

NCSY Torah
on One Foot Series

LASHON HARA

לשון
הרע



GUARD YOUR SPEECH

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Lashon Hara means “evil speech” and refers to gossiping about others.

AVAK LASHON HARA

(Traces of Lashon Hara)

AVAK LASHON HARA is a statement that is not in and of itself *lashon hara*, but leads others to speak *lashon hara*. Even praising a person in front of someone who doesn't like him or her is *avak lashon hara* in that it tempts the rival to disagree with the praise.

One must also be careful to avoid praise that could cause harm. For example, praising someone's wealth could encourage thieves, or praising someone's hospitality could encourage others to take advantage of him or her. This is alluded to in *Mishlei* 27:14

where it says, “If one praises his neighbor loudly from the morning, it is considered a curse.”



B'APEI TLASA (In Front of Three)

THERE IS a leniency regarding speaking what may be considered *lashon hara* to a group of three or more people. If something is not intrinsically derogatory, but could be taken the wrong way, it may be said in front of the group. Since it is likely that what was said will ultimately get back to the subject, it is safe to assume that the speaker meant the ambiguous comment in the non-derogatory way.

An example of an ambiguous comment that would be permitted *b'apei tlasa* is, “The Cohens always have a pot on the stove.” Such a comment could mean that they are hospitable and always ready for guests (a positive thing) or that they are a family of gluttons (a negative thing).

***B'apei tlasa* does not mean that one may speak actual *lashon hara* in front of a crowd!**

Rechilus (Tale Bearing)

A talebearer is someone who carries tales among people, saying things such as “This is what Bob said about you...” or “I heard Ashley wants to do such-and-such to you...” It is considered *rechilus* (tale-bearing) even if the story is true, is not intrinsically derogatory, or if the speaker's intention was not malicious.

It is forbidden to speak *rechilus* even indirectly, such as creating animosity by referring to supposedly “innocent” topics. One may not incite ill will by mentioning a sore subject or reminding someone of an old dispute, which could revive bad feelings.

Rechilus is forbidden, even if refraining from speaking would cause the individual a large financial loss. It is a negative commandment of the Torah (“Thou shalt not”), and one must forfeit all his possessions rather than violate it (*Yoreh Deah* 157:1).

Mishlei 6:16–19 says, “Hashem hates six things, and the seventh is an abomination to His soul.” Among the six things that Hashem hates are spilling innocent blood and rushing to do evil. What's the seventh thing that He hates most of all? “One who stirs up trouble among brothers.” Accordingly, *rechilus* is a most severe type of negative speech.



Doeg the Edomite told King Saul that Achimelech ben Achituv, a *Kohein* of the city of Nov, gave food and weapons to David, who was fleeing from Saul. After hearing what Achimelech did for his rival David, Saul ordered that all the *Kohanim* in Nov be killed. This is the power (and danger!) of *rechilus*.

(*Shmuel I* 21–22)



"What if I have to speak *lashon hara* in order to protect someone?"

Before you do, ask yourself:

- Do you know the information first-hand?
- Was the incident truly a violation of Torah law?
- Did you approach the transgressor privately with gentle rebuke?
- Are you exaggerating the sin in any way?
- Are your intentions pure?
- Can the problem be solved without speaking *lashon hara*?
- Would your speaking *lashon hara* cause the transgressor harsher than appropriate repercussions?

THE MERAGLIM

The Meraglim (the spies who visited the land of Israel after the Jews left Egypt) were guilty of speaking *lashon hara* against the Holy Land. It wasn't just the ten spies who actually spoke *lashon hara* that were guilty; the entire nation was guilty because they accepted the spies' evil report! As a conse-



SELECTED LAWS OF LASHON HARA

Lashon hara is prohibited EVEN IF...

- It's derogatory but not intrinsically damaging. (For example, "John is so weird!" or "What an ugly outfit Suzie has on!")
- It's damaging but not intrinsically derogatory. (Such as saying "Mike's originally from Georgia" to Mike's boss who has an irrational dislike of people from the South.)
- You don't actually reveal the subject's name.
- You convey information by hinting.
- You would say it to the subject's face.
- It's "just a joke."
- It's true. (*Lashon hara by definition* is true! If it's false it's called "*motzi sheim ra*," spreading a bad reputation, and is even worse!)

Not only is it forbidden to speak *lashon hara*, it is prohibited to listen to it! If hearing it is unavoidable, it is forbidden to believe it!

quence, B'nei Yisroel had to spend forty years in the wilderness.

If such serious consequences can come from speaking against soil, rocks and trees which have no feelings, just imagine what can come of speaking ill of a fellow human being!

Arachin 15b

This one page of Talmud has quite a lot to say about *lashon hara*. Here are just a few excerpts:

REGARDING one who speaks *lashon hara*, Hashem says, "I cannot dwell with him," as it says (*Tehillim* 101:60), "One

who slanders his neighbor... him I cannot tolerate."

ONE who speaks *lashon hara* is like one who denies G-d, as it says (*Tehillim* 12:5), "They have said 'Because of our tongues we will prevail...who is Master over us?'"

ANYONE who speaks *lashon hara* acquires sins equivalent to idolatry, adultery and bloodshed.

LASHON HARA kills three people: the one who said it, the one who listened and the one about whom it was said.

TZARA'AS & LASHON HARA

In Biblical times, the punishment for speaking *lashon hara* was *tzara'as* (a skin disease commonly translated as "leprosy," but actually somewhat different). The *metzora* ("leper" – related linguistically to *motzi ra*, one who spreads evil) had to live outside the camp. This was a punishment *midah k'neged midah* (measure for measure); since his *lashon hara* antagonized and separated people from one another, he was punished by being isolated from the community. (See Rashi on *Vayikra* 13:46.)

Miriam was punished with *tzara'as* for speaking ill of her brother Moshe (see *Bemidbar* 12). This is one of six things that the Torah commands us to remember every day (*Devarim* 24:9).

Even Moshe Rabbeinu, greatest of the prophets, could not speak *lashon hara* with impunity. Why did Hashem give Moshe's hand *tzara'as* (*Shemos* 4:6)? Because Moshe spoke *lashon hara* about the Jewish people by saying that *B'nei Yisroel* would not listen to him or believe that he spoke with G-d (*ibid*, 4:1).

THE TORAH SAYS...

- You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people
Vayikra 19:16
- You shall not utter a false report.
Shemos 23:1
- Keep far away from a false matter.
Shemos 23:7
- You shall rebuke your neighbor and not bear sin because of him.
Vayikra 19:17
- Do not take revenge or bear a grudge.
Vayikra 19:18
- Love your neighbor as yourself.
Vayikra 19:18
- Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn from evil and do good. Desire peace and pursue it.
Tehillim 34:14-15
- Death and life are in the power of the tongue.
Mishlei 18:21
- One who guards his mouth and tongue guards his soul from troubles.
Mishlei 21:23
- It is better to jump into a flaming furnace than to embarrass somebody.
Brachos 43B

The Chofetz Chaim

Rav Yisroel Meir Kagan of Radin (1838-1933) was the author of many important works, including the *Mishnah Berurah*. He is called "The Chofetz Chaim" after one of his many works on *lashon hara*. "Chofetz Chaim" means "the one who desires life." The phrase is from *Tehillim* 34:13-14, "Who is the one who desires life? ... Guard your tongue from evil..."



The Chofetz Chaim's works have been translated and adapted in many forms. There are not only books, but also tapes, daily planners, web sites, telephone hotlines and email lists that assist people with following the laws of *lashon hara*. Entire organizations have been founded for that sole purpose! *Lashon hara* is an area that requires constant vigilance!

For a guide to resources to help you avoid speaking *lashon hara*, visit us at www.ou.org/ncsy/projects/lh03.htm