

Journey To Better Speech

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Journey To Better Speech is a website set up as part of an ongoing project by a group of people who are working on improving the way they speak in every element of their lives. If you feel this is important please come and join us!

Listening To & Believing Lashon Hara

One of the many Mitzvot mentioned in this week's Parsha is לא תשא שמע שוא - Don't bear a false report. The Midrash and Gemara bring two explanations to this verse, both of which are quoted as Halacha by Rambam. Firstly, a judge may not listen to the claim of one litigant while the other is not present. Secondly one must not accept Lashon Hara. Let's explore the Mitzva of not 'accepting' Lashon Hara in greater detail.

1) The first aspect of this Mitzva is that if someone hears Lashon Hara they are not allowed to **believe** it. It is extremely easy to get drawn into believing everything that one is told. Practically, therefore, how can we manage to achieve this disbelief?

If we were to undertake a serious investigation into our very own life experiences we would realize that countless times the information we have received has been partially, and often completely, incorrect. I have been told someone got divorced only to find out later that they were still married. I have been told that A insulted B, but later realized that actually B was the perpetrator. There are a variety of reasons for the extensive amount of disinformation we receive:

- The person speaking may have misheard the information* - people often overhear an exchange or join a conversation midway through and they missed some crucial information that would have displayed the topic in a completely different light.
- They may have mis-seen the occurrence they are relating* - e.g. they thought they saw Yaakov eating non-kosher chips but in reality it was the kosher replica.
- They may have misunderstood what was happening* - e.g. they were correct that Yaakov ate non-Kosher chips but he was allowed to due to a severe life-threatening illness
- They may be describing a person or occurrence colored by their own life perspectives* - Hence the phrase 'there are two sides to every story!' Both sides may even be telling the truth but they choose to stress the points that fit better with their outlook. As an example - the secular media will often cherry pick the aspects of a story that fit their agenda, carefully selecting some parts while discarding others.
- They may be completely lying or partially exaggerating a truthful story.*

If it is too difficult to fully disbelieve the story you are hearing, Chafetz Chaim gives a few other options that are also acceptable. You could believe the facts but just not that it is negative, e.g. maybe he did that action but under the circumstances it was actually permissible for him or

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Mishpatim - Shekalim



Prayer Insights

Over the last few weeks we have been investigating 'Modeh Ani' where we thank Hashem for returning our souls to us every morning. The last two words in Modeh Ani are רבה אמונתך - Great is Your faithfulness.

This phrase is borrowed from a verse in Megillat Eichah which says חדשים לבקרים רבה אמונתך - The renewal in the mornings, great is Your faithfulness. The straightforward explanation of this verse is that Hashem is faithful for every morning He returns our soul to us and gives us life anew. But digging deeper and in context with the rest of Eichah the Midrash explains that Yirmiyahu the prophet is comforting the Jewish people at the time of the destruction of the Temple and the death of many of the Jewish people. He encourages them to examine what happens every single morning. Even though we hand our souls over to our Creator in the evening, He faithfully renews our lives every morning. So too, when Hashem promises us that at the end of days there will be Tachiyat HaMeitim - Resurrection of the dead, we can have faith in this promise.

The Resurrection is one of the 13 Principles of Faith which are incumbent on every Jew to believe. And yet it seems a fantastical idea. The dead arising from the grave?! Yirmiyahu is telling us that miracles such as this occur on a daily basis, but we don't realize because we have got so used to them! The fact that we can arise again in the morning after undergoing a shutdown is just as amazing, yet wonders that occur regularly, we mistakenly call 'nature'! By focussing daily on the miracle we experience we can internalize the concept that there'll be a time when those we have lost will rise again.

Prayer Insights has been written as a zechut for a re'fuah sheleima for Elisha Ben Ayala, a young boy who is undergoing treatment for leukemia. Please take a moment to say some tehillim on his behalf

Following The Crowd

Do you have teenagers in your home? If the answer is yes the following situation may be familiar! One day your child comes home from school and tells you that she has to go out later that night with her friends. She knows the policy you've set for your home, no evenings out during the school week. But she's often pushing the boundaries (that is, after all, exactly what teenagers are all about!) and she has a range of emotional tools that she stores up for just such occasions. One of her favorite lines is 'but everyone else is going! I'll be the only one left out! It's just not fair! (And then, the pièce de résistance) You don't care about me and about how I appear to my friends!

What is fascinating is that most of us continue to use such reasoning to justify many of our more questionable actions (although possibly with much less of the teenage angst!) How often do you find yourself reasoning that since everyone else does it, you should do it too? In this weeks Parsha the verse says לא תהיה אחרי רבים לרעות - Don't follow the many to do evil. While the straightforward approach is that this refers to the judiciary, the Rabbis read a deeper meaning - if there is a transgression that the vast majority of people are not careful with, you should not use that as an excuse to be involved yourself. Rather you must take a stand and distance yourself from the widespread behavior.

The Chafetz Chaim points out that this is especially relevant with regards to the laws of Lashon Hara. It is unfortunately not uncommon for many people to regularly speak and listen to Lashon Hara. Nowadays, even though there are thousands learning the laws of negative speech across the world and the awareness is great, we regrettably live in an era where there is much greater opportunity to pass on negative information, post a harmful comment or tweet. And many people will find themselves saying, everyone else does it, it's the normal way of being nowadays, I don't want to make a fuss, be seen as the meshuga frummer!

Our forefather, Avraham, stood up for what he believed in, despite the scoffers, despite being almost completely unique in those beliefs. The pasuk is saying that we, his descendants, must be able to state that we are different and that certain behaviors are just not suitable for our exalted status.

maybe he didn't know that such behavior was not allowed (obviously, if the person is of a stature where they would be expected to know, this itself would be a derogatory statement). You could believe that a person said or did something but be willing to entertain the possibility that it was done with the best intentions.

2) The second aspect is that someone is not even allowed to **listen** to Lashon Hara, even without believing it. However there are several different circumstances where a person *is* allowed to listen to Lashon Hara. They include:

- a) *When one believes that the statement has value to prevent harm to themselves* - e.g. A wants to tell you information about B who you are considering entering into a business partnership with.
- b) *When one believes, due to the influence they have with the person being spoken about, that they may be able to speak to him to encourage him to change his behavior* - A spiritual mentor may hear details so that they can judge how best to approach the subject with the person.
- c) *If one believes that by listening they may be able to change the perspective of the speaker or other listeners from negative to positive* - Unfortunately, this often doesn't work. In fact we have seen that it regularly backfires as the speaker tends to want to back up their position by telling yet more negative statements!

Even in these cases where one is allowed to **listen**, one still may not **believe** what they are being told. Nevertheless, the information heard is important. The Gemara, based on the verses in Yirmiya, relates the story of how Gedalia, the leader of the remaining Jews in Israel after the destruction of the first Temple and exile, was killed. Yochanan ben Kareach warned him that Yishmael ben Netanya planned to kill him but he refused to believe him. The Gemara explains that even though Gedalia was correct not to believe that Yishmael wanted to murder, he should still have taken precautions based on the information he received.

Not listening to Lashon Hara is a difficult Mitzva to keep. It is often out of your hands, you didn't initiate the conversation, you don't want to listen, but what can you do, the person insists on telling you! I heard from Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits that one of the best ways of dealing with such a situation is to suddenly change the subject. Statements like 'Oh, you've just reminded me of something I was meaning to ask you' can then be followed by a discussion that will lead away from the original topic. If that doesn't work, it is often possible to just excuse yourself 'Oh, I'm so sorry, I've just remembered that there is something that I need to do' - yes, you've remembered that you have to escape from hearing Lashon Hara!!

However, if you are stuck in a place where you truly can't get out of it and you didn't go there specifically to listen to Lashon Hara, Chafetz Chaim says you may stay, however you must be careful a) not to believe what you hear, b) not to get any enjoyment from the gossip and c) ensure that you do not make any movement or facial expression that implies that you agree or approve and, if possible, you should even make a strained or upset face to demonstrate your disapproval.

לע"נ מרים בילא בת אברהם דוד הלוי

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