



## Honorable Mentchen: The Evil of Lashon Hara

### Rabbi Hanoch Teller

*Lashon hara* by definition means something that is true. People sometimes mistakenly invoke this in their defense. Although in an American civil court a person would be absolved from slander by saying it is true, according to Jewish law, it is still forbidden. This kind of speech denigrates someone else and it is inherently unfair because the person isn't there to defend himself. The Torah says, "*Lo telech rachil b'amecha.*" A *rachil* is a peddler. There is a peddler mentality to gossip. If we reveal something intimate and negative about someone, we expect the other person to recompense us by telling us something negative about someone else. The Rambam refers to someone who speaks *lashon hara* as a *meragel*, a spy who will reveal secrets that are damaging to the country he is spying on. Likewise, someone who speaks *lashon hara* damages another person's reputation, while they are defenseless.

One who speaks *lashon hara* violates the commandment of, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The two things people least want revealed about themselves are character flaws and intimate details about their life. Most people gossip about precisely this. *Lashon hara* violates the commandment of judging one's fellow Jew fairly, "*B'tzedek tishpot et amitecha.*" The Gemara says, "Cursed is the one who strikes his fellow man in secret." This refers to *lashon hara*, which since it is not said in the person's presence, he is unable to defend himself.

Parents should discourage their children from speaking *lashon hara* about each other. Obviously if a child is being bullied you have to tell a parent, but as a rule you should discourage tattling. Yosef and his brothers serve as the example. Yosef kept bringing back evil reports about his brothers and they despised him and nearly killed him. Human nature is to

speak negatively. The healthiest way to uproot this nature is to train children to avoid evil speech. One should explain that it is damaging, mean spirited, and drives people apart.

The Torah tells us there is a positive commandment to remember what happened to Miriam. She spoke *lashon hara* against Moshe and was stricken with *tzoraat* (leprosy). If you read the story, it doesn't seem so terrible. Yet if Hashem gave us a positive commandment to dwell upon it, it clearly was not inconsequential. The person being gossiped about is hurt. Even Hashem is also hurt. Just as a parent feels bad when someone speaks negatively about his child, Hashem, our father, is distressed when evil is spoken about his children.



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### The Evil of Lashon Hara Part II

### Rabbi Hanoch Teller

*Lashon hara* does incalculable damage to the person one talks about. A parable attributed to the Chofetz Chaim describes this best. A person once spoke *lashon hara* about a certain Rabbi and then regretted it. He approached the Rabbi and asked, "What can I do to repair this?" The Rabbi said, "Climb up a hill. Cut open a pillow and disperse the feathers." The man went and did it and then came back to the rabbi and asked, "Now do you forgive me?" The Rabbi said, "Now, go and gather up the feathers." The fellow looked at him nonplussed, "They are all gone." The Rabbi then said, "The same is true for *lashon hara*. Once you let it out it's gone. Words spoken can never be retracted."

There was once a Rabbi who served in a small community in England. The president of the shul disliked him and never treated him fairly. One day the president's daughter announced her intention to marry a non-Jew. Her father was devastated and asked the Rabbi to help him. The Rabbi tried to speak to

her and failed. With a sneer the president said, "The one time I ask you to help me, you can't even do that?" The Rabbi, a disciple of the Chofetz Chaim, responded with a parable.

In a certain province, a terrible epidemic broke out. The doctors had no remedy and many children died. Then one day a doctor appeared who claimed he had a cure. He started administering a potion, which to everyone's amazement cured the children. The doctor went from town to town and wherever he went long lines appeared to get his potion. One day, highway robbers attacked him and stole everything he had. The man ran away leaving behind his potions and the equipment to make them, which the thieves threw into the ocean. The doctor arrived in the next town and a long line of patients awaited him. The doctor called in the first patient and told him what happened and that it would take a few weeks till he could manufacture a new supply of medicine. The man paled. He was the one who had sent the highway men. He had unwittingly caused the

potion to be thrown into the ocean when it could have saved his child's life.

The Chofetz Chaim concludes, when you speak badly about a Rabbi, you rob his power to help you. Everyone will disregard his words. This is what the Rabbi meant to tell the president. "You took away my respect and credibility and now you want your daughter to listen to me?"

It's a clever idea to put a small reminder next to your phone or computer not to speak or write *lashon hara*. Some put a picture of the Chofetz Chaim. A factor that makes *lashon hara* so unfair is that when you speak badly about someone, this becomes the initial association you have with the person. When you damage someone's reputation you deny the person the ability to portray their good qualities. This is why the Torah considers *lashon hara* such a serious offense.