

*Parasha Nitzavim Va'yelecheh***How can I Make Up for having Spoken Lashon Hara (Evil speech)?****Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,**

I live out of town in a very small Jewish community, and they don't offer many Torah classes for women. I always look forward receiving your weekly writing, which is my lifeline and connection to Torah and the Land of Israel. Thank you so much for making the effort to keep sharing your unique Torah of the Land. I hope you are well, and that Hashem gives you the strength and insight to keep inspiring many more women! I've been having some challenging relationships with a family member, and I feel really badly about having spoken negatively about her to others. I am wondering what to do if I spoke lashon hara and then feel badly about it later. How do I deal with it? Is there a specific way to repent? Thank you so much!

Sincerely,

Devorah Silverman (name changed)

Dear Devorah,

It's good that you are contemplating doing teshuva (repentance) at this time, just prior to Rosh Hashana. When we remember our imperfections and shortcomings, then G-d will overlook them on the Day of Judgement. Teshuva is the greatest gift, because "Teshuva preceded the world" (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 54a*). Therefore, nothing stands in the way of teshuva (*Jerusalem Talmud, Peah 5a*). When we express regret, do teshuva and sincerely cry out, we draw down towards ourselves pardon and forgiveness from the upper world. Since teshuva preceded the world, it causes us to become a new person, with our slate totally wiped clean like before creation (*Ohr L'Smamayim, Parashat Bo*). Even more so today, when there is no altar of atonement, there remains nothing but teshuva to atone for sins. Even a person who was wicked his entire life but repented in his final moments, will not be punished for any aspect of his wickedness as, "the wickedness of the evil one will not cause him to stumble on the day he repents his wickedness" (*Yechezkiel 33:12*); (*Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva 1:1*). Then, how do we repent in general and more specifically from speaking lashon hara?

The Teshuva Process Involves Our Heart, Speech and Action

The meaning of Teshuva is "return." It is about returning to our true selves – the Divine spark within us – beneath the layers of murky 'soul-fog.' When we do teshuva, we assess our ways, recognize our shadow sides, and return to our own original state of spiritual purity – our divine selves. We essentially return to our direct bond with Hashem.

The process of teshuva involves the following four steps:

1. Regret – Realizing the extent of damage and feeling sincere regret.
2. Cessation – Immediately discontinuing the harmful action.
3. Confession – Confessing the sin before Hashem and asking for forgiveness.
4. Resolution – Making a firm commitment to change for the future.

You need to apply your entire heart and soul in the teshuva process, as we learn from the first verse of the teshuva section in *Parashat Nitzavim*:

ספר דברים פרק ל פרק ב וְשָׁבַת עַד הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם אֶתְּךָ וּבְנֶיךָ בְּכֹל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכֹל נַפְשְׁךָ:

“Return to Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice, according to everything I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul” (*Devarim 30:2*).

Feeling badly about doing what we shouldn’t have done is actually the first step of teshuva – regret. When you move through the process of teshuva, the bad feeling goes away and is replaced with a feeling of relief. Not only must our hearts be involved in doing teshuva, we also need to apply our faculty of speech and change our actions. We must confess to ensure that we will make a real effort to change. When we express with our lips the feelings of our hearts, we are more likely to live up to it and carry it into action.

Asking Forgiveness for Speaking Lashon Hara

Confession can be just moving your lips quietly to ourselves and Hashem, but if we wronged anyone, we also need to ask forgiveness from that person. If we have caused a person emotional, physical, or financial harm through our lashon hara, we must ask him or her for forgiveness. While it is relatively easy to apologize to the people with whom we spoke lashon hara, it is not so, regarding the person we disparaged. It wouldn’t go off well, to approach him or her saying, “I’m sorry I spoke lashon hara against you, please forgive me!” We have a Danish expression that translates something like, “What you do not know can’t hurt you.” If the person was unaware of your lashon hara, your request for forgiveness will only cause unnecessary pain. However, we can only obtain Divine forgiveness after we have tried everything to receive forgiveness from our victim. Therefore, the solution is to ask general forgiveness from the person without specifying for what.

Creating the Highest Light Imaginable by Refraining from Negative Speech

Doing teshuva for negative speech is to become aware of the effect of our words. Before speaking, we must ask ourselves, “Can it damage someone?” Not only derogatory words, but even words that are seemingly neutral could cause harm. Before speaking about someone, we can visualize that person overhearing our words. Would the person that I am speaking about be embarrassed if she was present? We can also train ourselves to ask before speaking whether our words may cause anyone to look down at the person about whom we are speaking? This way we can learn to elevate our speech. The words of holiness we speak in this world create upper worlds and holy angels, who become advocates for our soul. Even if we have already spoken lashon hara and we feel that everything is lost, it is never too late to stop. For every single extra word that we refrained from expressing, we create a light so great that even the highest angels are unable to imagine it (The Vilna Gaon).

Permission to Speak

Sometimes speaking negatively about others is not lashon hara, because it is for a beneficial purpose. It could, for example, be for the purpose of getting advice for how to deal with a delicate situation. There are other reasons, too where it is permitted to speak negatively. For example, to

Please send your **Ask the Rebbetzin Questions** to director@berotbatayin.org
 Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum | Director, Midreshet B’erot Bat Ayin | www.berotbatayin.org

help prevent others from getting involved with a certain person which could be harmful for them. When a person is going through great hardships, due to a negative encounter with someone, it is permitted to vent to a good friend, in order to gain relief from the inner turmoil. However, we must carefully select the friend with whom we share our feelings. Venting to every person we meet is no longer for a beneficial purpose. I heard an old tape by Rabbi Kessing where he said, "Although it is allowed to vent, who said we can be an air conditioner?"

The Mirror of Noticing Your Fellow's Flaws

The Ba'al Shem Tov explained that the person, who is completely pure and holy, never notices anything negative in others. The reason we notice when someone does something wrong is because that person is a mirror to our own shortcomings. Even if we may not engage in the misbehavior to the same degree, we have a tinge of it ourselves. Hashem made us see or hear this imperfection in someone else, in order to make us aware of our own similar shortcoming, so that we can repent and repair the flaw in ourselves. Therefore, rather than speaking lashon hara, we need to look inwardly and mend our own ways. This way, we also rectify the imperfection in the other person. This concept is a deeper way of reading the well-known injunction against speaking lashon hara: "Guard your tongue from evil ...turn away from evil and do good" (*Tehillim* 34:14). "Guard your tongue from evil" – do not despise and speak about the evil of others. Rather, "turn away from evil" – and rectify the evil in yourself. By means of this, you will "do good" – by causing the person whom you noticed to also become good and repent from his evil (Arvei Nachal, *Parashat Lech Lecha*).