from feuds.

Certainly, he will not cheat others or steal; he is careful not to harm anyone with words, all the more so with actions.

Yahshua said that one of these is the second greatest commandment. **Love your neighbor as yourself.**

The **AI Chet** is one of the most famous High Holy Day prayers.

It's a double acrostic, with two 'popular sins' for each Hebrew letter.

A shocking number of these sins deal with speech: Two right at the beginning are, *Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha* (**for the sin we have sinned before You**) *b'vitui s'fatayim* (**through the utterance of lips**)... *v'b'dibur peh* (**and through the speaking of mouth**).

Since these two sound so similar, it begs the question, why both?

Because hurting others through speech is so common, yet so catastrophic, it deserves the repetition.

And then there's more: *b'vidui peh* (**through the confession of mouth**)... *b'tum'at s'fatayim* (**through the impurity of lips**)... *bil'shon hara* – **through lashon hara, the evil tongue.**

And we're only halfway through the Alef-bet!

Ahead are still the conversation of our lips, false vows, gossiping and rumoring.

Let's look at a rhyme from that list from the AI Chet, and work on our speech.

Here are some of the things not to do: Aim, Blame, Claim, Flame, Frame, Maim, Name, Shame.

Got it? Let's look at each of these:

Aim: Jewish tradition sees words as weapons, when used against someone. As Proverbs (18:21) says, *mavet v'chayim b'yad lashon* – life and death are in the power of the tongue. Don't direct your feelings, through spiteful or insensitive speech, at another person. It's too easy sometimes to take out our anger or frustration or sadness on someone else, often someone very close to us – even though those are the words that hurt the most. Don't aim.

Blame: We all want to be part of a winning team, and make sure that when something goes wrong in a system we're part of, we fix it. But publicly assigning blame on the person who seems to be responsible doesn't help. Even if they have messed up, we should point out their errors in private. Leaders who regularly assign blame end up with nervous followers, and followers who regularly assign blame end up driving away others. Don't blame.

Claim: Assumptions are also prohibited by the laws of lashon hara. To publicly claim anything about another person is, quite simply, inappropriate. A rumor is a claim, and rumors hurt. Behind the rules of lashon hara is the goal to slow down, check assumptions, and think twice (or more) before speaking. Don't claim.

Flame: We should also think twice (or more) before sending. E-mail is a bizarrely impersonal medium. Things we wouldn't dare say to someone's face somehow seem OK on a computer screen – but it's not. One offhand remark, or badly constructed thought, or bit of anger or frustration that seeps through in your tone, is enough to count as lashon hara. It takes way more time to undo that damage (if it's even possible) than it does to proofread before hitting 'send'. Don't flame.

Frame: Innuendo is among the worst forms of lashon hara. It's bad enough to talk about someone negatively behind their back; it's worse to subtly suggest bad things about someone, while trying to maintain plausible deniability. We need to own up to our actions, and the implications they carry for others. Don't frame.

Maim: Words can hurt, or even kill, in multiple ways. Name-calling, stereotyping, dehumanizing language, and exhortations to violence are all forms of speech that maim. We hear these in our own speech and also in pop music, literature, politics. Maiming speech. Don't do it.

Name: Here things get really interesting. Of course it's wrong to spread lies or exaggerations about someone. But it's also bad sometimes to accurately state the facts! The laws of lashon hara, in creating a 'fence' around blaming or maiming or shaming, say you shouldn't even name what's *true* about a person, unless it's vitally relevant information. Don't create openings for others to commit lashon hara. Don't name.

And, **Shame:** One way we hurt others through speech is halbanat panim, the whitening of the face, when blood drains away from public embarrassment. Jewish tradition says one who publicly insults another, or shames them, is an attempted murderer – they've tried not only to drain someone's blood, but also to 'kill' their character. Don't shame.

So this rhyming contrivance has covered most of lashon hara.

If it helps you remember what not to do, great.

Don't aim, blame, claim, flame, frame, maim, name, or shame, and you'll be in fine shape.

But there's obviously more to it than that.

Let's probe just a bit into a few areas of lashon hara that are less obvious, or gray areas where appropriate conduct might not be so clear.

Here are a few issues to get us thinking, and speaking more intentionally:

1. **Silence:** Remember the old adage, "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything?" That's actually a mitzvah. The Talmud (Yevamot 65b) says "Just as it is meritorious to say something which will be heeded, so it is meritorious to refrain from saying anything which will not be heeded." Elsewhere (Megillah 18a) it says, "the best medicine of all is silence – if a word is worth a coin, silence is worth two." Let's be conscious of not simply filling up airtime, but instead becoming comfortable with pauses. We complain that the pace of modern life is too fast, but we reinforce it with our constant communication. Turn off the cell phone; let eye contact and body language and touch suffice; make peace with comfortable silence.

2. **Listening:** When there's silence, we can hear better – as opposed to constant chatter, in which it becomes difficult to really listen above the din. Listening *is* a central value, from Sh'ma Yisrael (literally "listen, O Israel") on down. Listening to others well is the companion to speaking well. In truth, there's no such thing as uni-directional communication – it always goes both ways.

3. ***Bittul Zman***, literally the wasting or nullifying of time, is a rabbinic prohibition against anything that's not truly worthy. Much of our speech may not be a direct violation of lashon hara, but it isn't exactly uplifting, either. How much time do we waste in small talk, discussing things of no consequence? Chofetz Chayim says: "people waste precious time with idle chatter... wasted time is lost for all eternity. One who guards his tongue from lashon hara will keep his conversations to a minimum, giving him ample time for studying Torah." Torah study *is* of consequence – so are activism and volunteerism, quality time with friends and family, and so on. Every time we speak mindlessly – or equally bad, listen to other's mindless speech, such as most of what passes for television these days! – we take time away from that which is truly meaningful.

A gray area: **Venting**. We mustn't gossip – but isn't it good to let out our frustrations safely, so they don't blow up publicly? Shouldn't the rules of lashon hara be different for partners, best friends, therapy, and the like? NO! If you must vent, do it with the one that can do something about the situation, Yahweh.

We need to begin a crusade to wipe out lashon hara in our assembly.

We can do better than simply avoiding lashon hara: we can cultivate **lashon tov**, positive, affirming, constructive, community-building, loving, sacred speech.

We can discipline ourselves not only to guard our tongues against insults, but to be generous with praise – to encourage others through our words – to create a positive and supportive verbal environment in the classroom, boardroom, bedroom and living room.

Imagine a community that took lashon tov, the good tongue, seriously!

Oh the places we could go if – individually and collectively – we made this our goal for the year.

Finally, lashon hara isn't just a bad habit that most of us have slid into – it's a reflection of our own attributes or patterns or insecurities, which we would do well to consider.

It's not good, but it is natural, to be judgmental of others, and successful folks tend to have developed experience in judging others.

All of us have probably made the statement; "I am a good judge of people."

If you have to walk around harboring bad thoughts or feelings about people, the laws of lashon hara limit the damage by bidding you not to share them.

But the best and most meaningful way to avoid lashon hara is not to **think** bad thoughts of others – in which case it's perfectly natural to not say bad things about them.

So the real root of lashon tov, of positive and constructive speech, is positive and supportive thought – giving others that benefit of the doubt, and deeply knowing that they and their contributions have a place.

As parents and Grandparents, it is important that we also assume our responsibility to teach our children and grandchildren about Lashon Hara

Teaching our children to avoid speaking *lashon hara* takes a concerted effort.

Experiment with the following tools:

1. *Teach by example.* Showing children that it's a priority for you is perhaps the most important lesson. Don't let them hear your gossiping with your friends or relatives. Don't let them hear you laughing at other people's expense. Even better than "don't let them hear you" is not doing it -- whether they're in earshot or not.
2. *Discuss the importance of avoiding lashon hara.* Help your children identify what is and isn't proper speech. Talk about how improper speech can hurt others and how it hurts the person speaking *lashon hara*.
3. *Discourage "tattling."* When your kids come to "tell on" someone, tell them you aren't interested in reports of someone else's bad behavior, but that you're available if they need help or advice.
4. *Get in the habit of not using names.* There's no need for you to know the names of problem students at school or in the neighborhood unless you'll have a direct role in addressing the issue. Focus the discussion on your

child's feelings, worries and concerns. If he or she needs protection that requires your intervention, tell him or her that it is proper to tell you the name of the offending child.

5. *Don't fall into the trap of casual lashon hara.* At dinner and at other family times, bring books to the table to discuss or talk about current events. When you discuss what happened in each person's day, focus on what they learned that day and how they felt. Show your children that there are more interesting things to talk about than other people's poor behavior.
6. *Give positive reinforcement.* Be sure to commend your kids when they manage to tell you about school or neighborhood problems without mentioning who was involved. Let them know that you're proud of them - and that Yahweh is too.
7. *Reminders!* Tape a reminder to the telephone: "No *Lashon Hara!*" Put up signs on the fridge and in other prominent locations around the house.
8. *Study it.* Read a small section of the laws of *lashon hara* each day during dinner or at your Shabbat table. (You can find these on the internet or in Jewish books.) Encourage discussion and examples.

Lashon Hara or Lashon Tov?

It's your choice.

We can all change the impact we have on others that we come in contact with for good.

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