



Worse than Sticks and Stones: Gossip, Slander, and Talebearing

Parashat Va-yeishev, Genesis 37:1-40:23 | By Mark Greenspan

“Gossip, Slander, and Talebearing” by Benjamin Kramer (pp. 582) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

According to Rabbi Kramer, the ability to express ourselves in words is central not only to our humanity but to the divine image in which we are created. Just as God created the world through language, we have the power to create or destroy worlds and lives by the way we use words. As soon as we begin to speak, we reveal to the world our true character. It is for that reason that the sages placed so much emphasis on the ethics of language. Yet where does one draw a line between good and bad words? Few people would argue with the suggestion that slander and defamation of character are wrong; yet it's hard to resist the temptation to engage in a tasty bit of gossip. Simple straight-forward words can sometimes be destructive in ways we never anticipated. We also live in a time when the destructive or constructive power of words is amplified by digital and social media. What type of ethic should we have for the means and goals of communication at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

The ethics of language plays an important role in Jewish life. The *Talmud* devotes a good amount of space to this topic and Maimonides codified the laws of *lashon ha-ra* in the *Mishneh Torah*. And yet there can be no simple or obvious rules for ‘good talk’ and ‘bad talk.’ While we can easily identify ‘bad talk’ it is not easy to know what type of conversation is appropriate and inappropriate. If we take Rabbi Israel Kagan (the *Chafetz Chaim*), at his word, then we would hardly ever speak! The subject of good and bad talk begins in the Garden of Eden. But in some ways, the Joseph narrative epitomizes the issues of ethics in language. According to the sages, the conflict between Joseph and his brothers does not begin with parental favoritism or a multicolored tunic but with Joseph tattling on his brothers. His words lead to the subjugation in Egypt.

At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks of his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father.

- Genesis 25:21-29

Sources and Resources

- a) *And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father: Rabbi Meir said: He told their father, “they are to be suspected of eating limbs torn from a living animal.” Rabbi Judah said: Joseph said: “They insult the sons of the bondmaids and call them slaves.” Rabbi Simeon said: Joseph said: They cast their eyes on the daughters of the country. With respect to all three, “a just balance and scale are the Lords.” (Proverbs 16:11) The Holy One rebuked Joseph: You said, ‘they are suspected of eating the limbs of a living animal,’ by your life, even in the very act of wrongdoing, they stilled slaughtered a goat ritually, as it says, “And they killed a goat” (the brothers slaughtered a goat in order to bloody Joseph's coat). God said: You did say, ‘they insult the sons of the bonds maid and call them slaves;’ so, “Joseph was sold for a slave.” (Psalms 105:17) God said: You did say, ‘they cast their eyes upon the daughters of the land;’ so, I will incite the daughters of the land against you! “His masters wife cast her eye upon Joseph...” (Genesis 39:7)*
- Bereishit Rabbah 84:7
- b) *How many tragedies happened because of this disgustingly horrible trait! It is well known that the sin of the serpent was lashon ha-ra (evil tongue or gossip); the serpent spoke lashon ha-ra against the Holy One when he told Eve that He ate from this tree and created the universe. Using that argument, the serpent was able to corrupt Eve, as the sages taught in the Talmud (BT Shabbat 146b). “The serpent approached Eve and introduced her to the spirit of impurity.” Because*

of that, the serpent caused adultery and illicit relations to come into the world. The serpent was also the cause of murder and death coming into the world. Because of the serpent, humankind, Adam and Eve, violated the will of the Holy One. One who speaks lashon ha-ra seizes the quality that annihilates the universe. Also the essential reason Israel went into Egypt was because of this sin, lashon ha-ra, as the Torah teaches, “Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father.” (Genesis 37:2) God decreed against Joseph measure for measure and he was sold as a slave, just as he gossiped that some of his brothers called their other brothers slaves. Midrash (B’reishit Rabbah 84:7) repeats this as does the Jerusalem Talmud (JT Peab 1:1). Even though Joseph may have had a halachic leniency to speak about his brothers, as some commentaries note, nevertheless the leniencies did not help prevent his descent into Egypt at all.

- Rabbi Israel Kagan, *Sefer Chafetz Chaim*, Introduction

- c) 1. A person who collects gossip about a colleague violates a prohibition as [Leviticus 19:16] states: “Do not go around gossiping among your people.” Even though this transgression is not punished by lashes, it is a severe sin and can cause the death of many Jews. Therefore, the warning: “Do not stand still over your neighbor’s blood” is placed next to it in the Torah....
2. Who is a gossip? One who collects information and then goes from person to person, saying: “This is what so and so said;” “This is what I heard about so and so.” Even if the statements are true, they bring about the destruction of the world. There is a much more serious sin than [gossip], which is also included in this prohibition: lashon ha-ra, i.e., relating deprecating facts about a colleague, even if they are true. [Lashon ha-ra does not refer to the invention of lies;] that is referred to as defamation of character. Rather, one who speaks lashon ha-ra is someone who sits and relates: “This is what so and so has done;” “His parents were such and such;” “This is what I have heard about him,” telling uncomplimentary things. Concerning this, the verse [Psalms 12:4] states: “May God cut off all guileful lips, the tongues which speak proud things...”
3. Our Sages said: “There are three sins for which retribution is exacted from a person in this world and, [for which] he is [nonetheless,] denied a portion in the world to come: idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and murder. Lashon ha-ra is equivalent to all of them.” Our Sages also said: “Anyone who speaks lashon ha-ra is like one who denies God as [implied by Psalms 12:5]: ‘Those who said: With our tongues we will prevail; our lips are our own. Who is Lord over us?’” In addition, they said: “Lashon ha-ra kills three [people], the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is spoken. The one who listens to it [suffers] more than the one who speaks it.”
4. There are certain matters that are considered “the dust of lashon ha-ra.” What is implied? For example, a person says: “Who will tell so and so to continue acting as he does now,” or “Do not talk about so and so; I do not want to say what happened,” or the like. Similarly, it is also considered the “dust of lashon ha-ra” when someone speaks favorably about a colleague in the presence of his enemies, for this will surely prompt them to speak disparagingly about him. In this regard, King Solomon said [Proverbs 27:14]: “One who greets his colleague early in the morning, in a loud voice, curses him,” for his positive [act] will bring him negative [repercussions]. Similarly, [to be condemned is] a person who relates lashon ha-ra in frivolity and jest, as if he were not speaking with hatred. This was also mentioned by Solomon in his wisdom [Proverbs 26:18-19]: “As a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death and says: ‘I am only joking.’” Also, to be condemned is someone who speaks lashon ha-ra about a colleague slyly, pretending to be innocently telling a story without knowing that it is harmful. When he is reproved, he excuses himself by saying: “I did not know that the story was harmful or that so and so was involved.”
5. There is no difference whether one speaks lashon ha-ra about a person in his presence or behind his back. The statements of people who relate matters which, when passed from one person to another, will cause harm to a man’s person or to his property or will even [merely] annoy him or frighten him are considered as lashon ha-ra. If such statements were made in the presence of three people, one may assume that the matter has already become public

knowledge. Thus, if one of the three relates the matter a second time, it is not considered lashon ha-ra, provided his intention was not to spread the matter further and publicize it.

6. All the above are people who speak lashon ha-ra in whose neighborhood, one is forbidden to dwell. How much more so is it forbidden to sit together with them and hear their conversation. The judgment against our ancestors in the desert was only sealed because of lashon ha-ra.

- Moses Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot Deiot*, chapter 7 (translated by Eliyahu Touger)

- d) There is a further aspect of termination of employment where the balakhab has a good deal to teach us. Dismissals undoubtedly stir questions and often gossip. Even the most well intended people, concerned about the welfare of the person who have been terminated, want to know why a person has been dismissed. Laws exist prohibiting lashon ha-ra (gossip) and mandating Jews to take active steps to protect the reputation of a fellow person. Hence discretion should be exercised in discussing and/or disseminating any information, even if it is accurate, about a discharged employee that might lower the status of the person about whom it is said. In *Pirkei Avot* Rabbi Eliezer teaches: "Let your fellow man's honor be as dear to you as your own." *Avot D'Rabbi Natan*, a midrashic amplification of *Pirkei Avot*, expands this idea further: How is this so? It teaches that just as a man has regard for his own honor, so must he have regard for the honor of his fellow man; just as he desires that there should be no reflection on his good repute, so he must be anxious not to damage the reputation of his fellow man. When someone is released from a job, allowing open discussion about the circumstances of the dismissal would certainly lower the status of the employee within the community. It is for this reason that Jewish law limits sharing any information unless it is essential that the person to whom one is speaking should have it. If the bearer does not need the information, a person who engages in discussions about the employee's dismissal is causing themselves and others to violate the obligation to avoid lashon ha-ra— not to mention the fact that a litany of gossip and rumors can cause even more damage to the discharged employee than the discharge itself.

- Cheryl Peretz, "Social Justice and the World of Business," from *Walking with Justice*

Reflections

Most of us grew up with the nursery rhyme, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never harm." According to the *Chafetz Chaim*, nothing could be farther from the truth. In his reading of the Torah, words are the source of most of the evils that afflict the world. Words were the instrument of seduction by the serpent in the Garden of *Eden*; words led to the division of humankind into separate nations at the Tower of *Babel*; words led to Israel's decent into Egypt and were responsible for Israel's forty year sojourn in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. *Lashon ha-ra* is responsible for the Jewish peoples long exile and the delay in the coming of the Messiah.

The Torah doesn't tell us what Joseph's bad report was. It never questions the veracity of his report to their father, either. It was natural for the sages to ask what was said to his father. The *Talmud* offers three interpretations. According to one interpretation the brothers were guilty of eating *Ever min ha-hai*, or the limb of a live animal, one of the seven Noahide laws that all humanity must observe. Yet another interpretation is that he reported that his brothers were chasing the local girls, a repudiation of Abraham's instructions to his family. But the most interesting interpretation of this verse is the second one: Joseph reported to their father that the sons of Leah referred to the sons of *Zilpah* and *Bilhab* as slaves, emphasizing their different social position in the family. Despite the fact that Joseph was defending his half brothers, all of the brothers took offense at Joseph's role as an informant (nobody likes a tattler). This story leaves us wondering when and if it is appropriate for a person to inform on others. Despite the apparent truth of his claims, Joseph's actions have far reaching repercussions for his entire family for generations to come.

Maimonides devotes an entire chapter of the *Mishnah Torah* to the laws of *lashon ha-ra*. The *Chafetz Chaim* further develops the themes found in this chapter and in the Talmud. What would it mean to seriously live by this chapter? Is it even possible for a person to avoid gossip without appearing like a bore? Most of our daily conversation has something to do with the personal lives of others. Talebearing is an entire industry, found in the daily newspaper and on television. We are fascinated by the lives of others, particularly the rich and famous. Where does one draw the line between news and gossip? Was Former President Bill Clinton's dalliance with Monica Lewinsky gossip or was it news?

The issue of gossip and evil talk is made even more complicated by the rules and ethics of the business world and the fast paced evolution of technology. We can tell more people more information more quickly than ever before. In the click of a key we can destroy a person's reputation. In the world of business we often find ourselves wrestling with what type of information is appropriately shared with colleagues. One's words can destroy or build the career of another person. When is it appropriate to share a negative report about a co-worker or a candidate for another job? Maimonides, I would suggest, does not answer the specific questions regarding *lashon ha-ra*, but offers us a way of defining and recognizing its existence in our social interactions. Each situation is different from the next and must be defined on its own terms. What the sages appear to suggest is that we should always define *lashon ha-ra* with caution, erring on the side of stringency rather than being light and easy in our use of words. They also suggest that we should think before we speak.

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

- a. *We human beings have been given the divine power of speech in order to enable our participation in the ongoing work of creation.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 582
- b. *"Do not go out as a rakhil among your people, nor stand upon the blood of another; I am the Eternal." (Leviticus 19:16) ...Ibn Ezra writing in his famous commentary notes that the word rakhil is related to the word rokheil (merchant) and explains that just as the merchant buys from this one and sells to another, so does the rakhil tells this one what he heard from that one.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 582
- c. *This is defined as the act of saying about another person anything at all that may potentially cause that person physical, emotional, or financial harm. One transgresses the prohibition against rekhilut even if what one says is true, even if it is not negative, and even if the person about whom one is speaking would say the exact same thing.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 582
- d. *The prohibition of Leviticus 19:16 is usually presumed to refer primarily to verbal speech. However, the prohibition actually extends to all forms of communication, including non-verbal forms of communications such as letter-writing, the publication of information in books and newspapers or even communicative but non-verbal gestures like winking. Thus, as the ways in which we communicate become incrementally more complicated and sophisticated with each passing decade, so too do the laws governing defamatory speech...*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 582
- e. *Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the Internet in the context of the prohibition of Leviticus 19:16 is the large number of people with whom one can communicate instantly and often the enduring nature of those communications.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 582

Questions to Ponder

1. What role does Joseph's bad report play in the family conflict emerging in *Parshat Va-yeishev*? Do you believe that the brothers would have gone to such extremes if Joseph hadn't informed on them?
2. When is being an informant the proper course of action and when is it simply a matter of being a tattletale?
3. It is not always possible to know how one's words will impact on others either negatively or positively. How can we avoid *lashon ha-ra* without completely avoiding every day conversation?
4. While it may be possible for us to avoid speaking *rekbilut* and *lashon ha-ra*, it is much harder to avoid hearing it from others. How can we respond to others when they want to share a bit of gossip with us?
5. Employers and supervisors are often asked to give a recommendation or review of a former worker. Does this fall into the category of *rekbilut*? What if you have nothing good to say about a former worker?
6. If we were composing a *halakhab* for the internet, what might be some of the rules we would include? Is there a Jewish way to write emails and participate in social media?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan