

Shlom Bayyit

Sticks and Stones...



....and so begins that childhood ditty – the one that does NOT apply to us Jews. In sharp contrast to the words in this western adage, Judaism looks very severely on those who misuse speech. The main prohibition comes from **Leviticus 19:16** “Do not go as a tale-

bearer among your people...” The rabbis of the Talmudic period professed that slander was more serious a crime than murder, incest, or adultery. What could be worse than tarnishing someone’s reputation or good name? Torah’s laws on proper speech command us against *Lashon hora* translated as “evil tongue.”

Evil tongue: “It’s a thrice slaying tongue.”

Lashon hora destroys the person speaking – Others begin to mistrust the purveyor of gossip and wonder if and when he/she will be saying things about them.

Lashon hora destroys the person spoken about - The reputation, livelihood, good name of the person under discussion is tarnished forever.

Lashon hora destroys the person spoken to – This is the person, according to Talmud, who is most culpable because he/she has the power to stop it. One can admonish the speaker; walk away; refuse to listen.

Some Rules:

- “But it’s true,” “Everyone knows about it,” “I would say it to his face.” No excuses!
- Whether spoken, written, or gestured, truths that can harm others are forbidden.
- Even statements that are public knowledge are not to be repeated.
- The larger the group that hears, the more serious is the transgression.
- Hurtful words spoken directly to a person are not allowed. Deliver constructive comments - privately.
- Don’t relate an incident that embarrasses or makes another the subject of our entertainment.
- Defaming the dead who cannot defend themselves is not permitted.

Some Rules (con’t):

- Demean another Jew whose practices or views on Judaism differ from yours - Sfarmim, Ashkanizim, Chassidim, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist. That’s *Lashon hora*.
- Give each person the benefit of the doubt.

Exceptions to the Rules:

We are obligated to warn a person about

- financial ruin
- an abusive partner
- potential harm.



Teaching Our Children the Jewish Way:

- Teach by example.
- Discourage tattling.
- Focus on feelings and concerns of your child, not on knowing the names of problem peers.
- Make family discussions about ideas not people.

• Give positive reinforcement when a child discusses problems without mentioning names.

- Display a sign in your home, “*Lashon Hora* Not Spoken Here.”

Teach children positive expression and mold kind, understanding, and considerate adults.

The most complete discussion on this topic is found in two halachic works, *Chofetz Chayim* (Desiring Life) and *Shmirat HaLashon* (Guarding the Tongue) both written by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (Cohen) (1838-1933).

The Talmud tells us, “Most people are guilty of dishonesty, few of vice, but all of *Lashon Hora*.” What we say and how we say it defines who we are. When we are reminded, “if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all,” we speak an adage that does relate to who we are as Jews.