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MINISTRIES

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The Evil Tongue: What is Lashon Hara?

If you’ve been learning about the Torah, you may have heard people use the term *Lashon Hara*. Perhaps they’ve warned you about saying negative things, claiming that it’s sinful to speak critically about another person or thing. Perhaps they have recommended a teaching or a book about Lashon Hara to you. Or, perhaps they have criticized the very idea of Lashon Hara, stating that it is contrary to Scripture. In this teaching, we’re going to explain what the doctrine of Lashon Hara is, what the Scriptures have to say about it, and how this doctrine applies to us as believers in the Messiah.

First of all, what is Lashon Hara? In Hebrew, the phrase *Lashon Hara* literally means “The evil tongue.” However, this is not a phrase that comes directly from the Scriptures. Rather, Lashon Hara refers to a specific set of prohibitions and regulations within Rabbinic Judaism. Like many Rabbinic Jewish doctrines, Lashon Hara is very detailed, and contains lots of nuance. For the sake of our discussion today, we’re going to cover some of the main ideas of Lashon Hara, and we will discuss some, but certainly not all, of the finer details of this doctrine. (For a more complete explanation of the doctrine of Lashon Hara, we recommend the book *Chofetz Chaim*, by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan.)

The doctrine of Lashon Hara states:

“It is forbidden to speak negatively about another person even if what one says is entirely true.”

-Rav Yisrael Meir Kagan, *Sefer Chofetz Chaim: An English Translation of Sefer Chofetz Chaim*, Pocket-Size Edition, (Israel: Rabbi Aryeh Dinah, 2017), p. 76

According to this doctrine, there are many actions that can be considered to be “speaking negatively.” Some of these actions include:

- Speaking disparagingly about another person (ibid. 76);
- Causing public humiliation (ibid. 104);
- Exposing someone’s sinful actions (ibid. 104);
- Exposing someone’s character flaws (ibid. 115);
- Exposing someone’s physical flaws (ibid. 127-128);

- Creating or contributing to strife between other people (ibid. 218-220);
- Criticizing the teachings of a Torah teacher (ibid. 93-94); and
- Criticizing the merchandise that someone sells (ibid. 137).

In all of these examples, the underlying idea is that it is wrong to speak about a person in a way that will cause other people to have less esteem for that person.

As you can see, this doctrine places strict limits on what a person may say. However, even though this is such a strict doctrine, it does have some exceptions. Here are a few of them:

- You may speak negatively about someone if it is for the purpose of protecting the person you are speaking to (for example, to warn them about someone who is violent, or who steals) (ibid. 239);
- You may expose someone's sinful action if you have already rebuked that person in private, and he has not repented (ibid. 107, 113, 196-197);
- You may say things that reflect badly on another person if those things are already public knowledge (ibid. 82);
- You may say negative things about a person if that person is a heretic, i.e., someone who publicly rejects the Torah (ibid. 175-176); and
- You may say negative things about a person if that person is wicked, i.e., he is in the habit of committing egregious sins like adultery (ibid. 177).

This is only a partial description of the doctrine of Lashon Hara, but it should convey the doctrine's main idea: speaking negatively about another believer is wrong. But is this idea supported by the Scriptures, or is it just a religious tradition? Let's see what the Scriptures have to say about this topic.

Before we address some of the specifics of Lashon Hara doctrine, we should first establish that speaking negatively about another person using *false information* is unequivocally wrong.

Exodus 23:1-3

You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.

To “spread a false report” in this verse means to falsely accuse someone of committing a sin. This is a straightforward prohibition; in English, the term for spreading false information about someone is *slander*, or, if it is written information, it is called *libel*. It's clear from this verse that lying about people in order to defame them is wrong. However, Lashon Hara doctrine states that disparaging someone by telling the truth is wrong. Do the Scriptures ever condemn someone for telling the truth?

Leviticus 19:16

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD [YHWH].

Here we are commanded not to be a “slanderer.” To *slander* means to spread false information about another person. However, in this verse, “slanderer” may not be the most accurate translation. The Hebrew word translated as “slanderer” in this verse is *Rachil*. A *Rachil* means a talebearer, somebody

who gossips. However, it does not necessarily mean somebody who lies. Consider how the word *Rachil* is used in the following verses:

Proverbs 11:9-13

With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor, but by knowledge the righteous are delivered. When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, and when the wicked perish there are shouts of gladness. By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown. Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent. Whoever goes about **slandering** [*rachil*] reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.

Proverbs 20:19

Whoever goes about **slandering** [*rachil*] reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babbler.

In these verses, the one doing the so-called “slandering” is revealing secrets. If these secrets are *lies*, then it doesn’t really matter how closely you are associated with that person; he will probably lie about you regardless of how much he actually knows about you. But if the secrets that he might reveal are the truth, then it makes sense to avoid the person, so that he will not learn things about you and then reveal those things to your enemies. So, it appears that a person can tell the truth, but still be considered a *Rachil*. This brings up an important question: if the *Rachil* isn’t lying, then what is the problem with his words? The answer is that his words are causing tangible harm to his neighbor. Proverbs 11 says that the wicked man’s mouth is destroying his neighbor, and even overthrowing his city. In this next verse, we see that the *Rachil* is causing literal bloodshed with his words:

Ezekiel 22:6-9

Behold, the princes of Israel in you, every one according to his power, have been bent on shedding blood. Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the sojourner suffers extortion in your midst; the fatherless and the widow are wronged in you. You have despised my holy things and profaned my Sabbaths. There are men in you who **slander** [*rachil*] to shed blood, and people in you who eat on the mountains; they commit lewdness in your midst.

So, we see that the words that the *Rachil* speaks are putting the people he is speaking about in danger. There are several examples in Scripture of people doing this exact thing—of speaking the truth, but putting others in danger by doing so.

One example is found in Numbers chapter 12.

Numbers 12:1-2

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, “Has the LORD [YHWH] indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the LORD [YHWH] heard it.

The chapter proceeds to explain that God became very angry with Aaron and Miriam for saying these things, and even punished Miriam with leprosy.

This story is an example of saying true things that put another person at risk of harm. Aaron and Miriam said, “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?”, and these statements were true. Aaron is called a prophet in Exodus 7:1, and Miriam is called a prophetess in

Exodus 15:20, so they were indeed both people who God had spoken through. However, the implication of their words seems to be that they thought Moses did not deserve to have a status higher than theirs. This implication does put Moses at risk of physical harm, because numerous times, when the Israelites lost confidence in Moses as a prophet and a leader, they threatened to kill him (see Exodus 17:1-4; Numbers 14:1-10).

Another example of a person sinning by speaking the truth is found in 1 Samuel chapters 21 and 22. In chapter 21, David encounters a group of priests in the city of Nob. The priests give him bread, and the sword of Goliath, who David had killed years prior. One of Saul's servants saw all of these things happen. In chapter 22, Saul questions his servants.

1 Samuel 22:7-10

And Saul said to his servants who stood about him, "Hear now, people of Benjamin; will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, that all of you have conspired against me? No one discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day." Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who stood by the servants of Saul, "I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, and he inquired of the LORD [YHWH] for him and gave him provisions and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine."

Everything Doeg said to Saul here was true, but his words were sinful. Saul later went to Nob, and had all of the priests there killed. We know that what Doeg said was sinful because of Psalms 52. The heading of Psalm 52 reads: "To the choirmaster. A Maskil of David, when Doeg, the Edomite, came and told Saul, "David has come to the house of Ahimelech."", so in this Psalm, we know David is referring specifically to Doeg. He says:

Psalm 52:2-5

Your tongue plots destruction, like a sharp razor, you worker of deceit. You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking what is right. Selah. You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue. But God will break you down forever; he will snatch and tear you from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living.

Notice that David here is not condemning Doeg for the actual killing of the priests, but rather the words that Doeg spoke to Saul, words that put the priests at risk in the first place. Notice also that David calls Doeg's words "deceitful," even though the content of Doeg's words was factually true. Doeg spoke the truth, but because his words put the righteous priests in harm's way, they were considered sinful.

Both of these examples are violations of the commandment about being a *Rachil* that we read in Leviticus 19, and the context of the command confirms this:

Leviticus 19:16

You shall not go around as a **slanderer** [*Rachil*] among your people, **and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor**: I am the LORD [YHWH].

The idea here is that it is wrong to speak words that endanger the life of your neighbor, and as we've seen from the other instances of the word *Rachil*, and from the examples of Numbers 12 and Psalm 52, these dangerous words can be factually true. So, it can be sinful to say things that are true. But so far, the Scriptures have only condemned this kind of speech when somebody's actual life is at risk. The doctrine

of Lashon Hara says that it is wrong to say things that cause non-physical harm, like embarrassment or a damaged reputation. Do the Scriptures support these kinds of restrictions on our words? To find out, let's examine some of the Lashon Hara prohibitions one at a time.

One of the prohibitions of Lashon Hara is that one may not say things that cause strife between believers. The Scriptures agree with this standard, and in fact, they condemn this kind of speech in very harsh terms.

Proverbs 16:28

A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.

1 Timothy 6:3-5

If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ [Yeshua haMashiach] and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for **controversy** and for **quarrels about words**, which produce **envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people** who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

2 Timothy 2:23

Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.

Galatians 5:19-21

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, **enmity, strife, jealousy**, fits of anger, **rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy**, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Proverbs 6:16-19

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and **one who sows discord among brothers**.

It's pretty clear from these verses that speech that causes strife between believers is prohibited, so the Scriptures agree with the doctrine of Lashon Hara on this point. Causing strife can mean anything from creating distrust between believers, to jockeying for political power, to spreading strange, unsubstantiated doctrines that create division. In any case, this is something that we should take great pains to avoid.

Another one of the prohibitions of Lashon Hara is that you may not reveal another believer's sin. There is an exception to this rule, which is that you must confront the sinner in private and give him a chance to repent; if he refuses, then it is permissible to tell his sin publicly. The Scriptures have a very similar standard:

Matthew 18:15-17

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others

along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

These instructions from Yeshua about how to handle disputes with other believers are very similar to this rule of Lashon Hara. Yeshua says that a believer should not publicly reveal a sin committed against him unless he first goes through a process of approaching the sinner privately. Once this private process has run its course, if the sinner still refuses to repent, then it is permissible to publicize his sin. The reason that it becomes permissible to speak negatively about this person is because doing so will discourage other people from committing the same sins.

1 Timothy 5:20

As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, **so that the rest may stand in fear.**

In Acts chapter 5, we see an example of a publicly exposed sin inspiring this kind of fear:

Acts 5:1-11

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And **great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.**

Proverbs chapter 1 explains why this kind of fear is good.

Proverbs 1:7

The fear of the LORD [YHWH] is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

When people hear about the negative consequences of another person's sin, they will gain wisdom from hearing about it, and be less inclined to commit those sins themselves. This is why, under the specific conditions mentioned in Matthew 18, we can publicize the sins of others, even though we normally should not do so.

This specific permission to speak negatively about unrepentant sinners explains many of the examples of negative speech that we find in the Scriptures. For example, in Isaiah 1:4, Isaiah calls the entire nation of

Israel “sinful” and “laden with iniquity.” In Malachi 2, Malachi says the priests of God “caused many to stumble by their instruction,” and “corrupted the covenant of Levi.” In Matthew 23, Yeshua calls the scribes and Pharisees “hypocrites,” “children of hell,” “blind guides,” “full of greed and self-indulgence,” “full of hypocrisy and lawlessness,” and a “brood of vipers.” All of these were cases where people were willfully sinning, and had refused to accept correction. It should be noted, however, that we should be careful about using this exception to speak negatively about other believers, because if the person we are speaking about is not actually an unrepentant sinner, then we are spreading a false report, and violating Exodus 23:1.

Another one of the prohibitions of Lashon Hara is speaking disparagingly *in general* about another believer. The Scriptures also address this issue:

Titus 3:1-2

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, **to speak evil of no one**, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.

James 4:11

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.

Matthew 5:21-22

You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.

Lashon Hara doctrine does not specify exactly what qualifies as “disparaging speech,” and the Scriptures frequently do not either. The Lashon Hara doctrine has many specific regulations that attempt to precisely determine which things are and are not permissible to say. However, rather than evaluate each one of these regulations, we recommend using a general Scriptural principle to determine what we should say. That principle is that our words should be used for building up our fellow believers, not for tearing them down.

Ephesians 4:29-32

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but **only such as is good for building up**, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

There are other prohibitions of Lashon Hara that are not supported by any specific Scriptures. Ideas like it being wrong to mention someone else’s character flaws, or their physical flaws, to criticize a teacher or his teachings, to speak negatively about someone’s merchandise, or to humiliate someone, are not prohibited by specific commandments, proverbs, or other Scriptures. However, some of these prohibitions are concordant with the principle found in

Matthew 7:12

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Certainly, we would not want to be humiliated or mocked for no reason, and we ought to extend that same courtesy to others. So while the Scriptures do not specifically prohibit us from revealing the embarrassing flaws of others, these are generally things we would not want to have spoken about us, and so we should generally avoid speaking them ourselves. If someone has already spoken against us, the Scriptures do implore us to refrain from speaking back against them.

1 Peter 3:8-12

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. **Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless**, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For “Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” [quoted from Psalms 34:12-16]

This standard not only substantiates the principles behind some of these prohibitions, but it also calls into question several of the exceptions that Lashon Hara doctrine provides. For example, it is permissible, according to the doctrine, to repeat negative things about people that are already public knowledge, and also to speak negatively about heretics, that is, people who publicly deny the authority of the Scriptures. However, according to the Scriptures, we should be careful about what we say in regard to these people as well. Even if speaking badly of them is technically permissible, it is not necessarily advisable.

Romans 12:14-21

Bless those who persecute you; **bless and do not curse them**. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. **Repay no one evil for evil**, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but **overcome evil with good**.

This does not mean that we ought to lay down and allow our enemies to prevail, but it should make us think twice about maligning them just because we have the opportunity. As much as we can, we ought to “seek peace and pursue it.”

Another one of the categories of Lashon Hara doctrine is *gossip*, for which it has an extensive list of rules and exceptions. The topic of gossip in the Scriptures deserves its own teaching, so we will not be addressing it in detail here. However, to give a brief overview, all of the Scriptural principles we have discussed so far are applicable to the concept of gossip. In general, we should not say words behind each others backs that will cause strife between brothers, or that publicly reveal another believer’s sins, even if those words are factually true. While there is plenty more we could say on the subject of gossip, again, it is beyond the purview of this teaching, and deserves an entire teaching of its own to properly address it.

As we've seen, many of the principles of the doctrine of Lashon Hara are found in the Scriptures. Leviticus 19 instructs us not to say words that result in physical harm to another person, even if those words are true. Proverbs 6 tells us that God hates the sowing of discord between brothers. Matthew 18 instructs us not to expose someone else who sins against us unless we've confronted them privately first. And Matthew 7 instructs us not to do things to others—including saying things about them—that we would not want done to us. While the Scriptures do not provide specific support to some of the details of this doctrine—for example, whether it is sinful to criticize somebody's merchandise—the overarching principle, that we ought not speak negatively about other believers, is supported by the Scriptures.

With the understanding that we should generally avoid these kinds of negative speech, how can we apply this to our lives? How can we avoid saying things that violate the teachings of Scripture? Here are three suggestions.

First, we can acknowledge that sinning with our words is a serious matter.

James 3:6-10

And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

James here acknowledges the difficulty of taming the tongue, but also emphasizes why it is so important for us to do so. When we dishonor God's people, we also dishonor God. If we are in the habit of repeating negative information that we've heard about other people, we can recognize that habit, ask God for forgiveness, and ask him for help to overcome it. With God's help, we will succeed.

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The second thing we can do is take some advice from the Scriptures concerning how to speak generally. Specifically, we can train ourselves to think before we speak carelessly.

Proverbs 13:3

Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.

James 1:19

...let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

Proverbs 10:19

When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.

If we can train ourselves to slow down, and consider what we are going to say before we say it, this can help us to avoid saying things that we will regret later.

Finally, we can consider Yeshua's explanation of where our words come from.

Luke 6:43-45

For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

What is in our heart, that is, our desires and our thoughts, will produce our words. If we constantly think about evil things, then our words are going to be evil. But, if instead we think about the good things that God has provided for us, then our words will also be good.

Philippians 4:8

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

In conclusion, the Scriptures do justify many of the basic principles behind Lashon Hara doctrine, but not all of the doctrine's specific details. As believers, we should take the issue of evil speech seriously, and strive to avoid sinning with our mouths. We should not say things that cause needless strife between believers. We should not expose the sins of our brothers without taking the proper steps of confronting them privately first, and giving them a chance to repent. We should avoid saying disparaging things in general, especially about other believers. And, we should never spread false reports about anyone. Controlling the tongue is a difficult task, but we can accomplish it with God's help, and if we do so, the reward is well worth it.

James 3:2

For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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