
THE STUNNING POWER OF SPEECH II

Lashon Hara – Destructive Speech

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” According to Judaism, nothing could be further from the truth. The power of speech, man’s defining quality, can either be an extraordinarily constructive or, if misused, highly destructive force in the universe.

In this second class on the Stunning Power of Speech, we will discuss *lashon hara*, which means “evil speech” – the evil and negativity expressed by a person through communication. We will learn what is so destructive about lashon hara, identify what is considered negative speech, and clarify those situations when one can listen to or share potentially harmful information. The third Morasha shiur on the Power of Speech provides a framework to eradicate destructive speech and strive to enhance peaceful relationships.

This class will address the following questions:

- ∞ Why does Judaism view lashon hara as so destructive?
- ∞ Is there a framework to avoid speaking lashon hara and foster harmony?
- ∞ If another person is speaking lashon hara, may one listen?
- ∞ Are there any circumstances where the Torah allows one to speak lashon hara?

Class Outline:

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 - Part B. The Spiritual and Physical Harm Caused by Lashon Hara
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- Section V. Speaking Lashon Hara for a Constructive Purpose

SECTION I. THE SEVERITY OF LASHON HARA

1. Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Chofetz Chaim: Lesson a Day, p. xvii – Speech shapes the destiny of the Jewish people!

When one explores the mitzvah of proper speech, and the concomitant transgression of lashon hara, one fact becomes eminently clear: we are not dealing with business as usual. The cosmic repercussions of this issue are so intense that they have literally shaped the destiny of our people. It is hard to imagine that any religion would make so dramatic a statement as to say that God Himself had chosen not to sit in His home on this earth, that His people have been in exile for 2,000 years, because of the words that come out of our mouths.

The power we wield when we speak is far beyond what we can perceive. Imagine going to an automatic teller machine at your local bank, inserting the plastic ATM card and making a simple transaction, only to be told upon exiting that you had actually just transferred \$17 billion from the treasury of one country to that of another and left a devastating bankruptcy in your wake. We think we're only exchanging a few words, when in fact we're moving worlds.

What we will find as we explore the philosophy and laws of proper speech is that what appear to be benign pieces of information are actually the tremendously potent key factor in our relationship to God and in living our lives as Jews. Lashon hara is so powerful, in fact, that it can erase the merits of a lifetime of Torah learning and mitzvah observance.

Just as the negative consequences of speech can be so vast, the positive consequences of proper speech are even greater. The Vilna Gaon says that proper speech is the single biggest factor in determining one's portion in the World to Come. The Chofetz Chaim tells us that adherence to these laws empowers our prayers, validates our Torah learning, accesses God's Divine Protection and invokes the many blessings that God, in His kindness, is waiting to shower upon us.

From this, it is clear that proper speech is so vital to our lives that it is almost life itself. And that is why King David declared, "Who is the man who desires life? Guard your tongue..." (Tehillim/Psalms 34:14).

The following story illustrates the seriousness of speaking lashon hara.

The Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, 1838-1933) and another rabbi once set out on a three-day journey to take care of a spiritual need in a town somewhere in Poland. Along the way they stopped at an inn where they were seated at a special table, for the woman who owned the restaurant recognized them to be prestigious rabbis. She had them served promptly, and when they finished the meal she approached them and asked, "So, how did you like my food?"

"Very good," said the Chofetz Chaim. "It was excellent."

"Oh, it was quite good," said the second rabbi, "but it could have used more salt."

As the woman left, the Chofetz Chaim turned white. "I can't believe it!" he exclaimed. "All my life I have avoided speaking or listening to lashon hara and now God made me come with you, and I have to suffer by hearing you speak lashon hara! I regret coming with you and I am convinced that the purpose of our trip is not truly for a spiritual need after all. Otherwise this would not have happened to me."

Seeing the Chofetz Chaim's reaction, his companion became flustered and frightened. "What did I say that was

so wrong?” he stammered. “I said that the food was good – I only added that it needed some salt!”

“You simply don’t realize the power of words!” cried the Chofetz Chaim. “Our hostess probably doesn’t do her own cooking. Her cook could well be a poor widow who needs this job to support her family. Now, because of what you said, the owner will go back to the kitchen and complain to the cook that the food didn’t have enough salt. In self defense the poor widow will deny it and say, ‘Of course I put enough salt in the food. I even tasted it before you served it.’

“The owner will then accuse her of lying and say, ‘Do you think that the rabbis out there are liars? You are the one who is lying!’ They will argue, strong words will lead to even stronger words and the owner will get so angry that she will fire the poor cook. The woman will then be out of a job. Look how many transgressions you caused: (1) You spoke lashon hara; (2) you caused the owner and myself to listen to lashon hara; (3) you caused the owner to repeat the lashon hara and that is the sin of rechilut; (4) you caused the cook to lie; (5) because of you the owner caused pain to a widow, and (6) you caused an argument, another Torah violation.”

The rabbi smiled at the Chofetz Chaim and said softly and respectfully, “R’ Yisrael Meir, please, you are exaggerating. You’re carrying this just bit a too far. A few simple words cannot possibly have done all that.”

“If that is what you think,” replied the Chofetz Chaim as he stood up, “let’s go to the kitchen and see for ourselves.”

As they opened the door to the kitchen, they saw that the owner was indeed berating the cook as the poor woman stood wiping tears from her eyes. When the rabbi saw what was happening he became pale and ran over to the cook, begged for forgiveness and apologized profusely for any harm or distress he caused her. He pleaded with the owner to forgive and forget the incident and let the woman stay on the job. He even offered to pay her to keep the cook.

The innkeeper was really a kindly woman and she also wanted to fulfill the rabbi’s request. “Of course, of course,” she said hastily. “I only wanted to impress on her the need to be more careful. She is really a fine cook and she will remain here at her job.” (Rabbi Paysach Krohn, *The Maggid Speaks*, p. 59.)

Imagine if the rabbi had *complimented* the cook on the soup! Imagine how events would have transpired if he had said, “Please thank the cook for the best soup I’ve had all week!” Such is the power of our words to build or destroy. In the following sources, let us take a deeper look at the power of the tongue.

1. **Talmud Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud), Pe’ah 1:1 – Lashon hara is equivalent to the transgressions for which one must surrender one’s life rather than commit: idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder.**

There are four transgressions for which one pays in this world and in the next: idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder. And lashon hara is equivalent in severity to them all.

ארבעה דברים שהן נפרעין מן האדם בעולם הזה והקדש קיימת לו לעולם הבא ואילו הן: עבודה זרה, וגילוי עריות, ושפיכות דמים. ולשון הרע כנגד כולן.

To fully understand why Judaism views speaking negatively about others with such severity, we need to look at two incidents in the Torah: (1) Miriam commenting about Moshe Rabbeinu’s (Moses) separation from his wife, Tziporah, and (2) the report of the Spies about the Land of Israel.

First some background: Since Moshe was always ready to receive prophecy, he had to be ritually pure at all times, which meant that he had to refrain from marital relations with his wife Tziporah. This intimate matter remained their private affair, until Miriam learned of it from a chance remark by Tziporah. Not realizing that God had instructed Moshe to separate, and feeling that it was an unjustifiable affront to Tziporah,

Miriam shared the news with Aharon (her brother) who agreed with her. In the next source, we see Miriam and Aharon being critical of Moshe, contending that since the two of them were also prophets, but were not required to withdraw from normal marital life, neither was Moshe (Rabbi Nosson Scherman, Stone Chumash, Bamidbar/Numbers 12).

2. Bamidbar 12:1-15 – Miriam criticized her brother Moshe, and as a result she was afflicted with tzara'at (a leprosy-like affliction) for speaking lashon hara.

Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe, concerning the Cushite wife he had married... They said, "Has God only spoken through Moshe [in prophecy]? He has spoken through us, as well!"

And God heard ... He said, "Now hear my words. If there shall be prophets among you, I appear to them in visions, I speak to them through dreams. Not so my servant, Moshe. He is trustworthy in My entire house. I speak to him mouth to mouth, with clear vision and not in riddles. Why did you not fear speaking about my servant, about Moshe?"

And God became angry with them and He left. And the cloud left the tent and Miriam was white as snow with tzara'at. Aharon turned to Miriam and she had tzara'at ... Miriam was quarantined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not journey until Miriam was brought in.

וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל אִשְׁתּוֹ הַכּוּשִׁית
אֲשֶׁר לָקָח... וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֵרֶק אַךְ בְּמֹשֶׁה דִּבֶּר ה' הֲלֹא גַם בָּנוּ
דִּבֶּר וַיִּשְׁמַע ה'...

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַעוּ נָא דְבַרִּי אִם יְהִי נְבִיאֵכֶם ה' בְּמִרְאָה אֵלֵי
אֶתְנַדֵּעַ בְּחִלּוֹם אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ. לֹא כֵן עֲבָדִי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל בֵּיתִי
נֶאֱמָן הוּא. כֹּה אֶל פִּה אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא בְּחִידָת
וּתְמִנָּת ה' יָבִיט וּמִדּוּעַ לֹא יֵרָאֶתֶם לְדַבֵּר בְּעַבְדִּי בְּמֹשֶׁה.

וַיַּחַר אַף ה' בָּם וַיִּלֶךְ. וְהֶעֱנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהִנֵּה מִרְיָם
מִצְרַעַת כַּשֵּׁלֶג וַיִּפֹּן אַהֲרֹן אֶל מִרְיָם וְהִנֵּה מִצְרַעַת...
וַתִּסָּגֵר מִרְיָם מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְהָעָם לֹא נָסַע
עַד הָאֶסָּף מִרְיָם.

3. Devarim (Deuteronomy) 24:8-9, with Rashi – Miriam's ordeal reminds every generation to take great care with their speech.

Be exceedingly careful regarding the plague of tzara'at ... Remember what God did to Miriam on the way when you were coming out of Egypt.

Rashi

"Remember" – If you wish to be sure that you do not suffer from tzara'at, do not speak lashon hara. Remember what happened to Miriam who was punished when she spoke lashon hara about her brother.

הַשֹּׁמֵר בְּנִגְעַת הַצְרַעַת לִשְׁמֹר מְאֹד... זְכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה
ה' אֶלְקֵינוּ לְמִרְיָם בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם.

רש"י

זְכוֹר – אִם בָּאתָ לְהַזְהֵר שֶׁלֹּא תִלְקַח בְּצַרְעַת אֶל תִּסָּפֵר
לְשׁוֹן הָרַע זְכוֹר הַעֲשׂוֹי לְמִרְיָם שְׂדִיבְרָה בְּאֶחִיהָ וּלְקַתָּהּ
בְּנִגְעִים.

Miriam's offense seems relatively minor, in that she merely questioned Moshe's separation from his wife. Yet this example tells us just how seriously God views negative speech. This is more fully explained in the next source.

4. **Rambam (Maimonides), Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tumat Tzara'at (Laws of Tzara'at Impurity) 16:10 – Even though Miriam was Moshe's devoted sister and he wasn't upset by her comment, nevertheless, her negative speech was a serious transgression.**

The message of Devarim 24:8-9 [source 4 above] is: Think about what happened to Miriam who spoke about her younger brother, for whom she had risked her life to save from the Nile River. And she did not even speak negatively about him, other than to compare him to other prophets. And Moshe himself did not mind that she had spoken about him, as it says, "Now Moshe was extremely humble" [Bamidbar 12:3].

And in spite of all of this, she was still punished with tzara'at! All the more so for other wicked and foolish people who speak all types of haughty and pompous words. It is therefore fitting for anyone who wishes to improve himself to stay away from such people and from speaking with them.

ועל עניין זה הוא מזהיר בתורה ואומר "הישמר בנגע הצרעת ... זכור, את אשר עשה ה' אלוהיך למרים, בדרך" (דברים כד, ח-ט): הרי הוא אומר התבוננו מה אירע למרים הנביאה שדיברה באחיה שהיתה גדולה ממנו בשנים וגידלתו על ברכיה וסכנה בעצמה להצילו מן הים. והיא לא דברה בגנותו, אלא טעתה שהשותו לשאר נביאים. והוא לא הקפיד על כל הדברים האלו שנאמר "והאיש משה עניו מאד".

ואף על פי כן מיד נענשה בצרעת, ק"ו לבני אדם הרשעים הטפשים שמרבים לדבר גדולות ונפלאות. לפיכך ראוי למי שרוצה לכון אורחותיו להתרחק משיבתן, ומלדבר עמהן כדי שלא יתפס אדם ברשת רשעים וסכלותם.

The second incident occurred right after the episode with Miriam. The Jewish people requested to send spies to survey the Land of Israel before their entry. As the next source shows, ten of the twelve tribal leaders who were sent to investigate the land returned with a unified voice: "God is sending us to a dangerous land that will eat us up."

5. **Bamidbar 13:31-33, with Rashi s.v. *ochelet yoshvehah* – The spies returned with a negative report concerning the Land that God was giving to them. Even the special protection that was afforded them by God was interpreted negatively.**

But the [ten] men who had ascended with him [Yehoshua/Joshua] said, "We cannot ascend to [the land to drive out] that people for it is too strong for us!" They announced an evil report to the Children of Israel regarding the land that they had spied, saying, "The land through which we have passed is a land that devours its inhabitants! All the people that we saw there were huge ... we were like grasshoppers in their eyes!"

Rashi

"A land that devours its inhabitants" – The spies said, "In every place we passed we saw the inhabitants burying their dead." But God did this as a favor to the spies: to protect them from being detected He distracted the inhabitants with mourning and burying the dead.

והאנשים אשר עלו עמו אמרו לא נוכל לעלות אל העם כי חזק הוא ממנו. ויציאו דבת הארץ אשר תרו אותה אל בני ישראל לאמר הארץ אשר עברנו בה לתור אותה ארץ אכלת יושביה הוא וכל העם אשר ראינו בתוכה אנשי מדות ... ונהי בעינינו כחגבים ...

רש"י

אוכלת יושביה - בכל מקום שעברנו מצאנום קוברי מתים, והקב"ה עשה לטובה כדי לטרדם באבלם ולא יתנו לב לאלו.

6. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Arachin 15a – The lashon hara spoken about the Land of Israel was the ultimate cause of wandering in the desert for forty years.**

The decree that the Jewish people had to wander in the desert for forty years was sealed due to the lashon hara they spoke with regard to the Land of Israel.

שלא נתחתם גזר דין על אבותינו במדבר אלא על לשון הרע.

As we see in the next source, lashon hara was one of the causes of the destruction of the Second Temple, and the ensuing spiritual exile which continues to the present day.

7. **Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (the Chofetz Chaim), Shmirat HaLashon, Sha'ar Zechirah, Ch. 6 – Lashon hara caused the exile and dispersion of the Jewish people.**

The Jewish people were exiled because of the transgression of lashon hara.

בעון לשון הרע גלו ישראל...

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ☞ Words are powerful. They can build people up for life, or destroy them in a single sentence.
- ☞ Because lashon hara can wreak untold damage, it is compared with those transgressions for which one should sacrifice one's life rather than commit.
- ☞ Every generation is instructed to remember Miriam's ordeal after she spoke negatively about her brother Moshe. Even though Miriam was Moshe's devoted sister and he was not upset by her comment, nevertheless her negative speech was a serious transgression.
- ☞ Additionally, because of the lashon hara spoken by the Spies, the Jewish people wandered in the desert for forty years, rather than enter the Land of Israel.

SECTION II. WHAT'S SO TERRIBLE ABOUT IT?

What's so harmful about a little gossip? Anyway it permeates our world – it's on television, in newspapers, and internet. In fact, it's so exciting to be the first one on the block to reveal the sensational news about so-and-so.

But Judaism calls gossip *lashon hara*, “evil speech”! Why should it be considered evil? If it's true and anyhow everyone will find out, what's the harm? It's just a few words! Or is it? The following sources will answer this question.

PART A. LASHON HARA CONTRADICTS THE PLAN OF CREATION

1. **Talmud Bavli, Arachin 15b – God cannot exist in the same world as someone who speaks lashon hara.**

Regarding anyone who speaks lashon hara, God

כל המספר לשון הרע, אמר הקב"ה: אין אני והוא יכולין

says: "He and I cannot coexist in the same world." The verse says, "He who slanders his friend in secret ... him I cannot bear" [Tehillim 101:5]. Do not read it as "him I cannot bear [pronounced *uchal*]," but rather "with him I cannot eat [pronounced *ochel*]."

לדור בעולם, שנאמר: "מִלְשָׁנִי בְּסִתְרִי רָעָהוּ ... אֶתוֹ לֹא אוֹכֵל", אל תיקרי אותו לא אוֹכֵל, אלא "אֶתוֹ לֹא אוֹכֵל".

The next source explains the full meaning behind the above statement.

2. **Rabbi Menachem Shlanger, Midot Ha'Emunah, p. 54 – Even though people have weaknesses, God sees the good in them and guides them to reach their own personal perfection. On the other hand, someone who speaks lashon hara is emphasizing the weaknesses in people, and ignores the good, and thus contradicts God's plan for humanity.**

The meaning of this statement [Arachin 15b, in the previous source] is that the world of the speaker of lashon hara is a contradiction to the world that God has created.

To explain: It is axiomatic that the world is imperfect and has deficiencies. The way God guides events in the world is to lead it to its ultimate perfection. This applies to each individual as well. Each person has imperfections and deficiencies, but God, in His compassion sees the good within each person as his true essence, and assists him to reach his own personal perfection.

With this perspective there is no place for categorizing someone as lacking because of his inadequacies, because he is, after all, on his way to perfection! ... The habitual speaker of lashon hara emphasizes the negative aspects of others, and in so doing gives these weaknesses reality and permanence. By doing this, he removes himself from the world that God has created, a world that is completely directed for moving toward perfection.

כלומר: עולמו של בעל לשון הרע סותר במהותו את העולם אותו הקב"ה יוצר.

והביאור – מעיקר מהות העולם שאין הוא שלם מתחילתו אלא יש בו חסרונות, והנהגת הקב"ה מוליכה אותו לקראת שלמות. כן הוא גם בחיי האדם, לכל אחד יש פגמים וחסרונות, אך השי"ת ברחמיו רואה לעיקר את הטוב שבאדם, ומסייע בידו לתקן חסרונותיו ולהגיע לתכליתו.

במבט זה אין מקום לקבוע על אדם כי הוא במצב של חסרון, כי הרי הולך לקראת שיפור ותיקון... בעל לשון הרע מבליט בדבריו את החסרונות, ועושה אותם למציאות קבועה, ועיקרית. בזה הוא מוציא את עצמו מעולמו של הקב"ה, שכולו נוהג לקראת שלימות.

PART B. THE SPIRITUAL AND PHYSICAL HARM CAUSED BY LASHON HARA

To understand the damage caused by lashon hara, the next source provides background information on how our actions are judged and weighed in the Heavenly realm.

1. **Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto), Derech Hashem (The Way of God) 2:6:1-4, translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Feldheim Publishers, pp. 155-161 – God arranged that events in this world be affected by courts of justice in the spiritual worlds. Judgment for our wrongdoings is delayed due to God's kindness, but only until the Prosecuting Angel demands that we be judged.**

God arranged matters so that His direction of the world should be done in a way that resembles that of an earthly government ... The spiritual realm therefore contains courts of justice ... and various tribunals consisting of spiritual beings ... All cases that need to be judged are brought before these courts, and what subsequently happens is the result of their decrees.

God Himself is present in each of these courts ... He makes them grasp the essential nature of each case, so that the judgment issued should be true ... Accordingly, we may say that God does not judge the world simply based on His omniscience, but based on the systems that He has instituted ...

[Part of this system is that] God also appointed a prosecutor, known as the Satan ... whose job it is to demand that a particular person or action be judged. This is also as a result of God's goodness, since even though a person's wrongdoings are known to God, he is not brought to judgment until he is indicted [and arraigned] by this Prosecutor.

[א] סדר האדון ברוך הוא שהנהגת עולמו כלה ... יעשה בסדר כעין מלכות הארץ ... והיינו בבתי דינין ... כי הנה סידר בתי דינים שונים של נמצאים רוחניים.... שלפניהם יערכו כל הענינים הראויים לישפט ובגזירתם יקומו כל הדברים...

[ב] והנה הוא ית"ש מופיע בכל הסנהדראות האלה... ומעמידם על תוכן הענין שבאמת שיצא המשפט לאמיתו... [ג] נמצא לפי שורש זה שאין הקבה דן העולם בבחינת ידיעתו אלא בבחינת הסדרים שרצה וסידר לענין...

[ד] והנה שם האדון ברוך הוא את הקטיגור הוא השטן ... ופקודתו לתבוע דין בתי הדין. וכשהוא תובע יתעוררו הדינים וישפוטו. וממידת טובו שלא יתפס בדין עד שיקטר המקטר ואע"פ שחטאי החוטא גלויים לפניו.

Now, back to lashon hara:

2. **Tehillim 34:13-14 – King David advises us: if you want life, guard your tongue from speaking evil.**

Which man desires life, who loves days of seeing good? [If you so desire:] Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.

מי האיש החפץ חיים אהב ימים לראות טוב. נצר לשונך מרע ושתקיך מדבר מרמה.

The next sources will explain the above verse.

3. **Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, Shmirat HaLashon, 1:1, Merkaz HaSefer Edition, p. 21 – Why is it that life in this world and the World to Come are contingent upon avoiding lashon hara? There are many other mitzvot and prohibitions!**

The commentaries explain that the phrase "who desires life" refers to eternal life in the World to Come. And the phrase "who loves days of seeing good" refers to this world, which is only a matter of days in comparison to the eternal life.

ופרשו המפרשים, דמה שאמר הכתוב, "החפץ חיים" היינו חיים הנצחיים בעולם הבא, ו"אהב ימים לראות טוב" היינו בעולם הזה, שהוא רק בחינת ימים לגבי חיי הנצח.

It seems rather baffling that the verse advises one to avoid this *specific* sin of speaking negatively. [Why is life in this world and the next contingent on the prohibition of lashon hara?] After all, there are 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments. Why does the verse stress this particular offense?

ולכאורה יפלא מאוד: מה זה ייחוד לנו הכתוב בפרט שנשמר מן העון הזה? הלא נצטוונו בתורה רמ"ח עשה ושם"ה לא תעשה...

4. **Ibid. 1:2, pp. 23-24 – Since our actions and attitudes are mirrored in the spiritual world, if we speak negatively about others then negative accusations are brought against us in the spiritual world.**

One reason for the severity of the offense of lashon hara is based on the fact that a person's attitudes have an impact on the higher worlds. The types of attitudes that one has in *this* world causes similar attitudes in the higher worlds ...

When someone speaks lashon hara about another person, he activates accusatory attitudes in the higher worlds against himself and against the Jewish people. Through his words he gives power to the Satan to accuse and bring the Jewish People to trial.

כי ידוע הוא, כי לפי מה שהאדם מנהיג את עצמו במדותיו בעולם הזה, הוא מעורר כנגדו למעלה בעולם העליון ...

ואם מדבר לשון הרע על חבריו ומעורר מדנים עליו, מעורר בזה למעלה ענין קטגוריא על ישראל, ונותן בזה כח לשטן שיקטרג על ישראל.

5. **Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hakdamah, Merkaz HaSefer Edition, p. 11 – The power of life and death are in the tongue. Negative words can ultimately lead to the death of others at the hands of the Heavenly Court.**

It seems clear to me that the reason the Torah views this offense so strictly is because lashon hara awakens the accusatory powers on high against the Jewish people. Through this, one can even end up killing a number of people in different countries!

ונראה פשוט שהטעם שהחמירה התורה כל כך בזה העון משום שמעורר בזה הרבה את המקטרג הגדול על כלל ישראל, ועל ידי זה הורג כמה אנשים בכמה מדינות.

6. **Talmud Bavli, Arachin 15b – Words of lashon hara are compared to arrows because they cannot be retrieved once they have been shot.**

The tongue is compared to an arrow, as the prophet says, "Their tongue is like a drawn arrow, speaking deceit..." [Yirmiyahu/Jeremiah 9:7] ... How can one fix the consequences of one who speaks lashon hara? ... There is no remedy ...

אין חץ אלא לשון, שנאמר: חץ שחוט לשונם מרמה דבר ... מה תקנתו של מספרי לשון הרע? ... רבי אחא ברבי חנינא אומר סיפר אין לו תקנה...

One man spread a rumor about another. He later felt regret, and went to the rabbi to ask how to make amends.

"Go to the store and buy a bag of seeds," said the rabbi, "then go to a big open field and scatter the seeds into the wind. Do so and report back to me in a week."

The man did as he was told, and came back the next week to find out what to do next.

“Now,” said the rabbi, “go back to the field and pick up all the seeds.”

“But,” protested the man, “those seeds have scattered far and wide! I’ll never find them all. Many have even already taken root!”

“Exactly,” explained the rabbi. “Now you understand. When we speak badly about another person, the effect is far and wide. And it is damage that can never be fully undone.” (From Rabbi Shraga Simmons, www.aish.com, *The Power of Speech*)

PART C. LASHON HARA RUINS A PERSON’S TRUE ESSENCE

1. Bereishit (Genesis) 2:7, with Onkelos and Rashi – The identifying quality of the human soul is the power of speech, which animals lack.

And God formed man of dust from the ground, and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living soul.

Onkelos

“Man became a living soul” – He became a speaking soul.

Rashi

“Man became a living soul” – Animal and beast too were called “living soul” [Bereishit 1:24, 30], but this soul of man is the most alive of them all, for there was added to this soul the faculties of reasoning and speech [which animals lack].

וַיִּצְרֶה אֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם עֶפְרָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו
נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה.

אונקלוס

... והות באדם לרוח ממללא:

רש"י

לנפש חיה - אף בהמה וחיה נקראו נפש חיה, אך זו של
אדם חיה שבכולן, שנתוסף בו דעה ודבור:

2. Maharal, Chidushei Agadot, Arachin 15a, s.v. v'nimtzaḥ – Since speech combines the physical and spiritual aspects of a person, it defines his essence as a human being. Therefore, someone who speaks lashon hara abuses and ruins his essence.

This power of speech in man does not only come from the physical organs of speech [but rather, it comes from the soul too] ... Therefore, the essence of man is a living being that speaks [for his power of speech combines his physical and soul aspects] ... Therefore, someone who speaks lashon hara ... sins with his speech, which is his essence. [On the other hand, if he speaks properly] he perfects his essence.

וא"א שיהיה הדיבור רק ע"י כלים גשמיים ... וזהו צורת
האדם שהוא חי מדבר. ולכך המוציא שם רע ... שחטא
בדיבור אשר הוא צורת האדם, ועל ידו הוא אדם שלם.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ☞ What's wrong with a little gossip? It's just words! If one understands that God's plan for Creation is to guide each person to perfection, then it's clear that the strengths in every person must be

emphasized over his weaknesses. Someone who speaks lashon hara is focusing on the weaknesses in another person, and therefore undermines God's essential goal. This explains the Talmud's statement: God says, "I cannot coexist in the same world with someone who speaks lashon hara."

- ☞ Furthermore, life in this world and the World to Come are contingent upon avoiding lashon hara. Why? There are many other mitzvot and prohibitions! Since our actions and attitudes are mirrored in the spiritual worlds, if we speak negatively about others, then negative accusations are brought against us in the spiritual world. So potent is this chain of events, that it can even lead to the death of people in different countries!
- ☞ Finally, the identifying quality of the human soul is the power of speech, which animals lack. And since speech combines the physical and spiritual aspects of a person, it defines his essence as a human being. Therefore, someone who speaks lashon hara abuses and ruins his very essence. Now we can really answer the question: what's wrong with a little gossip?

SECTION III. THE FIVE CATEGORIES OF LASHON HARA

In the previous sections we saw the negative effects of lashon hara. This section will sensitize us to the five different types of lashon hara identified in the Torah. (Although the different types each have their own name, as a group they are commonly referred to as lashon hara.) In this verbal arsenal, each weapon inflicts harm in its own way, but all use the same ammunition – words.

The more categories a culture has to describe something, the more sensitized it is to that subject. Can any other people or culture claim to have five categories of negative speech? And furthermore, can any other culture claim to have nineteen chapters written on the details of these categories (in Sefer Chofetz Chaim)? The following anecdote reflects this.

I was once on a plane sitting next to two people who worked in the same office. In the course of the flight, I heard an earful of office politics and a complete psychological dissection of everybody in the office. Listening to the nonstop lashon hara, I realized how long it had been since I had heard such talk. It does not happen anymore in "our" world. It is socially unacceptable to gossip in such a vulgar fashion.

Of course we have not licked the problem of lashon hara. If we had, we would no longer need annual days of introspection concerning this mitzvah around the world. But the existence of those days demonstrates clearly the unique nature of the Jewish people. What other people has placed the refinement of speech at the very top of its agenda? Thousands around the world might demonstrate for or against abortion, for or against capital punishment, but try to imagine any other people drawing tens of thousands to rallies and speeches devoted to the subject of proper speech! Ask a group of non-Jews to list the greatest problems confronting our society and not one would mention the quality of private speech. As an issue, speech is not even on the agenda. (Rabbi Yissocher Frand, In Print, ArtScroll Publications, pp. 144-145.)

Now let's understand the types of lashon hara that undermine society in order to take the appropriate steps to uproot it.

PART A. RECHILUT: SPEECH THAT CAUSES DISPUTES

1. Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:16 – We are instructed not to go about gossiping.

Do not peddle gossip among your people ... I am God.

לֹא תִלְךְ רִבִּיל בְּעַמֶּיךָ ... אֲנִי ה'.

The above verse needs elaboration as to what constitutes “gossip.” The sources below elaborate.

2. **Rabbi Yosef Karo, Kesef Mishneh, Hilchot De’ot (Laws of Attitudes) 7:1 – *Rechilut* is telling someone about what other people said about him or did to him. The information itself may be neutral, but it will cause a dispute or dislike between the parties.**

One who “peddles gossip” [*rechilut*, Vayikra 19:16] refers to a person who says, “So-and-so *said* such-and-such *about you*”, or “So-and-so *did* the following *to you* ...” even though the information is not necessarily intrinsically negative [but can nevertheless provoke arguments between parties] ... Since he carries the information around from one person to another, he is called a “peddler” [a traveling salesman of gossip].

שרכיל היינו האומר “פלוני אמר עליך כך וכך” או “עשה לך כך” אף על פי שאותו דבר אינו גנות...כיון שטוען דברים מזה והולך לזה רכיל מיקרי.

3. **Rabbeinu Yonah, Sha’arei Teshuvah 3:222 – The seriousness of *rechilut* is that it replaces peace with arguments and hatred, and can lead to the destruction of families and communities.**

The damage that can be wrought by gossip-mongering is incalculable. It brings hatred between people, and therefore causes them to transgress the prohibition of “Do not hate your brother in your heart” [Vayikra 19:16]. The world continues to exist only based on peace, and one who peddles gossip causes the world to fall apart.

ונזק הרכילות חדל לספור כי אין מספר, כי הוא מרבה שנאה בעולם, ומכשיל את בני אדם לעבור על מה שכתוב בתורה “לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך”. והנה העולם קיים על השלום ומפני השנאה נמוגים ארץ וכל יושביה.

PART B. LASHON HARA: HARMFUL OR DEROGATORY SPEECH

In the previous part we discussed *rechilut*, speech that is not necessarily negative, but cause disputes and hatred.

In this part we will discuss lashon hara, where the speech itself is negative. The next sources describe two types of lashon hara:

1. Derogatory speech – it might cause people to think less of the subject, and
2. Harmful speech – it might cause physical, emotional or financial harm to the subject.

1. **Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot 7:2 – Lashon hara is derogatory speech about someone else and is forbidden even if it is true.**

There is a transgression that is much worse than *rechilut*, also included in the prohibition of “do not peddle gossip.” This is known as lashon hara, or derogatory speech. This refers to someone who speaks in a derogatory manner about someone else – **even if what he says is true** ...

Someone who speaks lashon hara will say negative and derogatory things like, “So-and-so

יש עון גדול מזה עד מאד, והוא בכלל לאו זה והוא לשון הרע, והוא המספר בגנות חבירו אע”פ שאומר אמת...

בעל לשון הרע זה שהוא יושב ואומר כך וכך עשה

did the following ...” or “So-and-so’s parents did the following ...” or “I heard the following about So-and-so ...”

פלוני כך וכך היו אבותיו וכך וכך שמעתי עליו ואומר דברי גנאי.

2. **Ibid 7:5 – Lashon hara also consists of harm-causing speech, which might not be overtly derogatory, but can still cause physical, emotional or financial harm.**

Lashon hara also consists of information that, if publicized, could cause physical, financial or emotional harm (it also includes causing a person emotional pain or giving him a fright).

והמספר דברים שגורמים אם נשמעו איש מפי איש להזיק חברו בגופו או בממונו ואפילו להצר לו או להפחידו הרי זה לשון הרע.

For example, if someone relates that Levi is not “the smartest” it could cause him a financial loss by discouraging someone else from becoming his business partner.

PART C. MOTZI SHEM RA: HARMFUL OR DEROGATORY SPEECH THAT IS UNTRUE

Motzi Shem Ra is slandering or lying about someone else, a severe form of lashon hara.

1. **Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot 7:2 – When the lashon hara is untrue, then one is speaking *motzi shem ra* (slander).**

[The previous cases refer to someone who speaks negative information that is true.] Someone who speaks derogatory or harmful information about someone that is *untrue* – he is called a slanderer (*motzi shem ra*).

אבל האומר שקר נקרא מוציא שם רע על חברו.

(Please refer to the Morasha class, *Can You Ever Tell a Lie?* for a full discussion on the importance of telling the truth.)

PART D. ONA’AT DEVARIM: SPEECH THAT CAUSES PAIN

The Torah looks at the pain caused by words as a real wound. This is in complete opposition to the common belief that words cannot hurt.

1. **Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot, negative mitzvah #251 – It is forbidden to speak to someone in a way that will cause him emotional pain or embarrassment.**

We are instructed not to cause emotional distress to each other with our words [*ona’at devarim*]. This includes statements that cause another person pain, anger, or embarrassment...

The source in the Torah is, “Do not aggrieve your fellow, and you shall fear your God” [Vayikra 25:17]. The Talmud tells us that the verse is referring to causing emotional distress with our words [*ona’at devarim*].

שהזהירנו מהונות קצתנו את קצתנו בדברים. והוא שנאמר לו מאמרים יכאיבוהו ויכעיסוהו ולא יוכל לעמוד מפני שיתבייש מהם...

והוא אמרו (בהר פ' יז) וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת עֲמִיתוֹ וְיִירָאתָ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ. אמרו זו אונאת דברים (ב"מ נח ב).

In the Torah's acute awareness of the power of words, it sees *ona'at devarim* as every bit as real as, and in some ways more serious than, the physical or financial harm individuals can inflict on each other (Bava Metzia 58b). The prohibition against *ona'at devarim* tells every Jew to use the softest possible approach to difficult situations, and to use the kindest possible words and manner to convey the message (Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Chofetz Chaim: Lesson a Day, p. xl). The following are examples of *ona'at devarim*:

- *Insulting comments*: “I told you so!” “What a dumb question!” “It’s all your fault because ...”
- *Reminding someone of his misguided or foolish behavior in the past*: “I remember when you ...”
- *Using a nickname with intent to cause discomfort*: “old man,” “baby face,” “crazy head.”

PART E. AVAK LASHON HARA: SPEECH BORDERING ON LASHON HARA

While the first four categories are all prohibited in the Torah, the early Torah Sages saw fit to include in this transgression anything that borders on lashon hara. The term used for this is *avak lashon hara*, literally, “the dust of lashon hara.”

1. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot 7:4 – Examples of avak lashon hara.

There are certain things that, although they are not actual lashon hara, are considered “avak lashon hara,” literally “dust of lashon hara,” or something close to the actual transgression.

Some examples of avak lashon hara are:

1. “Who would have thought that So-and-so would turn out like he is today?” [Implying that in the past he had a negative reputation.] Or,
2. “Let’s not talk about So-and-so. I don’t want to say what happened with him.” [Implying that there is something wrong with the subject].
3. Speaking positively of someone in the presence of his enemies, for this will surely cause them to start speaking negatively about the subject.
4. Speaking lashon hara without malice, rather as a joke or lightheartedly.
5. Similarly, one who feigns innocence, as though he were not aware of the fact that he is speaking lashon hara.

יש שם דברים שהן אבק לשון הרע. כיצד?

כגון “מי יאמר לפלוני שיהיה כמות שהוא עתה.”

או שיאמר “שתקו מפלוני איני רוצה להודיע מה היה ומה אירע.” וכיוצא בדברים האלו.

וכל המספר בטובת חבריו בפני שונאיו הרי זה אבק לשון הרע. שזה גורם להם שיספרו בגנותו ...

וכן המספר בלשון הרע דרך שחוק ודרך קלות ראש כלומר שאינו מדבר בשנאה ...

וכן המספר לשון הרע דרך רמאות, והוא שיספר לתומו כאילו אינו יודע שדבר זה לשון הרע הוא...

Examples, of the last case are:

- “I didn’t think anything was wrong.”
- “Oh! I didn’t know that was lashon hara.”

Although it is not included in the prohibition against lashon hara, revealing information that was told to you as a secret or confidentiality is also prohibited (Talmud Bavli, Yoma 4b).

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

☞ There are five categories of negative speech:

1. **Rechilut**: is telling someone about what other people said about him or did to him. The information itself may be neutral, but it may cause a dispute or bad feelings between the parties.
2. **Lashon Hara**: is derogatory speech about someone else, and is forbidden even if it is true. Lashon hara also consists of harm-causing speech, which might not be derogatory, but will still cause physical, emotional or financial harm.
3. **Motzi Shem Ra**: is lashon hara that is untrue.
4. **Ona'at Devarim**: is causing emotional pain or embarrassment with one's words.
5. **Avak Lashon Hara**: is saying something whose implied meaning is derogatory or harmful; or saying lashon hara as a joke or with fake innocence.

☞ The more categories a culture has to describe something, the more sensitized it is to that subject. Can any other people or culture claim to have five categories of negative speech?! And furthermore, can any other culture claim to have nineteen chapters written on the details of these five categories (in Sefer Chofetz Chaim)?!

SECTION IV. COMMUNICATING, LISTENING, AND BELIEVING LASHON HARA

PART A. METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

Does lashon hara refer only to *speaking*? What about *writing* something derogatory? Or silently hinting something negative? The next source will explain.

1. **Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchot Lashon Hara (Laws of Derogatory Speech) 1:8** – If the message is negative it makes no difference if the lashon hara was communicated through speech, writing or hinting.

The prohibition against communicating lashon hara applies whether one conveys the information verbally or in writing. There is also no difference between relating lashon hara explicitly or through hinting.

איסור זה של לשון הרע הוא בין אם הוא מספר עליו בפיו ממש או שהוא כותב עליו דבר זה במכתבו. וגם אין חילוק בין אם הוא מספר עליו הלשון הרע שלו בפירוש ובין אם הוא מספר עליו הלשון הרע בדרך רמז. בכל גווני בכלל לשון הרע הוא.

In all cases of communication – even if it's only in writing or a hint – if the message is derogatory or harmful, then it's lashon hara. For example:

Yaakov: *When Reuven comes he will help you.*

Yitzchak: *(With a cynical smile): Sure, Reuven ...*

PART B. LISTENING VERSUS BELIEVING LASHON HARA

1. **Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchos Lashon Hara 6:1-2 – Believing lashon hara is almost always prohibited. However, one can listen to the information (but not believe that it's true) if it's something relevant to you, and it can protect you from future harm.**

It is prohibited by the Torah to *accept and believe* lashon hara. One who accepts it transgresses the prohibition of, "Do not accept a false report" [Shemot 23:1] ...

It is also forbidden to intentionally *listen* to lashon hara *even* if one has no intention of believing it. However, there is a difference between (1) listening versus (2) believing lashon hara.

1. *Listening* to lashon hara is forbidden if the information does not pertain to him. However, if the information being said might pertain to him in the future, it is permitted to listen in order to be prepared and protect himself [from damage or harm]. It is permitted because his intent is not to hear the derogatory information about the person, but rather to protect himself from harm.

2. However, it is forbidden under all circumstances to *believe* the lashon hara and decide in your heart that the information is true [unless it is confirmed, as described in the next source].

[א] אסור לקבל לשון הרע מן התורה...דהינו שלא נאמין בלבנו שהסיפור הוא אמת ... והמקבל לשון הרע עובר בלא תעשה שנאמר "לא תשא שמוע שוא" ...

[ב] אף על שמייעת לשון הרע לבד ג"כ יש איסור מן התורה אף דבעת השמיעה אין בדעתו לקבל הדבר, כיון שמטה אזנו לשמוע. אך יש חלוק בין שמייעה לקבלה ...

דבשמייעה אין איסור רק אם אין הדבר נוגע לו על להבא, אבל אם הדבר נוגע לו על להבא אם אמת הוא ... מותר לכתחילה לשמוע לזה כדי לחוש לזה ולהשמר ממנו, כיון דמה שהוא רוצה לשמוע אין כונתו לשמוע נגותו של חברו, רק הוא רוצה להציל את עצמו ...

אבל לקבל, דהינו להחליט הדבר בלבו שהוא אמת אסור בכל גווי.

The following examples are an application of the above principle:

If a particular businessman is said to have engaged in dishonest business practices, (you can protect yourself, but) it is forbidden to call him a thief, or even to treat him coldly and harbor an internal dislike for him.

If an unsubstantiated report circulates that an individual who is considered needy has deliberately created a false impression of poverty in order to elicit donations, it is forbidden to cease giving him charity based on this unconfirmed report alone. (Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman, Journey to Virtue, 13:10)

As the next source describes, there are certain conditions under which lashon hara may be believed.

2. **Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman, Journey to Virtue, pp. 122-3 – In special circumstances even believing lashon hara is permitted if there are (1) a number of reports from (2) multiple sources (3) who are impartial.**

Rumors [i.e. lashon hara] may not be believed unless they are confirmed. Confirmation takes place when there exist: (1) a number of reports from (2) multiple sources (3) who are impartial.

(1) A number of reports is defined as the subject having been seen engaging in a consistent pattern of behavior over a period of time; one episode does not prove negative character. (2) Reports which originate from only one person are not considered reliable proof. (3) Moreover, if the sources dislike the subject, the reports are never considered reliable. Very often, negative information is widely circulated and accepted, but upon investigation, it is revealed that all the reports originated from a single source or from individuals who dislike the subject and are therefore not reliable, or that only one incident is under discussion [based on Chofetz Chaim, Hilchos Lashon Hara, Chap 7, Be'er Mayim Chayim 8].

Caution should be advised when hearing:

“Everyone knows it’s true – it’s the talk of the town!” (How does “everyone” know? From how many sources does the information originate, and are they impartial? How many separate events are they discussing?)

“Of course it’s true, there was a whole write-up in the newspaper. I also heard it on the news.”

Even in a case where lashon hara may be believed, it is still forbidden to repeat what one has heard (or even personally witnessed), unless a legitimate need exists, such as for the other party’s protection. If the case was not personally witnessed but originated from multiple impartial sources, he should say so when sharing the information (ibid. p. 127).

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ☞ The *message* is more important than the *words*. Therefore, if one in any way conveys a derogatory message – by hinting, winking, smirking, writing, etc. – this is considered lashon hara, even if no words were spoken.
- ☞ Furthermore, just as we have to be careful about what comes *out* of our mouths (as well as our gestures), we have to be careful about what comes *into* our ears. If someone else mistakenly speaks lashon hara, the following rules apply:
 1. It is forbidden to listen to the information, unless it is relevant to you and can protect you from future harm.
 2. It is forbidden to believe the information, unless there exists (1) a number of reports from (2) multiple sources (3) who are impartial.

SECTION V. SPEAKING LASHON HARA FOR A CONSTRUCTIVE PURPOSE

Finally, we need to consider certain situations in which one can speak lashon hara for a constructive purpose. Consider the following scenario:

Larry has been proposed as a business partner to Daniel, and you were previously Larry's partner on numerous investments. In all your dealings with Larry you have only good things to say about his business practices. However, another associate once mentioned to you how a large business deal failed due to Larry's involvement. Daniel has approached you for your advice on whether he should accept Larry as his partner, and you know Daniel is seeking someone with a stellar track record. What do you say?

There are specific criteria that allow a person to share negative information about another party.

1. **Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchot Lashon Hara 10:1-2 – Before relating negative information for a constructive purpose, there are seven conditions that need to be met.**

If one saw a person wronging someone else, through theft, deceit or any other form of harm ... and one knows with certainty that no amends were made ... one may tell this information to others in order to help the victim, or to publicize how unacceptable these acts are. He must, however, make sure that the following seven conditions are met:

1. [The speaker of the negative information] must have witnessed the incident, and not heard about it from someone else, unless he is able to verify its truthfulness.
2. He must calmly think over whether or not the incident actually constitutes a theft, damage or wrongdoing, examining the issue from all sides and not coming to hasty conclusions.
3. He must first attempt to approach the offender himself, if that is possible, gently rebuke him for his misdeed and urge him to set things right.
4. He must not exaggerate in his account of what transpired.
5. His intent must be only for the sake of achieving justice, and not God forbid, enjoying the negative light in which he is casting his fellow. Nor may he speak out of hatred that he already harbors for the subject.

אם אחד ראה אדם שעשה עולה לחבירו כגון שגזלו או עשקו או הזיקו...ונודע לו בבירור שלא השיב את הגזילה...יכול לספר הדברים לבני אדם כדי לעזור לאשר אשם לו, ולגנות המעשים הרעים בפני הבריות. אך יזהר שלא יחסרו אלו השבעה פרטים שנבארו בסמוך.

ואלו הן:

א] שיראה דבר זה בעצמו, ולא על ידי שמיעה מאחרים אם לא שנתברר לו אחר כך שהדבר אמת.

ב] שיזהר מאד שלא יחליט תכף את הענין בדעתו לגזל ועושק או להזק וכיו"ב, רק יתבונן היטב את עצם הענין אם הוא על פי דין בכלל גזל או נזק.

ג] שיוכיח את החוטא מתחילה ובלשון רכה אולי יוכל להועיל לו...

ד] שלא יגדיל העולה יותר ממה שהיא.

ה] שיכוין לתועלת, ולא ליהנות ח"ו מהפגם ההוא שהוא נותן בחבירו ולא מצד שנאה שיש לו עליו מכבר.

6. If there is any way in which he can achieve the same results without having to resort to relating the negative information, he is required to take that course of action.
7. It must be clear that the consequences that the offender will suffer will be no more severe than those he would face were he to be brought to Beit Din [Jewish court of law].

ו] אם הוא יכול לסבב את התועלת הזאת גופא בעצה אחרת, שלא יצטרך לספר את ענין הרע עליו, אזי בכל גוני אסור לספר.

ז] שלא יסובב על ידי הספור היזק להגידון יותר מכפי הדין שהיה יוצא אילו הועד עליו באופן זה על דבר זה בבית דין.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION V:

- ☞ Under certain conditions, Judaism's ideals of peace and protecting the innocent takes precedence over not speaking lashon hara. Therefore, to prevent harm or to settle a dispute, it is permitted to relate negative information that would otherwise be considered lashon hara, as long as seven conditions are met, which include witnessing the event and trying to approach the offender first.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHY DOES JUDAISM VIEW LASHON HARA AS SO DESTRUCTIVE?

1. Lashon hara undermines God's plan for Creation, in which the goal is to build up each person to reach perfection.
2. Lashon hara causes physical and spiritual harm.
3. Man's essence as a combination of physical and spiritual elements is expressed through speech. By speaking lashon hara one transgresses with one's very essence.
4. Because lashon hara can wreak untold damage, it is compared to those transgressions for which one should sacrifice one's life rather than commit.

IS THERE A FRAMEWORK TO AVOID SPEAKING LASHON HARA AND FOSTER HARMONY?

By avoiding the following categories of lashon hara, we are on the road to bringing peace to the world:

1. *Rechilut*: is telling someone about what other people said about him or did to him.
2. *Lashon Hara*: is derogatory or harm-causing speech about someone else, and is forbidden even if it is true.
3. *Motzi Shem Ra*: is lashon hara that is also untrue.
4. *Ona'at Devarim*: is causing emotional pain or embarrassment with one's words.
5. *Avak Lashon Hara*: is saying something whose implied meaning is derogatory or harmful; or saying lashon hara as a joke or with fake innocence.

IF ANOTHER PERSON IS SPEAKING LASHON HARA, MAY ONE LISTEN?

It is forbidden to listen to the information, unless it is relevant to you and can protect you from future harm. And even if it's permitted to listen, it is forbidden to believe the information.

ARE THERE ANY CIRCUMSTANCES WHERE THE TORAH ALLOWS ONE TO SPEAK LASHON HARA?

To prevent harm or to settle a dispute, it is permitted to relate negative information that would otherwise be considered lashon hara, as long as seven conditions are met.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

Chofetz Chaim: A Lesson a Day (concepts and laws of proper speech), Rabbis Shimon Finkelman and Yitzchak Berkovits (ArtScroll/Mesorah, 1995)

Guard Your Tongue, Rabbi Zelig Pliskin (Pliskin, 1975)

Journey to Virtue: The laws of interpersonal relationships in business, home and society, Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman (ArtScroll/Mesorah, 2002), Chaps. 5, 13, 17, 19, 21

Successful Relationships at Home, at Work and with Friends, Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski (Artscroll/Mesorah, 2003)

SECTION I.

Talmud Bavli, Arachin 15b – Lashon hara is as serious as the sins of idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder.

SECTION IV.

Chofetz Chaim, *Hilchos Lashon Hara*, Ch. 7, Be'er Mayim Chayim