



## Why does Guarding our Tongue Generate the Greatest Spiritual Protection?

### Why is it so Hard to Refrain from Negative Speech?

One of the factors that originally attracted me to become Torah observant was Torah's emphasis on Jewish ethics – specifically proper conduct toward others. It is much easier for someone from the secular world to relate to developing refinement in thought, speech and actions, than, for example, to appreciate the intricate laws of Kosher foods. Every Jew and perhaps most gentiles, too, have an innate desire to become a good person. It's just that outside of the Torah world, we are often misled about how to define this goal and about the ways to achieve it. Almost every person on this planet knows deep down, that gossip, bad mouthing and derogatory speech is a negative habit to stay away from. Nevertheless, people keep engaging in negative speech out of habit, or due to nothing better to talk about. Furthermore, we have all inherited an ingrained tendency to blame others – from Adam and Eve – who evaded taking responsibility for their wrongdoing by blaming someone else. Since there is no clear definition of what is considered unethical, negative speech in the secular world, it is easy to slide down to our lower selves and slip into damaging speech. Thus, since I don't play bridge or chess, I'm always finding it challenging to visit with secular family and friends. It is often difficult to come up with meaningful topics for discussion, and without realizing it, we may naturally find ourselves entangled in disparaging gossip about mutual acquaintances. If we could only fathom the poisonous arrows emanating from our mouths, with every denigrating word, wouldn't we be more careful? But if we must be so careful about speaking about others, what remains to speak about?

### Worthwhile Speech is Limited to Words of Wisdom and Kindness

King Solomon, the wisest of all men, provides us with an answer in his description of the Woman of Valor: "Her mouth opens in wisdom, and the Torah of kindness is on her tongue" (*Mishlei* 31:26). This implies that rectified speech must remain within the categories of wisdom and kindness. 'Wisdom' implies sharing Torah insights and general knowledge, including but not limited to scientific discoveries. For example, discussing ways to remain healthy in various situations is surely included in, "Her mouth opens in wisdom..." In addition to sharing wisdom, engaging in "Torah of kindness" is the second worthwhile way of conversing. Kindness refers to whatever kind of helpful, encouraging and soothing words we can share with others. Even giving directions on the street to a passerby or offering to pass the salt can be included in this category of 'kindness.' Every kind of worthwhile speech can be traced back to the two categories of 'wisdom' and 'kindness.' There is really no value in any other kind of speech. As my parents always used to say when we were kids: "If you don't have anything good to say then keep silent!" This is a helpful rule of thumb to go by. Perhaps, Hashem orchestrated it that such a large part of the world population has been wearing face masks – even though [there is very little evidence that it actually protects against the virus](#) – in order to inculcate the message that we need to cover our mouth and think twice before letting out steam.

## Protection from Plagues

In biblical times, a person who engaged in lashon hara would become afflicted with the spiritual skin disease called tzara'at. Hashem would give the person time to reflect and repent, by first bringing tzara'at on his home. If he didn't repent, then it would spread to his utensils, and then finally afflict the person's body (*Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Tazria* Chapter 10). When the Kohen had diagnosed the person with tzara'at, he would have to leave the camp and be in quarantine until he was healed (*Vayikra* 13:46), before going through the purification process that would readmit him into the community (*ibid.* 14:1-20). The current pandemic, which has put people in quarantine and confined populations to their homes, in some way parallels the purification process from tzara'at. This alludes to the fact that we must reflect on our lives and our relations with others, which first and foremost is expressed through speech. Becoming more careful with our use of words is advantageous in all ways. It will protect us from plagues and afflictions in this world and grant us eternal life in the next world. The midrash explains that, although the men of the generation of Shmuel were great Torah scholars, they would go to war and fall, because there were words of accusation between them. In contrast, although the generation of Achav worshipped *Avodah Zara* (idols), when they would go to war, not one of them would be killed, because there was no accusation between them (*Midrash Tehillim* 7). From this, we learn that the very best protection we can avail ourselves is to guard our tongue, as David exclaims, "Who is the person that wants life, loves his days, and looks for good? Guard your tongue from negativity and your lips from speaking deceit" (*Tehillim* 34:13-14).

## When is it Permissible to Engage in Negative Speech?

There are times, however, when we do need to judge or criticize others, either to their face or discuss their problems with their teachers and mentors in order to help them. Sometimes, we may also need to warn our friends against a certain person – for example a cleaning lady who has been found to steal – in order to protect them from damage. In other words, it is permissible to use negative speech for a constructive purpose. Whenever we do so, we should first state that what we are going to discuss now is for a beneficial purpose. This will help us limit unnecessary speech and keep the Chafetz Chaim's seven conditions for relating negative behavior to others (See [Chafetz Chaim, Laws of Prohibition of Lashon Hara 10](#)). These conditions are very complicated and this article is not the place to elucidate them. There are plenty of [articles](#) explaining them on the net. What I do want to share is an easy way to remember the seven conditions we need to keep, whenever we feel the need to engage in negative speech for a beneficial purpose. I found them on a Chafetz Chaim Foundation card many years ago and they have helped me remember and limit negative speech. The principles are summarized under the acronym of CAREFUL and they go like this:

**Certainty** – The information must be true.

**Ascertain** – Verify that the information portrays an objective violation of Jewish Law.

**Rebuke** – Approach the transgressor before resorting to speaking about him.

**Exaggerate** – Do not exaggerate the severity or degree of the violation.

**For a beneficial purpose** – Have pure intentions, exclusively for constructive purposes.

**Use another method** – Look for ways to achieve the constructive purpose without revealing the negative information.

**Loss of victim must match Torah law** – Do not use negative speech if it causes more damage to the subject than what a Beit Din (court of Jewish Law) would have decreed to make up for his transgression.

## The Severe Consequences of Lashon Hara

While the world at large may be happily unaware of the consequences of negative speech, the Torah recognizes the severe damage of negative speech, lashon hara – evil tongue and equates it with the three cardinal sins for which a person must sacrifice his life rather than violate:

רמב"ם יד החזקה הלכות דעות פרק ז משנה ג אמרו חכמים שלש עבירות נפרעין מן האדם בעולם הזה ואין לו חלק לעולם הבא עבודת כוכבים וגילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים ולשון הרע כנגד כולם ועוד אמרו חכמים כל המספר בלשון הרע כאילו כופר בעיקר שנאמר אשר אמרו ללשוננו נגביר שפתינו אתנו מי אדון לנו ועוד אמרו חכמים שלשה לשון הרע הורגת האומר והמקבלו וזה שאומר עליו והמקבלו יותר מן האומר:

Our Sages said: "There are three sins for which retribution is exacted from a person in this world and, [for which] he is [nonetheless,] denied a portion in the world-to-come: idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and murder. Lashon hara is equivalent to all of them." Our Sages also said: "Anyone who speaks lashon hara is like one who denies G-d as [implied by *Tehillim* 12:5]: 'Those who said: With our tongues we will prevail; our lips are our own. Who is Lord over us?'" In addition, they said: "Lashon hara kills three [people], the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is spoken. The one who listens to it [suffers] more than the one who speaks it" (*Babylonian Talmud, Arachin* 15b; Rambam, *Hilchot De'ot* 7:3).

Every single exile in Jewish history was caused by lashon hara, from the expulsion of the Garden of Eden caused by Adam blaming Chava, and Chava blaming the snake to the destruction of the Second Temple. Also, the Egyptian exile came about through Yosef's lashon hara, for which he greatly repented. Likewise, the lashon hara of the spies delayed entry into the Holy Land for forty years and its repercussion reverberated for generations until it ultimately effected the destructions of both Temples, as it states, "This selfsame night [when the congregation of Israel accepted the lashon hara of the spies] was the night of *Tisha B'Av*. The Holy One said, you cried a cry for no reason, I will establish for you a crying for generations..." (*Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit* 29a). If every single exile of the Jewish people was caused by lashon hara, it follows that the avoidance of engaging in evil speech will bring the redemption! This is especially a pertinent message for women, who are greater talkers than men, as it states, "Ten measures of speech were given to the world, and nine of them were allocated to women" (*Talmud, Kiddushin* 49b). Moreover, we women, pave the way to the final redemption (*Sotah* 11b), Just as it was in the merit of the women's faith that the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt, so, too, will it be in the merit of the righteous women of our generation, that we will be redeemed once again (Arizal, *Sha'ar Hagilgulim, Hakdamah* 20).