

Watching our Words: Fulfilling the Jewish Challenge of Sacred Speech

Instructions

"Watching our words" is a lifelong project – one that can often be difficult. However, *beginning* to watch our words can be easy. As easy as 1,2,3...as easy as A,B,C....

1. Allot some time.

- Select regularly-occurring time periods as lashon-hara-free (gossip-free) times in your schedule – one hour per day, one day per month or one week per quarter – whatever works for you. Be sure that the time you select is one during which you ordinarily interact with others.
- During these times, make a point of not saying anything to anyone about anyone else.
- Also, if you should hear others gossip during these times, ask them to stop. How? Try these as some good "stock responses":
 - Let's change the subject.
 - I'm trying not to gossip these days – not even to listen to gossip. Can we talk about something else?
 - That's gossip; you shouldn't say those things; please stop.
- If you do need to speak about others during these times, be sure that:
 - The information you share is *correct*,
 - Sharing it is of *crucial* importance, and
 - Sharing it is truly a *constructive* thing to do.

2. Build upon your accomplishments.

- Remember, these lashon-hara-free times are only a starting point. As you become more proficient in the "art" of sacred speech, consider adding additional lashon-hara-free times to your schedule.
- Don't get discouraged. For most of us, lashon hara is a deeply ingrained habit that will prove hard to break. See your slip-ups as learning opportunities – reflect upon how you might do better in similar situations in the future.
- Also, remember that the goal of these lashon-hara-free times is to help you begin to *eliminate* gossip, not postpone it. Don't say, "I want to tell you something about him, but I can't do so for the next 23 minutes." Instead, perhaps you could refrain from *ever* sharing any gossip that you find yourself even *tempted* to share during your lashon-hara-free times.
- Be vigilant – it's hard work; it takes ongoing commitment; every word of gossip that you avoid is a great achievement and a true mitzvah!

3. Continue to study.

- There is a rich body of literature about lashon hara in Judaism (see the other side of this page). Study it for insights and pointers.

Hillel taught, "What is hateful to you, do not do unto others. The rest is commentary. Go and study."

Let us be kind and respectful to others, let us learn together, and let us begin today...



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On The Power of Speech

Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav would say: "How can you say, 'It was mere talk, no harm was done by me'? Were this true, your words of prayer and kindness would be a waste of breath!"

On The Value of Silence

Even a fool, if he holds his peace, is thought wise; keep your mouth shut and show your good sense.

Proverbs 17:28

On The Gravity of Lashon Hara ("the evil tongue," i.e., gossip)

There are three things for which a person is punished in this world while the capital is laid up for them in the world to come: idolatry, forbidden sexual relations and the shedding of blood. And lashon hara is equal to them all.

Tosefta, Peah 1:2

On Rechilus (Talebearing) & Rebuking

Do not go about as a talebearer among your people, do not stand by the blood of your fellows, I am God.

Leviticus 19:16

You must not hate your fellow in your heart, you must certainly rebuke our neighbor, and not bear sin because of them.

Leviticus 19:17

Books & Papers

Finkelman, Shimon, *Lesson A Day: The Concepts and Laws of Proper Speech Arranged for Daily Study*, 1995

Telushkin, Joseph, *Words That Hurt Words That Heal*, William Morrow and Company, Inc. New York, NY 1996

Telushkin, Joseph, *The Book of Jewish Values: A Day to Day Guide To Ethical Living*, Bell Tower, New York, NY 2000

Wolpe, David. *In Speech and In Silence*, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1992

Yoshor, Moses, *Chafetz Chaim: The Life and Works of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan of Radin*, Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1984

Web sites

<http://www.uahc.org/rjmag/02summer/gossip.shtml> - from an article in *Reform Judaism* magazine

http://www.aish.com/family/mensch/Stopping_Lashon_Hara.asp, "Stopping Lashon Hara With Children," by Sarah Radcliffe

www.torah.org - summarizes most concepts covered in Hilchot Lashon hara

www.darchenoam.org - addresses ethics in the workplace

www.uahc.org - addresses ethics

www.ahavat-israel.com – addresses ethics