

## UNDERSTANDING LASHON HARA

Lashon Hara refers to harmful speech and is a fundamental aspect of Jewish law aimed at fostering peaceful coexistence and harmony within the community. We have all seen relationships suffer and friends and family members become estranged because of careless words. The Torah and rabbinical commentaries emphasize the destructive nature of Lashon Hara. Let's clarify what Lashon Hara is and when it is considered prohibited.

In Orthodox Jewish culture today, there is a common misunderstanding of the laws surrounding Lashon Hara. This has led to an overly strict and often impractical observance. For example, some women in various communities commit to refraining from Lashon Hara for just one hour each day. To put this into perspective, consider the prohibition against stealing, which is also essential for societal harmony. Imagine if someone pledged not to steal only on Wednesdays. Such a commitment would miss the point entirely and not be seen as virtuous. Similarly, the true understanding of the laws of Lashon Hara has often been lost. Let's clarify these important laws.

### What Is Lashon Hara?

Lashon Hara involves speech, comments, or information shared with the intent to harm another person. Here are some common scenarios:

1. Reuven knows that Shimon had learning disabilities as a child, which Shimon finds embarrassing.

2. Chana knows that Yocheved's father is not Jewish. Yocheved, being new to the community, feels uneasy about this information becoming public.

3. David is known in business circles as someone who doesn't pay his bills, earning him a reputation as a shark.

4. Aliza is seeking a match (Shidduch) for her son, who she considers exceptional. She is considering Elisheva, a girl reputed to have good character. Batya, a friend, hesitates to reveal that Elisheva's virtue is merely an act.

5. A particular Rabbi has a large following, but you know him to be angry and bitter, potentially harming his followers with his influence.

6. Chaim Yankel comes to Shul (Synagogue) and prays with such fervor, but you know that he is a fraud. He steals, he beats his wife, and he does various horrible things. Should you tell the others in Shul?

In these examples, the current understanding of Lashon Hara might label such speech as classic cases, warning that those who share these kinds of information are committing a grave sin.

### Common Misconceptions

Many believe that in all the above scenarios, you should not say anything. There is a widespread belief that even positive statements about others can be Lashon Hara. For example, saying, "Yaakov was such a brilliant student that even the Rabbi admired his understanding of the Talmud," might be seen as forbidden.

This is a misconception; not all speech about others is inherently negative or harmful.

### The True Concept of Lashon Hara

The core idea of Lashon Hara is simple: it involves sharing private information that can harm someone when there is no justifiable reason to do so. If such information is not widely known, revealing it is prohibited under Jewish law as Lashon Hara.

Let's revisit the earlier examples:

- Scenario 1: Shimon's learning disabilities were likely known to many—teachers, classmates, and their parents—making it difficult to claim this is a secret. Therefore, Reuven's sharing of this information is not a violation of Lashon Hara.

- General Rule: If more than three people know a piece of information, it is no longer considered a secret.<sup>1</sup> Lashon Hara is about exposing confidential, hurtful secrets. While sharing such information might not be nice or ethical, it doesn't necessarily qualify as Lashon Hara unless it involves revealing a closely guarded secret that could harm another person.

- Scenario 2: Yocheved's story is known to many and would therefore fall under that same rule, and would not be Lashon Hara. Again, let's try to be nice to

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<sup>1</sup>ערכין ט"ז א

רבה בר רב הונא כל מילתא דמיתאמרא באפי תלתא לית בה משום לישנא בישא מ"ט חברך חברה אית ליה וחברה דחברך חברה אית ליה

each other and not expose information that isn't pleasant for the other. But, it does not rise to the level of Lashon Hara, which is a commandment in the Torah.

- Scenario 3: When David doesn't pay his bills, many people get hurt. By not telling people, you are in some ways complicit.

- General Rule: Things that are said for a proper and productive reason are not Lashon Hara. On the contrary, it is a Mitzvah to tell people.

- Scenario 4: Sharing important aspects of a Shidduch truthfully falls under this same rule. People should know what they're getting into.

- Scenario 5: When a person can affect others and potentially hurt them, it is your duty to tell the truth and help protect them.

- Scenario 6: There is a requirement to inform everyone about Chaim Yankel. People should know his true character and behaviors.

- General Rule: The only time something is forbidden as Lashon Hara is if it is a behavior that they regret or something they have no control over. However, if the person continuously engages in certain bad behavior, it is a Mitzvah to publicize it.<sup>2</sup>

## Most People Do Not Speak Lashon Hara

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יומא פ"ו ב' מפרסמין את התגבין מפני חילול השם

Now that you can see that most things we say are not actually Lashon Hara, you can realize that most of us don't engage in it. To be guilty of the sin of Lashon Hara, we need to have secret information known by fewer than three people about a person who does not repeat the behavior, and we must not have any productive reason to tell anyone. When was the last time you did something like that? Would you? If so, you should work on this to stop it. Most of us would not. The Yetzer Hara (loosely defined as the inclination or impulse to evil) drives us to work on ourselves, particularly on Lashon Hara. We then avoid the real character traits that truly need improvement.

You will see that it is common for many who work on their Lashon Hara to make sure everyone knows about it. They will also constantly scold others. These are bad traits in themselves. Don't let the Yetzer Hara trick you into working on something other than your important traits and behaviors.

### Not Saying Good About Someone

The idea that you shouldn't say good things about others is ridiculous and wrong. This misunderstanding is based on a specific scenario mentioned in the Talmud. It suggests that if you say something positive about someone with the ulterior motive of triggering others to speak Lashon Hara about that person, then it is wrong. Otherwise, saying good things about others is a wonderful practice and should be encouraged.