

# ***LaShon Hara***

**by Michael Rudolph**

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The First Amendment of our United States Constitution reads as follows:

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”*

This has loosely become known as the “Freedom of Expression Amendment,” and each of its components has been challenged in the courts numerous times. Regrettably, two of its components, freedom of speech and freedom of the press, have come to mean that we have the right to say just about anything we want to short of giving away state secrets, making threats against persons, or shouting “fire” in a crowded theater. There are civil remedies against defamation (i.e. libel and slander), but they are often ineffective against defaming public figures such as celebrities and political leaders. One needs only watch a television news channel for a short time to hear that our president is mentally ill, an abuser of women, a white supremacist, and a Russian collaborator.

Well, if you do not already know it I will tell you, that freedom of speech (such as it has come to mean in our country) is not a biblical precept and, according to the Bible, most of the political talk that is rampant in the media, coming from both parties, is nothing short of sin. And not only that but, according to Scripture, if we search out and listen to or read such negative things because we find them entertaining – we contribute to the sin and commit sin ourselves.

There is a Jewish tradition that prohibits speaking derogatory speech about another person that is called *lashon hara*, meaning “evil tongue.” Whether it is in writing, spoken, or communicated by the rolling of eyes, *lashon hara* has long been considered in Judaism to be sinful because, no matter how seemingly slight, it always causes harm to a person. I have previously alluded to the secular counterpart of *lashon hara* called “defamation.” *Lashon hara* is like defamation, but it is broader in that the truth of a pejorative statement is a defense against defamation, but it is not a defense against *lashon hara*. For example, spreading the word that John Doe stole money is not considered defamatory if it is true, but it is nonetheless *lashon hara* whether it is true or not. Now before I go further, I must tell you that the words *lashon hara* do not appear in Scripture, nor does its broad definition of conveying derogatory information about another person whether or not the information is true. That notwithstanding, Scripture is replete with commandments to not use speech hurtfully or otherwise improperly; for example, Psalms 34:14(13) reads:

*“..keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceiving talk*

Scripture also prohibits *rekhilut* (gossip) in Leviticus 19:16a:

*“Do not go around spreading slander among your people ..”*

And we read in Ephesians 4:29:

*“Let no harmful language come from your mouth, only good words that are helpful in meeting the need, words that will benefit those who hear them.”*

In Ephesians 5:4 we read:

*“Also out of place are obscenity and stupid talk or coarse language; instead, you should be giving thanks.”*

And in James 4:11 we read:

*“Brothers, stop speaking against each other! Whoever speaks against a brother or judges a brother is speaking against Torah and judging Torah. And if you judge Torah, you are not a doer of what Torah says, but a judge.”*

There is a children's rhyme that goes this way: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never harm me." It is often taught to children as a lesson that they should not retaliate against name-calling, but the weight of Scripture teaches that the rhyme is not true. Indeed, despite its intended lesson, the rhyme should be instead: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can hurt me even worse." The lesson of the substitute rhyme and also of Scripture, is that we must be vigilant that our tongue is used only for good and for holiness, and not for harm. James 3:6-10 says:

*“Yes, the tongue is a fire, a world of wickedness. The tongue is so placed in our body that it defiles every part of it, setting ablaze the whole of our life; and it is set on fire by Gei-Hinnom itself. For people have tamed and continue to tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures; but the tongue no one can tame- it is an unstable and evil thing, full of death-dealing poison! With it we bless ADONAI, the Father; and with it we curse people, who were made in the image of God. Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing!”*

Speaking negatively about a person invariably harms him in some way and bringing harm to a person (except when sanctioned legally) is always wrong. It is egregious to God, and especially so if the *lashon hara* is against a leader that God Himself has set into office. What happened to Miryam when she spoke against Moses is the quintessential example of how serious a sin it is; we read about it in Numbers 12:1-2 and Numbers 6-10:

*“Miryam and Aharon began criticizing Moshe on account of the Ethiopian woman he had married, for he had in fact married an Ethiopian woman. They said, “Is it true that ADONAI has spoken only with Moshe? Hasn't he spoken with us too?” ADONAI heard them.”*

*“He said, “Listen to what I say: when there is a prophet among you, I, ADONAI, make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. But it isn't that way with my servant Moshe. He is the only one who is faithful in my entire household. With him I speak face to face and clearly, not in riddles; he sees the image of ADONAI. So why weren't you afraid to*

*criticize my servant Moshe?" The anger of ADONAI flared up against them, and he left. But when the cloud was removed from above the tent, Miryam had tzara'at, [leprosy] as white as snow. Aharon looked at Miryam, and she was as white as snow. "*

Consider that Miryam and Aharon were not even talking to strangers; they were talking to each other – within the family – and look at what happened (see also, [James 5:9](#)).

[Matthew 5](#) and [Matthew 18](#) of the New Covenant Scriptures have much to say about this subject as well, because speech so often is the result of (or causes) human conflicts. [Matthew 5:23-24](#) speaks to us if we are the offender, and [Matthew 18:15-17](#) speaks to us if we are the one who is offended. In both cases, the required initial action is for us to hold our tongue, not speak negatively about our brother or sister to others, and instead go directly and immediately to the person with whom we have the conflict. It is only after there has been no success at this attempt at reconciliation that others may be brought in to help, and then, only in a strictly controlled manner. In the second and third attempts at reconciliation, [Matthew 18:16](#) and [18:17](#) are parts of an authorized judicial process that begins with mediation and culminates in a *beit din* adjudication. Whatever is spoken before witnesses at these two "judicial" sessions is considered testimony and is therefore exempt from the prohibition of *lashon hara*.

This message stands for the principle that, unless exempt, no derogatory comment about another should leave our lips, whether or not what we say is true; but there are exceptions. The exceptions are when we mean it for his good, when we mean it for justice, and when we have a special responsibility to speak. I will have more to say about this later, but loose talk merely for the purpose of venting criticism is considered "gossip" which is strictly forbidden in Scripture; here is what Scripture has to say about Gossip and its companion slander:

[Proverbs 11:13](#): "*A gossip goes around revealing secrets, but a trustworthy person keeps a confidence.*"

[Colossians 3:8](#): "*..but now, put them all away- anger, exasperation, meanness, slander and obscene talk.*"

And Sha'ul wrote to the Corinthians:

[2 Corinthians 12:20](#): "*For I am afraid of coming and finding you not the way I want you to be, and also of not being found the way you want me to be. I am afraid of finding quarreling and jealousy, anger and rivalry, slander and gossip, arrogance and disorder.*"

These Scriptures have to do with the speaking of *lashon hara*, but what about the intentional listening to it? I don't mean hearing just enough of it to recognize what it is – I mean giving a willing ear to it. I suggest that listening to *lashon hara* is also *lashon hara* – not with the tongue but with the ear – and perhaps it is even more sinful than speaking evil because the one who willfully listens to it becomes an enabler and a contributor to the other person's sin.

Here are Scriptures that clearly show God's attitude toward those who listen to the *lashon hara* of gossip:

Proverbs 16:27: “A worthless person digs up evil [gossip] – it is like scorching fire on his lips.”

Proverbs 20:19: “A gossip goes around revealing secrets, so don't get involved with a talkative person.”

You see that getting involved with a talkative person enables his sinful talking. If there is no one listening to him there is no reason for him to continue to talk and, if he doesn't talk, he will not sin. Consider also, the warning of 2 Timothy 2:16:

*“But keep away from godless babbling, for those who engage in it will only become more ungodly, and their teaching will eat away at people like gangrene.”*

The Scripture suggests that if we listen to godless babbling it will eat away at us, as well as at the person who is doing the babbling.

It is relatively simple to control our own speech so as not to commit *lashon hara*, but what should we do when *lashon hara* is spoken to us? That is not so simple because it requires judgment and sometimes risk of a relationship, depending upon who the person is to us. Nevertheless, Galatians 6:1a says this to us:

*“Brothers, suppose someone is caught doing something wrong. You who have the Spirit should set him right, but in a spirit of humility, ..”*

And almost as a follow-up, 2 Timothy 2:25 says:

*“Also, he should be gentle as he corrects his opponents. For God may perhaps grant them the opportunity to turn from their sins, acquire full knowledge of the truth, ..”*

As important as it is to stop the *lashon hara* that is being spoken, helping the offending person to recognize that it is wrong and that he must turn away from it is even more important. Because there is no one Scripture nor instruction that covers all situations, it is important that we let the *Ruach HaKodesh* guide us on how to proceed. The Holy Spirit knows whether bringing correction will be profitable in each situation and, if so, how best to bring it. There have been times when the Holy Spirit instructed me to move away from where the *lashon hara* was being spoken, and other times when he instructed me to correct the offending person boldly. There were times when he instructed me to change the subject, and other times when he told me to not attempt correction, but rather to respond tangentially.

I encountered such a situation just recently. I was conversing with a person that I knew to be an unbeliever when, out of the blue, he referred to someone we both knew as “weird Sally” (I have named her “Sally” fictitiously for obvious reasons). And he did not stop with that comment, but continued to relate multiple instances of Sally's unsocially acceptable behavior, seemingly without rationale since Sally had nothing to do with what we were previously discussing. Well, it took me by surprise, but my response was automatic which is usually a sign that the *Ru'ach*

*HaKodesh* is taking charge. Instead of correcting him by citing Scripture (what good would that have done?) I told him that, through my pastoral experience caring for a wide variety of people, I had become both familiar and comfortable with relating to and working with people who have disabilities, including the kind of disability that Sally might have. I told him that when I get to know a person I get to know both their strengths and their weaknesses and, as their congregational “papa,” I try to help them overcome their deficits, and I encourage them to help me and their congregational family through their strengths.

I could tell that the man to whom I was speaking was stunned by my reply because he immediately stopped talking about Sally and began to question me about my having referred to myself as the congregation’s papa. I am sure that he had never thought in those terms other than perhaps applied to his personal family, and the concept seemed to fascinate him. As I previously said, I did not cite chapter and verse of Scripture, but I didn’t need to because he knew full well the authority whose principles I was espousing.

You may not find yourself in exactly the same situation as I have just described and your background from which you will be able to draw is most likely different from mine, but how will you respond when someone corners you with *lashon hara*? I say “when” and not “if” because if it has not already happened it will, and if it has already happened, it will happen again.

Each situation requires its own unique response and that is why being led by the *Ru’ach HaKodesh* is so important. Much will depend on the person’s age compared to yours, his station in life compared to yours, whether or not he is a believer, whether or not you are under his authority (such as his being your employer or your teacher), and the relationship that you and he has had prior to this happening. It is important that you do not shrink back in fear, or believe that you do not have the right, authority, or duty to address the *lashon hara* as God would have you address it. His being an unbeliever does not excuse it and, as a matter of fact, God may have put you in just that place and at just that time to be His witness. I have found that many unbelievers who are resistant to being preached to about God and Yeshua, are nevertheless open to hearing what God and Yeshua have to say about everyday practical issues. And when a person opens himself to the Word of God, he will eventually open himself to God.

I said earlier that there are three exceptions to *lashon hara*, and I would like to address them a bit more fully now. Speaking negatively about a person is permitted when it is intended for his good, but it must be accompanied by godly wisdom and discretion. Miryam’s offense of murmuring was that she vented poison against Moses and did not intend what she said to be for Moses’ good. Had she said instead:

*“Aaron, I am worried about Moses because I think that marrying the Ethiopian woman was the wrong thing for him to do.”*

Her concern, while still critical, would have been intended for Moses’ good and she would not have been punished for what she said.

The second exception to *lashon hara* is when our negative words about a person are meant for justice. A situation in which this happens is when we give testimony against a person in a *beit din* or a secular court of law. Deuteronomy 19:15 anticipates this through its instruction:

*“One witness alone will not be sufficient to convict a person of any offense or sin of any kind; the matter will be established only if there are two or three witnesses testifying against him.”*

Clearly, the testimony referred to here is derogatory and not exculpatory.

The third exception to *lashon hara* is when our negative statement about a person is in response to our having a special responsibility to speak. An example would be reporting a crime, the abuse of a child, or a juror deliberating with other jurors. Sha’ul himself made statements that would be considered *lashon hara* had he not been imbued with special responsibility for the congregations he was overseeing; consider, for example, his comments about his fellow *shaliach* Kefa:

Galatians 2:11-13: *“Furthermore, when Kefa came to Antioch, I opposed him publicly, because he was clearly in the wrong. For prior to the arrival of certain people from [the community headed by] Ya'akov, he had been eating with the Gentile believers; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, because he was afraid of the faction who favored circumcising Gentile believers. And the other Jewish believers became hypocrites along with him, so that even Bar-Nabba was led astray by their hypocrisy.”*

Also, Sha’ul names names in 1 Timothy 1:19b-20:

*“By rejecting conscience, some have made shipwreck of their trust; among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander. I have turned them over to the Adversary, so that they will learn not to insult God.”*

Well, I think my time is up, so I will leave you with this thought: speech has spiritual power and can be used for both good and bad. It can bring comfort and it can distress; it can bring blessing and it can harm. As believers, our witness of Yeshua to those who do not know him requires that we be different, and one of the most noticeable ways of our being different is how we speak and how we respond to others who speak. Ridding ourselves of *lashon hara* is not an option – it is a commandment, and we must take it seriously. At the close this service, if there are any here who would like prayer for developing new habits in how you speak, please come up; I will remain here for a time, along with others to pray with you.