

Lashon Hara: The Evil Tongue

He who guards his mouth preserves his life,
But he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction.
Proverbs 13:3

In today's modern world, many people are avidly searching for the 'good life.' To most Americans this means accumulating material goods, becoming successful in a career, or achieving recognition for some accomplishment. While none of these types of achievement are wrong in themselves, they are not *HaShem's* (Hah Shem = *YHVH* or the LORD) pathway to the 'good life' and, in all likelihood, will bring only momentary pleasure.

In His written word, *HaShem* has shown us the way to achieve a life of contentment and peace of mind, no matter in what circumstances we might find ourselves:

**"Who is the man who desires life,
And loves many days, that he may see good?
Keep your tongue from evil,
And your lips from speaking guile.
Depart from evil, and do good;
Seek peace, and pursue it."** (Psalm 34:12-14)

One of the chief requirements for attaining this 'good life' is to bring into submission that member of our body which is most difficult to control; our tongue. To do this requires that we must also learn to control another part of our body, our mind, for our tongue only speaks what is in our heart and mind. As *Y'shua* (Yeh-shoe'-ah = Jesus) said:

"...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." (Matt. 12:34)

Ya'akov (Yah ah'-cove = James) addressed our need for tongue control when he said:

"... we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also

to bridle the whole body. ... the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. ... no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so." (James 3:2, 6, 8-10)

A very extensive Jewish teaching has been developed which gives instruction on what is, and what is not permissible to say about another person. The leading teacher of this important principle, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan (b. 1839), has become known as Chofetz Chayim. In the Hebrew language, the speaking of evil about another person is called *Lashon Hara* (lah-shone' hah-rah'). It literally means "tongue evil," and was punishable by leprosy in the times of the Tabernacle and Temple (see Num. 12).

The children of Israel (Jacob) have seen the destruction of their magnificent Temples, the earthly houses where the Creator of the universe came to dwell with them. It is said that *HaShem* allowed the first Temple to be destroyed because of idolatry and Sabbath breaking, while He allowed the second Temple to be destroyed because of lack of love. Since speaking evil is the ultimate and most pervasive form of the expression of lack of love, it is also taught that the second Temple was destroyed because of *Lashon Hara*. This, in itself, shows the magnitude of the sin of *Lashon Hara*. It should have no part in the lives of those who are seeking to follow *HaShem's* way of life as found in the *Torah*.

It is easy to give a general definition of *Lashon Hara* by saying that it is the speaking of evil. But the truth of the matter is that *Lashon Hara* is more than just speaking evil, it is speaking anything (including truth) that will bring any type of hurt or loss to another person. There are two major types of *Lashon Hara* which need to be avoided: 1.) Making a remark that in any way puts down or belittles another person. 2.) Making a remark which causes another person to be hurt physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, or financially.

Following are some important points to understand about *Lashon Hara*:

1.) A statement is considered to be *Lashon Hara* if it hurts the feelings of another person, even when nothing actually 'derogatory' was said.

2.) *Lashon Hara* is not confined to the spoken word. Writing, hinting, or even facial expressions can all be used to communicate *Lashon Hara*.

3.) A story about another person can be *Lashon Hara* even if one does not mention any names, for someone may be able to figure out to whom one is referring.

4.) One may not belittle another person. This is true even if no damage would be caused due to the fact that the listener would not believe the report.

5.) Repeating a story that belittles another is *Lashon Hara* even if the story is public knowledge.

6.) Even if the words spoken are not technically *Lashon Hara*, if the result of those words has a negative effect on another person it may be classified as such.

7.) It is even wrong to say something derogatory about another person in a joking manner.

Lashon Hara is both a very serious sin, and one that has wide acceptance in the world around us. It is readily apparent that most of what passes for news in the modern media is nothing more than *Lashon Hara* on an international scale.

A good principle to follow is this: ANYTHING THAT IS FORBIDDEN TO SAY IS ALSO FORBIDDEN TO HEAR. Not only is it wrong to speak *Lashon Hara*, it is also considered a sin to listen to it, for it is the willing listener that enables the speaker to commit *Lashon Hara*. Even if the *Lashon Hara* being spoken is true, we are not to listen to it because it may cause us to lower our opinion of the person about whom it is being spoken . It is in this way that we fulfill the command:

"You shall do no injustice in judgment. ... But in righteousness you shall judge your neighbor."

(Lev. 19:15)

While the scriptures abound with passages warning us about the tendency of the tongue to speak evil and get us into trouble, they also inform us that if a person controls their tongue, so that only good is spoken, their speech will become a veritable 'tree of life' to them:

**"A wholesome tongue is a tree of life,
But perverseness in it breaks the spirit."**

(Prov. 15:4)

**"Whoever guards his mouth and tongue
Keeps his soul from troubles."** (Prov. 21:23)

In Jewish teaching doing a good deed is synonymous with the keeping of the commandments (*mitzvot*). One good deed that all of us can begin doing immediately is to stop speaking *Lashon Hara*. Such an action will prove be a great blessing for us both individually and collectively, for:

"The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments (*mitzvot* or good deeds) of the LORD your God and walk in His ways."

(Deut. 28:9)

It is written:

"... love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

(Deut. 10:19)

If a person truly loves someone, they will not speak *Lashon Hara* against them. This includes not only those in their own circle of family and friends, but all others with whom contact is made.

Y'shua said:

"... if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ... But love your enemies, ... and you will be sons of the Highest. ..."

(Luke 6:32, 35)

It must also be noted that rare times do exist when it is not only permissible to speak *Lashon Hara*, it is actually commanded that one do so. In particular there is one type of person who should be spoken against, and that is a known *rasha* (rah-shah'). A *rasha* is someone who knows that the *Torah* forbids something but does it anyway, on a deliberate and regular basis. This person's lifestyle indicates that he is in open rebellion against *HaShem* and the *Torah*. In such cases the following guidelines should be followed:

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Additional Materials

If you enjoyed reading this brief explanation of *Lashon Hara* (The Evil Tongue) and would like to learn more, you will want to see our website for the in depth 44 page booklet on the same subject, entitled *Guarding the Tongue*.

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- 1.) You must have seen the sin yourself.
- 2.) You must be sure that what you saw was a sin.
- 3.) Your motivations in communicating this story must be pure. (Ridicule and revenge are not pure motives.)
- 4.) There must be absolutely no exaggeration.
- 5.) You must be willing to tell it to the person's face, even if you are unable to do so.

Other instances where *Lashon Hara* may be spoken is if a person is causing someone else physical or psychological pain, is stealing from someone, embarrassing another person, or damaging someone's property. However, the purpose of speaking *Lashon Hara* against such a person must be to warn others of possible danger, not just to spread stories about the offender. Again, there are specific guidelines which should be observed in such cases:

- 1.) You must not jump to conclusions.
- 2.) If at all possible you must speak to the offender before spreading the story.
- 3.) Your personal motivation must be absolutely pure.
- 4.) You must not cause the person to suffer in excess of what they deserve.
- 5.) The *Lashon Hara* that you speak must be stated publicly; it must not be a 'whisper' campaign.

To summarize: LASHON HARA IS ANY SPOKEN OR WRITTEN WORD, OR EXPRESSION OF THE BODY, THAT CAUSES ANOTHER PERSON TO BE HURT IN ANY WAY. *Lashon Hara* is only permitted in cases where it serves a truly constructive purpose; i.e. where concealing the matter has the potential of bringing about harm. Discernment must be made between situations where a person is relating an incident because help in a particular situation is needed, and when they are speaking *Lashon Hara* for no constructive purpose.

It is a sad commentary on the state of the Bride of Messiah to realize that a great deal of *Lashon Hara* is being spoken by Believers. All of us have been guilty of this sin, and all of us need to repent for past *Lashon Hara* and determine to refrain from speaking evil of others. When we reach that goal, we will indeed be blessed more abundantly, for:

**"He who follows righteousness and mercy
Finds life, righteousness and honor."**

(Prov. 21:21)

The antidote for *Lashon Hara* is *shmiras halashon* (shmee-rah's' hah-lah-shone' = guarding the tongue). All of us would do well to keep our tongues and our pens (and computers) so busy focusing on good things (with praise to *HaShem* and giving thanks for our Husband and Savior, *Y'shua HaMashiach*), that we would not have the time and/or the desire to hurt others with our words. May we all learn to pray as did King David:

**"Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth;
Keep watch over the door of my lips."**

(Psalm 141:3)

**"O Lord, open my lips,
And let my mouth declare Your praise."**

(Psalm 51:15)

**"May the words of my mouth and the prayer of
my heart be acceptable to You,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer."**

(Psalm 19:15)

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