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דרך ארץ קדמה תורה
JUDAISM, COURTESY AND CIVILITY

The Commission on Social Action and Public Policy of The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism is pleased to present this publication on **Judaism, Courtesy and Civility**. In recent years, public discourse — particularly in the political arena — has become increasingly shrill. The air waves seem at times to be flooded with radio "shock jocks" who spout the most inflammatory remarks imaginable. Their ratings apparently thrive on the controversy they foment. Accordingly, more talk show hosts are encouraged to use strong language in order to obtain high ratings. Similarly, politicians are aware that unless they use "spicy" language, the news media will not report what they have to say. A "sound bite" must have some "bite" to it. One factor that may promote a lack of civility is the extent of public attention paid to those whose language or behavior is outrageous.

Unfortunately, such language also ratchets up the level of heat, anger and hostility we have for each other. In private conversation, it is common for someone to say offhandedly they wished someone were dead. Cruel and thoughtless as such a remark is, it is not generally taken seriously either by the speaker or by any nearby listeners. However, when the same comment is made over the radio or television, the statement is given an air of credibility. Moreover, as we become accustomed to hearing such acerbic language, we have a tendency to reflect that language more often in our own conversations. It becomes acceptable to speak in this fashion because "everyone else does."

It is not the purpose of this publication to argue against the freedom of speech or to question the value of the First Amendment to the Constitution. Rather, as with any right, we must recognize our concomitant responsibilities. We must recognize inflammatory language and actions for what they are, to ignore them where possible, protest them when necessary, and, most important, to avoid engaging in them ourselves. All this is not to say we do not have a right to be angry at times. We do. However, Jewish tradition teaches that we should avoid shaming, embarrassing, and belittling one another by acting or speaking rashly in the heat of our passion.

It is not only in the public arena that we must guard against incivility. Our tradition counsels us to be friendly, helpful and thoughtful in all our daily dealings with fellow human beings. Necessary daily tasks such as waiting in line at the grocery store or bank, driving in heavy traffic, or weaving through the maze of automated telephone answering systems, can sometimes sap a person's patience and forbearance, hi reacting to these — and other more exasperating situations — we all have a tendency at one time or another to speak and/or act rashly. At such times, it is most difficult to maintain what our tradition calls *derekh eretz* - proper manners. Nevertheless, as with any habit that is hard to break, we can do better with practice if we would only begin. As the sage Hillel said, "If not now, when?"

The enclosed study material was prepared by Steven Morgen, a rabbinical student at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America; the program suggestions were prepared by Rabbi Moshe Edelman, Co-Director of The United Synagogue Department of Congregational Programs, and the complete packet was edited by Sarrae G. Crane, Director of the Commission on Social Action and Public Policy. Special thanks to Lois Goldrich and Rabbi Kenneth A. Stern for their helpful comments. If you would like further information, contact The Commission on Social Action and Public Policy of The United Synagogue.

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Courtesy and Civility in the Jewish Tradition

The following are some Jewish sources dealing with civility and related topics. We encourage their use as the basis for study sessions and to motivate and support congregational action in the public arena.

The Importance of Civility: The Torah commands, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (*Leviticus 19:18*). A *midrash* on this verse quotes Rabbi Akiba as saying that this is a very important principle of Torah. Ben Azzai counters that the verse "This is the book of the descendants of Adam, in the day of God's creating Adam in the image of God He made *him*." (*Genesis 5:1*) is a more important principle (*Sifra, Kedoshim, 4:12*). A parallel *midrash* on the verse in Genesis explains Ben Azzai's comment as follows: "Therefore, you should not say, 'Since I have been shamed, let my neighbor be shamed'. . . If you do so, know whom you put to shame, [since the text says] 'In the image of God He made him'" (*Genesis Raba 24: 7*). When we embarrass shame, humiliate or denigrate another human being, we are also doing so to God Who created us all in the Divine image. The Rabbis compare the act of shaming someone to the act of shedding blood (i.e., murder) because the blood drains from the face of the person (*BabaMetzia 58b*). Perhaps they also recognized that shaming someone can often cause long-term or permanent damage to the psyche, reputation and/or livelihood of the person. It is as though you have killed or taken away a piece of the person.

Everyone knows the story of the great sage Hillel who, when asked by an idolater to teach the entire Torah while the challenger stood on one foot, answered, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow, that is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and *study*." (*Shabbat 31a*) Clearly, Hillel believed that acting decently to your fellow human being was the most important teaching of our tradition. Accordingly, one of his famous statements is "Be of the disciples of Aaron, one that loves peace, and pursues peace, that loves mankind and brings them close to Torah" (*Avot 1:12, Siddur Sim Shalom, p. 607*). Even the sage Shammai, who is depicted as being less patient in the story of the heathen, elsewhere said "receive everyone with a cheerful attitude" (*Avot 1:15, Siddur Sim Shalom, p. 607*).

Hatred and Anger: "You shall not hate your sibling in your *heart*" (*Leviticus 19:17*). "Rabbi Joshua [ben Hananiah] said: The evil eye, the evil impulse, and hatred of mankind put a man out of this world" (*Avot 1:16, Siddur Sim Shalom, p.607*). "Ben Zoma said:... Who is mighty? One who subdues his evil impulses, as it is said, 'One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one who rules his spirit is better than one who conquers a city'" (*Avot 4:1, Siddur Sim p.631*). Commenting on this advice, it is recorded in *Avot d'Rabbi Natan (ARN):* "And some say: Mighty is the one who makes of his enemy a friend" (*ARN 23*).

The Talmud records an instance in which Rabbi Meir prayed for the death of certain lawless men who caused him trouble. His wife, Beruria, asked how he could pray for such a thing. By use of a clever word-play on a verse in *Psalms 104:35*, "Sinners will cease from the earth, and the wicked will be no more" (*Siddur Sim Shalom, p. 38*), she interprets the verse to mean when sins cease from the earth (because sinners repent and sin no more), the wicked will no longer be wicked. She then suggests that her husband pray rather that these sinners repent. He did, and they repented (*Berakhot 10a*). The Talmud states that the First Temple was destroyed because of three sins: idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed; while the Second Temple was destroyed because of senseless hatred. It is concluded that senseless hatred is as deplorable as all three of the former sins combined (*Yoma 9b*).

Lashon Harah — the Evil Tongue: Saying anything derogatory about another person is absolutely forbidden by Jewish law, except under very limited circumstances. If a statement is true, it is considered *lashon hara* — and it is forbidden. If a statement is false, even if only in some minor way, it is considered *motsi shem ra* (defamation of character) — an even worse offense. It is no defense to say that the statement is true. It is also no defense to say it was made in jest, or that "everybody knew it anyway," or that the speaker included him/herself in the derogatory remark. All of these are forbidden.

Courtesy and Civility in the Jewish Tradition

(cont'd)

The laws of *lashon harah* are far-reaching and difficult to observe. Nevertheless, they provide much-needed guidance in a fundamental aspect of human interaction – speech. It is safe to say that most uncivil conduct comes under the category of *lashon harah* or is the physical response to some act of *lashon harah*. Two books in the bibliography below – Zelig Pliskin, *Guard Your Tongue: A Practical Guide to the Laws of Lashon Hora based on Chofetz Chayim* and Joseph Telushkia *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well* — discuss this very important subject.

Arguing: It is recorded that the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai disputed for three years over whose view was correct in matters of Jewish law. A voice from heaven, a *bat kol*, announced that both views were the words of God but that the law was in accordance with the view of the school of Hillel. Why, the Talmud asks, if both views are the word of God, should the school of Hillel prevail in establishing the law? The answer given is because they were kind and modest. They studied both their own position and the position of the school of Shammai, and they cited the opposing view first even before their own (*Eruvin 13b*).

Another principle, which applies to how we perceive others generally, as well as how we should examine their position in an argument, is the statement of Joshua ben Perahyah: "Judge everyone with the scale tipped favorably" (*Avot 1:6, Siddur Sim Shalom, p. 605*). In other words, give the other person every benefit of the doubt.

Bearing a Grudge: We sometimes act uncivilly toward another when we feel we have been wronged. Our tradition counsels: If you have done some minor wrong to another, consider it a big thing, while if you have done someone a great benefit, consider it a minor thing. On the other hand, if someone has done you a minor favor, consider it a big thing, while if another has done something very bad to you, try to see it as a small thing (*ARN 41*). We all have a tendency to overrate or underrate an event to suit our own position. It is wise to try and counterbalance this tendency.

Reproving Someone: There are times when it is necessary to point out to someone else that he or she has, in fact, erred. The Talmud, citing *Leviticus 19:17*, states that one has an obligation to rebuke another when necessary, and even to do so more than once if the other persists. However, it further admonishes that one is not permitted to shame the person to the point where he or she turns white from shame (*Arakhin 16b*). This is a tricky matter as the ensuing discussion makes evident. The Rabbis doubt whether there existed in their time a person who knew properly how to rebuke or how to accept rebuke!

One helpful principle is to remember that the rebuke is supposed to help the other person to change his or her ways. It is not supposed to be an expression of the rebuker's rage or hatred. (See Zelig Pliskin, *Love Your Neighbor, pp. 278-92*.)

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- Derech Eretz Rabba and Derech Eretz Zuta.** (Two "Extra-Canonical" Tractates found in the Babylonian Talmud at the end of the Order of Damages. They both deal with ethical conduct. Soncino Press published a translation into English in 1984 under the title: Minor Tractates. Another translation was made by Marcus van Loopik in 1991, and Daniel Sperber wrote a commentary on *Derekh Eretz Zuta* published in 1990 by Bar Ilan University Press.)
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- Mishnah Avot.** (Also called *Pirkei Avot*, Sayings of the Fathers, or Ethics of the Fathers. This tractate of the Mishnah is available in English translation in a wide variety of editions, each with its own commentary. It is a collection of ethical aphorisms from the early Rabbinic sages.)
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Kedoshim 5763 – Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun

“Everyone shall revere his mother and his father and keep my Sabbaths, I am the LORD.” (Lev. 19:3) “You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another.” (19:11) “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.” (19:14) “You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly.” (19:15) “Do not hate your kinfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen.” (19:17-18) “Do not turn to ghosts and do not inquire of familiar spirits.” (19:31) “You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old.” (19:32) “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (19:33-34)

So many laws, so little time. This morning we have read from one of the most inspiring, stimulating and thought-provoking portions in the entire Torah. More than most other sections of the Torah, this one seeks to answer the question: what does it mean to be Jewish? What does it mean to be a holy people? “You shall be holy,” God tells us at the beginning of the portion, “because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” And before we can formulate the words of the question – “Dear LORD, what do you *mean* by that?” – an avalanche of commandments is heaped upon us. What does it mean to be holy? The Torah seems to be telling us that it means to follow all these rules; and most of them are serious, ethical commands, very idealistic, and not easy to observe. Each one could occupy us in lengthy discussion to tease out their many implications for our every day lives – because so many of them apply to all kinds of things we do every day.

So, where to begin? Rabbi Akiba, a great sage who lived around the year 120, said that the commandment to “Love your neighbor as yourself,” which is found in Leviticus 19:18, is THE most important commandment in the entire Torah. Another great sage, who lived about 120 years before Rabbi Akiba, restated this rule a little. His name was Hillel. As the story goes (Shabbat 31a), a gentleman came up to Hillel and told him that he wished to convert to Judaism. BUT, first Hillel had to teach him the entire Torah while he stood on one foot. Hillel could have said, “forget about it, there’s too much to say. I can’t teach you the entire Torah in a couple of minutes.” But instead, Hillel thought about it for a little while and then answered, “What is hateful to you, do not do to someone else, the rest is commentary, go and study.” It seems, then, that both Hillel and Rabbi Akiba would consider “Love your neighbor as yourself” to be a foundational principle of our faith and practice. So, let us consider just this one commandment this morning. What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself?

The Hebrew word we translate as “your neighbor” is *Re’ekha*. And one of the first things we need to understand is that Hebrew word. Now that word comes from a verb which can mean, “to associate with,” “to keep company with” or “to befriend.” I am going to suggest four different meanings of this one word.

First, we can translate the verse as most Bible translations do. Since the verb can mean to associate with or keep company with, in a general way, the word *can* mean your neighbor – those people in your neighborhood, wherever you happen to live. In a similar way it can mean people you associate with at work. Or, in a more general way, people you associate with because they live in the same town or city you do. In each of these cases, the people you are supposed to love are not people that you chose. They just happen to be people who come into your life because of where you live or work. Yet, says the Torah, you are required to *love* them.

Samson Raphael Hirsch, the 19th century German rabbi, interprets this commandment to mean that “we are [required] to rejoice in [our neighbor’s] happiness as if it were our own, grieve over his sorrow as if it were our own, assist as eagerly in advancing his welfare as if we were working to advance our own, and keep trouble away from him as if we ourselves were threatened by it. This is a requirement,” Hirsch maintains, “that we can and must fulfill even toward [someone] who is downright repugnant to us, for this requirement of love is not dependent on our neighbor’s person or on his personality traits. ... No one may view the prosperity of another as an obstacle to his own well-being or the downfall of another as an aid to his own growth, and no one may rejoice in his own flowering as long as his neighbor’s life remains blighted.”

Are you jealous of the success of your neighbor? Your co-worker? Do they have something you don’t have? The Torah commands us to love them! Be happy for them! We love our children. Would we be jealous if our successful neighbors were our own children? No, we’d be thrilled! Do you gossip about your co-workers? Ask yourself, would you like it if others gossiped or said these things about you? If not, remember what Hillel said – do not do what is hateful to you. Have you avoided someone who is grieving or in pain? Someone who is sick and could use some words of comfort? Ask yourself, if you were in their position, wouldn’t you want someone to reach out a helping hand, offer a sympathetic ear? How many times have we – all of us – gotten angry at someone? They made some mistake, they didn’t do something the way we would have liked it done, or we *think* they have been insensitive or have hurt us. Ask yourself, “Am I a perfect person? Do I make mistakes sometimes?” Maybe we should be more forgiving, because we, too, make mistakes and would like to be forgiven. As our *Etz Hayim* commentary suggests you should “Love your neighbor because he or she is *like* yourself, subject to the same temptations that you are. Just as we excuse our own behavior by seeing it in context, claiming that we were tired, angry, or misinformed and, therefore, guilty of nothing worse than poor judgment, we should be prepared to judge the behavior of others as charitably.”

We are *commanded* to love our neighbor!

The second possible definition of this commandment is more specific: the Hebrew *re’ekha* can come from the verb “to befriend,” and therefore the commandment comes to say “You shall love your *friend* as you love yourself.” This is much easier in some ways, because unlike your neighbors, co-workers or fellow citizens, you *choose* your friends. But the Bible provides us with two examples of very special friends, friends who really did love each other as they loved themselves.

The first example of such friendship is Ruth and Naomi. Ruth was a Moabite, she was not Jewish. But she married the son of Naomi, who was Jewish. When Naomi’s husband dies, and then Ruth’s husband dies, Naomi is grief-stricken. She has lost her husband and her only

children. She is at a total loss, and decides to return to her hometown to seek solace with distant relatives. Naomi bids farewell to Ruth, “turn back to your mother’s house” she says, “May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt kindly with my son (before he died) and with me. May you find comfort and security in the home of a future husband who will take care of you.” [paraphrased from 1:8-9] But Ruth insists on coming with Naomi nevertheless. And even after Naomi tried to push her away two more times, Ruth would not be dissuaded from staying by Naomi’s side. “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you,” Ruth tells her mother-in-law. “For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the LORD do to me if anything but death parts me from you.” [1:16-17] That is not the stereotypical relationship of a mother-in-law with a daughter-in-law. Ruth ended up converting to Judaism and became one of the ancestors of King David. Truly, Ruth loved Naomi as she loved herself. And her love and devotion to Naomi gave her mother-in-law new hope for the future, and comfort in her great grief.

The other example of a powerful friendship in the Bible is the relationship between David and Jonathan. Jonathan was the son of King Saul, David’s rival. Yet the two were extraordinarily close friends. The Bible tells us that “Jonathan’s soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself.” [I Samuel 18:1] Jonathan literally gave David the shirt off his back, as well as his sword, bow and belt. [18:4] And when Jonathan is later killed in battle, David cries out “I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan, You were most dear to me. Your love was wonderful to me.” Here again were two people, two inseparable friends, who loved each other as they loved themselves. How many of us can say we have friends like that?

The third possible definition of this commandment is even more specific. In the *Shevah berakhot*, the seven blessings recited under the wedding canopy to the bride and groom, one of the blessings refers to the husband and wife as *re'im ahuvim*, “beloved friends.” The commandment can therefore be read to include a very specific friend: your spouse, or for those not yet married, your “significant other.” Now, you might say, “So what, Rabbi, of course husbands love their wives and wives love their husbands. This would be an easy commandment to fulfill.” But sometimes it is those who are closest to us that we take for granted, we do not show them how much we love them. Sometimes we focus too much on the annoying habits or weaknesses of those we really love and don’t pay attention to all their wonderful qualities.

Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, a contemporary Orthodox rabbi who has devoted his life to inspiring people to improve their lives in all kinds of ways, makes several suggestions for spouses. Here are a few of them:

1. “Apply outcome thinking. That is, before you say or do something, ask yourself, ‘What will be the outcome of what I will say or do?’ Only say or do things that are likely to have positive outcomes.
2. “See the good. Focus on the positive deeds, qualities, and patterns of your spouse.
3. “Don’t cause pain. Give pleasure. These five words create positive marriages.
4. “Reframe positively. Find positive ways to evaluate what your spouse says and does.
5. “Apologize first. Take the *initiative* to apologize for any mistakes, misunderstandings, or wrongs.

6. “Speak with respect at all times. Even if you are upset or angry, still speak with respect.
7. “Constantly say and do things to put your spouse in positive states.”¹

My last interpretation of the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself comes from Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the famous professors who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He proposed an interesting twist on this commandment. Noting that Judaism holds that God is everywhere all the time, that means that wherever we go, God is always with us. So, Heschel writes:

“God is not hiding in a Temple” or a synagogue. You don’t have to come *here* to feel God’s presence in your lives! That is why our Torah gives us commandments that relate to *everyday* things like what kinds of *food* we can eat, how we should conduct our *business*, how we should treat our *neighbors*, because *everywhere* we go, *everything* we do, God is there and so our actions can be infused with holiness and meaning. The problem is we so often don’t pay attention to what we are doing! We don’t often pause to think, “is this what God would want me to do?” Heschel continues: “The Torah came to tell inattentive man: ‘You are not alone, you live constantly in [a] holy neighborhood; remember ‘Love [your] neighbor – God – as [yourself].’” *God* is your neighbor wherever you go, wherever you happen to be, at any time of the day!

Being a holy person, part of a holy people, living a holy life, says Heschel, does not require us “to abandon life and to say farewell to this world, but to keep the spark [of the Divine] within [us] aflame, and to [allow God’s] light to reflect in our face,” to shine in our eyes – everywhere we go, and with everything we do, and especially in all our interactions with our neighbors, our friends, and our loved ones.

Loving God and loving our neighbor turn out to be closely related commandments. What better way can we show love for our Creator, than to show love for another of His creations?

Rabbi Pliskin, who has written many books on improving one’s life, concludes a little book titled simply *Kindness*, by noting that:

“Some people spend way too much time complaining about the awful state the world is in. There is too much aggression and violence. There is too little kindness and compassion. There is too much anger and depression and too little serenity and joy.

“If someone complains and complains, the world is still full of whatever it is the person is complaining about, and now more complaining has been added. Conversely, if someone spreads compassion and kindness, the world improves. The ripple effect can spread these positive qualities. A little positive action is more beneficial than a mountain full of complaints.”²

...

“Every time you act kindly, the world has more kindness.

“Every time you are compassionate, the world has more compassion.

“Every time you smile to someone, the world is a more cheerful place.

¹ Pliskin, Zelig *Kindness: Changing People’s Lives for the Better*, (Artscroll: Shaar Press, 2000) p. 186

² Id. p 235

“Every time you help transform someone’s worry into serenity; the world is a more serene place.

“Every time you calm someone who is angry, the world is a more pleasant place.

“Every time you give money to charity, the world is a more charitable place.

“Every time you encourage someone to do something for others, you are creating a partner to make a better world.³

No wonder Rabbi Akiba felt that to love your neighbor as yourself is the most important commandment in the Torah. No wonder Hillel felt the entire Torah could be reduced to this one principle, provided you go and study the rest to see how to fulfill it properly. What does it mean to be a good Jew? What does it mean to be part of a holy people? It means making people’s lives better. It means increasing joy and happiness in the world. It means sharing kindness with strangers as well as with friends. It means to love your neighbor, your friend, your spouse, and God as much as you love yourself.

Shabbat Shalom.

³ *Id.* pp. 234.

Gossip and Slander in Jewish Tradition

When (if ever) is it OK to talk about someone else? – Tazria-Metzora 5775

Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun, April 25, 2015

What does it mean to be a God-fearing person? The Hebrew expression “*Yirat Hashamyim*” (the “Fear of Heaven”) often makes us think of someone trembling in fright; terrified, perhaps, that God will punish us. In fact, the Hebrew term that is often used to describe the super Orthodox Jews is “*Haredim*” which literally means “tremblers”. One reason given for describing them as *Haredim* is that they are “Trembling before God”. (By the way, two small Christian denominations have essentially the same name: The Quakers and the Shakers.)

But I think that the Hebrew word *Yirah* could be better translated in this case as “awestruck”. That is the feeling I have when I contemplate the Maker of Heaven and Earth. When I envision the grandeur and majesty of the Universe – particularly as science has now allowed us to see it, with all its complexity, its enormity and its intricate structures – when I imagine such a glorious cosmos, I cannot help but be awestruck by the Force that created it all. And when I realize I am somehow in the presence of that Great Force, I feel *commanded* to behave in a way that would be worthy of having been created by such a Being.

But however you want to understand the Hebrew word “*Yirah*” in *Yirat Hashamayim* – Fear of Heaven – *in the Bible*, this concept is nearly always associated with *being a good person*. When the Bible says that someone “Fears the Lord” it always means that person is righteous and compassionate. By contrast, someone who does *not* Fear the Lord, or who does not “know God’s name,” is cruel, merciless, violent, arrogant, and evil.

For example, the Psalmist says, “Come my children and listen to me. I will teach you what it is to **fear the LORD**. *Mi ha'ish he'hafetz hayyim, ohev yamim lirot tov?* Who is the one that desires life, who loves to see goodness all his days?” And the Psalmist answers his own question by describing what kind of person “**fears the LORD**”: “**Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking guile. Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it.**” (Psalm 34:12-15)

From this passage in the Psalms, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, named a book he had written on the Jewish laws of *Lashon Hara* – the “Evil Tongue,” otherwise known as the laws of gossip and slander. Rabbi Kagan’s book was called “*Hafetz Hayyim*” “The One Who Desires Life”, a phrase taken from this psalm. And in typical Jewish fashion, Rabbi Kagan became known by the name of his first major book. His nickname, and the name he is most well-known by, is The *Hafetz Hayyim*. He lived at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century in what is now Belarus. He was known as a very pious man, and his book about *lashon hara* would make any of us turn pale by all of the restrictions and prohibitions it contains. Most people would find it very difficult to have a conversation with friends if they followed strictly all of the rules in this book.

Our Sages believed that the skin disease, *Tzara'at*, that is described in the Torah portion this morning was inflicted as a punishment for someone who spoke *lashon hara*. I have to admit that I find it very difficult to believe that that disease came as a punishment for speaking slander or gossiping. But the connection has provided rabbis for centuries with the opportunity to avoid talking about skin diseases every year when this Torah portion is read, and to focus instead on a very important topic: *Lashon hara* – the evil tongue.

So, with your permission, here is the “Annual Lashon Hara Sermon”.

The first question we have about this subject is what exactly constitutes *Lashon Hara*? The website Torah.org provides a convenient summary of the rules according to the sources of our tradition.¹ *Lashon Hara* is “any derogatory or damaging statement against an individual. ... [The great 12th century Sage] Maimonides [supplied] a litmus test for determining whether something is or isn't *Lashon Hara*: Anything which, if it would be publicized, would cause the subject physical or monetary damage, or would cause him anguish or fear, is *Lashon Hara*.”

One way to put this in simple terms is to ask yourself: would I say this about Jane (or John) if she were standing in front of me right now? Would I say these words if we were standing face to face and I were looking into her eyes? If I would be hesitant to say something with the person I am talking about in the room at the time, then I probably shouldn't say it. How many of us can honestly say that we never say anything about anyone else that we wouldn't say to their face? I must confess that I am also guilty of doing this from time to time. But it is wrong. It is even more problematic if what we are saying could cause the person we are talking about to lose their job, or cause them some other physical or monetary damage. But it is also *Lashon Hara* if it would “only” cause them anguish, embarrassment, or shame.

And in Jewish law, it is no defense to say, “But it's true!” It is no defense to say “but everyone knows this anyway.” And it is no defense to say “well, this is only my opinion.” The relevant question is whether it would cause the person physical or monetary damage, or cause him anguish, embarrassment or shame.

But what if the person we are talking about is doing something you believe is wrong? Shouldn't you say something? Don't you have a responsibility to warn others about this person's behavior? The answer is: yes. You should say something – *directly to that person*. And yes, *sometimes* you have a responsibility to warn others of the person's behavior.

It seems to me that the laws against speaking *Lashon Hara* are often related to the law requiring us to “rebuke our neighbor” [Leviticus 19:17]² when we see him or her doing something wrong. What the Torah wants us to do when we see someone doing something wrong is to speak *directly to the person doing it*. But we often find that too difficult or embarrassing to do. We don't want to walk up to someone and say – directly to their face – “you should not be doing that.” Why not? Why do we find this too difficult or embarrassing? Perhaps it is because we know it will cause that person anguish and embarrassment. But strangely, although we do not want to cause that person anguish and embarrassment *by speaking directly to them*, we seem to have no problem complaining about the person *to 100 other people behind their back*. Which action do you think will cause more shame and embarrassment?

Perhaps what *really* prevents us from speaking directly to the person is we are afraid they might get angry with us. Well, what do you suppose is going to happen when they find out you said those very things to 100 other people behind their back?

So maybe what we are really trying to avoid in confronting the person directly is an argument. Arguments are unpleasant. Besides, we might have to actually defend what we are saying about this person. They will point out the errors of what we are saying and then we will have to rethink our complaint about them, maybe even admit that we were wrong. Wouldn't that be terrible?!

I don't want to minimize the difficulty in confronting someone directly. The commandment to “rebuke your neighbor” is not an easy one to do correctly. Our Sages taught

that the purpose of this commandment is to actually get the other person to change their behavior. Very often when we do “rebuke our neighbor” we are really venting our anger at them. That may make **us** feel better because we have unburdened ourselves of our irritation and our resentment. But it is very unlikely to change the other person’s behavior.

I admit that I myself do not generally do well with criticism – even when it is well-intentioned. And I am not always so good at gently telling someone they have done something wrong so they can improve their conduct. And I am sure I am not alone. Finding a way to gently tell someone that what they are doing is wrong, in a manner that is likely to be heard and understood, is very challenging. But it is a whole lot more effective – and a **whole, whole lot less destructive** – then running around telling 100 other people what you don’t like about someone.

There are some very limited occasions in which it is appropriate to talk to a third person about someone.³

First, if you think John has done something wrong, but you don’t think that *anything* you would say to John directly – no matter *how* well-intentioned or *how* gently you say it – would have any effect on John. And if you know someone that John respects, someone who could speak to John about this matter and get John to understand that what he did was wrong. You are allowed to speak to John’s friend and explain the situation *with the goal of getting John’s friend to speak to John to **change his behavior***.

Second, if you know that Jane has done something wrong, and you know Sally may in the near future be harmed by Jane’s behavior, you can warn Sally about Jane’s behavior. Or, alternatively, if Sally has **already** been hurt by Jane, you are allowed to talk with Sally about Jane in order to help Sally feel better.

Third, if John and Jane are having a destructive dispute with each other, and this dispute is likely to escalate and to involve a lot of other people, you are allowed to talk about John and Jane *in order to resolve the dispute and keep it from spreading further*.

And finally, you are allowed to talk about an incident if you are using it to help other people learn from the mistakes that were made. I would add that in such situations you should not name names. There is usually no need to do so if you are only using the situation to teach others not to make the same mistakes.

But, in each of these four cases, there are several requirements that must first be met⁴:

1. The information you are conveying must be completely true and witnessed or verified by yourself. If it is impossible to verify the information yet necessary that it be passed on, you must preface your remarks with a warning that the information is only hearsay and not definitely true.
2. The issue must be a problem (e.g. misbehavior, or unhelpful character trait) from an **objective** viewpoint, not merely a problem from your personal perspective or sensitivity.
3. You must first rebuke the person you are speaking about directly, in a kind and gentle way which is likely to influence the person to change.
4. The information cannot be exaggerated or embellished.
5. Your intention must be purely to **help** in the situation, not to humiliate or hurt the person you are talking about.

6. If the beneficial purpose you intend to accomplish can be achieved in any way **other** than speaking *Lashon Hara*, you should (of course!) choose that other method.
7. Any damage that is caused to the person you are speaking about as a result of the *Lashon Hara* should not be more than that which would be ordered by a Beit Din (Jewish court) if the case were reviewed there. This is very often difficult to evaluate, so that situations that impact the livelihood or other areas of the subject should be referred to a Beit Din, or some third party arbitrator.

I would also like to mention here again what I said earlier about the general rule of thumb when saying anything about anybody: would you say the same thing, using the same words if that person were in the room and you were looking them right in the eyes while you are talking about them? If not, you probably ought to find another way to say it.

The words we use in all our conversations can cause others harm, embarrassment, or worse. That is *lashon hara* – the evil tongue. We should therefore heed the wisdom of the Psalmist who advised us, “Come my children and listen to me. I will teach you what it is to **fear the LORD**. *Mi ha'ish he'hafetz hayyim, ohev yamim lirot tov?* Who is the one that desires life, who loves to see goodness all his days?” **Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking guile. Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it.**”

Shabbat Shalom!

¹ <http://torah.org/learning/halashon/review1.html>

² The verse obligating one to rebuke your neighbor is actually the verse immediately following the one prohibiting tale bearing. So the Torah itself seems to make a connection between these two commandments. Moreover, what many Sages (including the famous Rabbi Akiba) believed was the most important commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself” is the verse following the one to reprove your neighbor. “¹⁶**Do not go about as a talebearer your people.** Do not stand idly the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.¹⁷You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. **Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him.** ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. **Love your fellow as yourself:** I am the LORD.”

³ <http://torah.org/learning/halashon/review1.html>

⁴ *Id.*

Hilchot Lashon Hara Review, Part 1: What is Lashon Hara?

Thank you to David Solomon for this review material, which was part of his class for BMT students in Jerusalem in 1993.

1. [The Definition of Lashon Hara](#)
 2. [Commandments regarding Lashon Hara](#)
 3. [Lashon Hara guidelines](#)
 4. [Avak Lashon Hara](#)
 5. [Listening to or Believing Lashon Hara](#)
-

Now that we have completed the section of Hilchot Lashon Hara, I would like to share some review material that my husband David Solomon wrote as part of a class for students in BMT of Jerusalem in 1993.

I. The Definition of Lashon Hara

Lashon Hara is any derogatory or damaging statement against an individual. In Hilchot Deot 7:5, Maimonides supplies a litmus test for determining whether something is or isn't Lashon Hara:

Anything which, if it would be publicized, would cause the subject physical or monetary damage, or would cause him anguish or fear, is Lashon Hara.

II. Commandments Regarding Lashon Hara

There are many commandments, positive and negative, which can be violated when someone speaks Lashon Hara. Two negative and two positive examples:

(1) Leviticus 19:15, "*Lo telech rachil b'ameicha*," - Do not go about as a talebearer among your people. This is the basic prohibition against speaking Lashon Hara.

(2) Leviticus 19:14, "*Lifnei iver lo titen michshol*" - Do not place a stumbling block before the blind. One who involves himself in Lashon Hara is helping others to violate the prohibitions as well.

(3) Deuteronomy 24:9, "*Zachor et asher asa H' Elokeicha l'Miriam*" - Remember what G-d did to Miriam. When Miriam spoke negatively against her brother Moses, she was afflicted with tzara'at (leprosy).

(4) Leviticus 19:18, "*V'ahavta l'rei'echa kamocho*" - Love your neighbor as yourself. This is the source of the "do unto others" rule, that we should treat others the way we would want to be treated.

III. Lashon Hara Guidelines

It's Lashon Hara **EVEN IF**:

- it's true
- a listener pressures the speaker to tell
- names are left out
- it's about the speaker's family
- the speaker includes himself in the derogatory description

Lashon Hara expresses itself in many forms. Lashon Hara can be factual, such as stating that someone violated a commandment. Or it can be subjective, such as discussing whether someone is intelligent, attractive, generous, etc. This type is often worse since listeners often readily accept an unverifiable opinion. Sometimes whether something is Lashon Hara depends on the situation: reporting that someone gave a certain amount for a donation can be derogatory when said about a wealthy person but positive when applied to one who has lesser means.

Some kinds of statements are not about individuals explicitly, but are Lashon Hara nonetheless. Insulting someone's possessions ultimately insults the owner as well. Degrading groups of people reflects unfavorably upon each member of the group.

It doesn't even have to be speech - any means of communicating derogatory or damaging information falls under the definition of Lashon Hara.

IV. Avak Lashon Hara

Some statements are not outright Lashon Hara, but can imply Lashon Hara or cause others to speak it. These statements constitute Avak Lashon Hara, meaning traces of Lashon Hara. Some examples:

Praise:

- In situations which inevitably provoke someone to contradict the praise, such as in excess, or in front of the subject's enemy, or in public.
- That leads to harm, such as recounting someone's generous character when a listener might take advantage of the subject's good will.

Negative implications:

- "Who would believe what he used to be like."

- "Don't ask me about what happened with X."

V. Listening to or Believing Lashon Hara

Listening to Lashon Hara is generally prohibited for two reasons:

(1) It is forbidden to accept or believe Lashon Hara, and by listening to it one might cause himself to believe it.

(2) By participating in a session of Lashon Hara, the listener would be assisting the other participants to commit the sins of speaking and believing the Lashon Hara.

Believing Lashon Hara is forbidden regardless of the subject (family, friend, enemy, etc.), and regardless of the speaker (teacher, parent, spouse, etc.). Only if the subject is known to commit certain sins or have other problems, it might be permissible to believe it. In any case, someone can suspect that the Lashon Hara might be true, such that the listener should take precautions to protect himself from harm.

If information against someone might be of benefit to another (e.g. a potential business partner, roommate, etc.), it is permissible for that person to listen to it. (The listener should state why he is listening to the information so that the speaker realizes that the intentions of the listener are constructive, and also so that the speaker doesn't intend to speak for non-constructive reasons.) However, the listener is forbidden from:

- (1) accepting the information as true (he may only suspect and investigate), or
- (2) taking action against the subject based on the information.

If caught in a group of people who are speaking Lashon Hara, one should try and leave the group or change the topic. If stuck there:

- (1) decide in one's heart/mind not to accept the Lashon Hara as true.
- (2) do not enjoy the Lashon Hara (because the subject is being shamed, its a funny story, etc.).
- (3) do not pretend to agree or accept the Lashon Hara (make a face, don't make eye contact, or at least wear a blank expression)

If someone starts speaking Lashon Hara, try to privately and respectfully tell them that speaking Lashon Hara is forbidden. The best way to prevent others from speaking Lashon Hara is by setting a good example.

Hilchot Lashon Hara Review, Part 2: Repentance

Thank you to David Solomon for this review material, which was part of his class for BMT students in Jerusalem in 1993.

1. [Repentance for Speaking Lashon Hara](#)
2. [Repentance for Believing Lashon Hara](#)
3. [Listening to or Believing Lashon Hara](#)

This is the second of three review classes on Hilchot Lashon Hara, followed by three on Hilchot Rechilut.

Hilchot Lashon Hara Review: Part 2

I. Repentance for Speaking Lashon Hara

Repentance, or Teshuva, involves three steps (in any order):

1. Regretting one's actions
2. Confessing the misdeed privately to G-d
3. Committing to not repeat the error in the future

In addition, any sin one person commits against another also requires rectification:

4. make amends or repay the damages
5. ask for forgiveness

If someone spoke Lashon Hara, all five of the steps are required. The first three are the same as in all repentance - sincere regret, confessional prayer, and the resolve plus strategies to avoid speaking it in the future.

To make amends, the speaker must go back to all those who heard his Lashon Hara and explain to them that what he said was incorrect. He must also apologize to the subject of the Lashon Hara and ask for forgiveness. If, however, the speaker is certain that the Lashon Hara was never accepted, he is only required to complete steps 1-3.

Note: if, as part of asking forgiveness, telling the subject about the Lashon Hara would cause the subject more anguish (either because he is hearing it for the first time or it renews his distress over the matter), the speaker is forbidden to mention it. Instead he should tell the subject that he sinned against him without specifying how, and ask his forgiveness.

II. Repentance for Believing Lashon Hara

If someone believed Lashon Hara, he should make amends by making himself no longer believe what he heard. He should also seek repentance through the three standard steps for repentance for any sin: sincere regret, confessional prayer, and the resolve plus strategies to avoid believing what he hears (and ideally from hearing any of it) in the future.

III. Listening to or Believing Lashon Hara

Listening to Lashon Hara is problematic for two reasons:

(1) It is forbidden to accept or believe Lashon Hara, and by listening to it one might cause himself to believe it.

(2) By participating in a session of Lashon Hara, the listener would be assisting the other participants to commit the sins of speaking and believing the Lashon Hara.

Believing Lashon Hara is forbidden regardless of the subject (family, friend, enemy, etc.), and regardless of the speaker (teacher, parent, spouse, etc.). In some cases if the subject is known to commit certain sins or have other problems, it might be permissible to believe it. In any case, someone can suspect that the Lashon Hara might be true, such that the listener takes precautions to protect himself from harm.

If information against someone might be of benefit to someone (e.g. a potential business partner, roommate, etc.), it is permissible for that person to listen to it. (It's a good idea for that person to state why he is listening to the information so that the speaker realizes that the intentions of the listener are constructive, and also so that he doesn't intend to speak for non-constructive reasons.) However, the listener is forbidden from:

(1) accepting the information as true (he may only suspect and investigate), or

(2) taking action against the subject based on the information.

If caught in a group of people who are speaking Lashon Hara, one should try and leave the group or change the topic. If stuck there:

(1) decide in one's heart/mind not to accept the Lashon Hara as true.

(2) do not enjoy the Lashon Hara (because the subject is being shamed, its a funny story, etc.).

(3) do not pretend to agree or accept the Lashon Hara (make a face, don't make eye contact, or at least wear a blank expression)

If someone starts speaking Lashon Hara, try to privately and respectfully tell them that speaking Lashon Hara is forbidden. The best way to prevent others from speaking Lashon Hara is by setting a good example.

Hilchot Lashon Hara Review, Part 3: When Speaking Lashon Hara is Permitted

Thank you to David Solomon for this review material, which was part of his class for BMT students in Jerusalem in 1993.

1. [Circumstances Under Which Speaking Lashon Hara is Permitted](#)
 2. [The Seven Conditions](#)
 3. [Additional Guidelines for Speaking Lashon Hara](#)
-

This is the third of three review classes on Hilchot Lashon Hara, followed by three on Hilchot Rechilus.

Hilchot Lashon Hara Review: Part 3

I. Circumstances Under Which Speaking Lashon Hara is Permitted

In "Chafetz Chaim: A Lesson a Day" p. 132, Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz lists the major categories of constructive purposes for which Lashon Hara may be spoken:

1. To influence the subject to improve by discussing his faults with someone who can help him.
2. To prevent someone from being harmed by the subject, or help someone who was already harmed by the subject.
3. To help end a dispute between individuals which could escalate to the community level.
4. To help others learn from the subject's mistakes.

II. The Seven Conditions

Before speaking Lashon Hara for a constructive purpose, the following seven conditions **must** be met:

1. The information spoken must be completely true and witnessed or verified by the speaker. If it is impossible to verify the information yet necessary that it be passed on, the speaker must preface his remarks with a warning that the information is only hearsay and not definitely true.
2. The issue must be a problem (e.g. transgression, relevant character flaw or bad behavior) from an objective viewpoint, not merely a preference or sensitivity. (For example, if a store openly encourages shoppers to sample the new grape

shipment, and someone takes a few grapes rather than exactly one, it would be incorrect to consider him "greedy" or "a thief.")

3. The speaker must first rebuke the subject directly, in a kind and gentle way which is likely to have an influence. (If the subject will not listen to any rebuke, or if trying to rebuke him can make the Lashon Hara ineffective, refer to ch. 10 in Hilchot Lashon Hara and ch. 9 in Hilchot Rechilut for the Chafetz Chaim's treatment of the subject.)
4. The information cannot be exaggerated or embellished, even if it's the only way to get the listener to heed the information.
5. The intention of the speaker must be purely to help in the situation, not to degrade the subject or cause him shame.
6. If the constructive purpose intended by the speaker can be achieved in a way other than speaking Lashon Hara, the speaker should resort to that other method.
7. Any damage that is caused to the subject as a result of the Lashon Hara should not exceed that which would be decreed by a Beit Din (Jewish court) if the case were reviewed there. This is difficult to evaluate, so that situations that impact the livelihood or other areas of the subject should be referred to a Beit Din.

When someone either speaks or requests Lashon Hara for constructive purposes, they should state the constructive purpose. Otherwise, the other party in the conversation will think they are speaking Lashon Hara without any halachic justification.

Also, it would be foolish to include the subject's enemies in a constructive discussion. Not only would they be unlikely to have truly constructive intentions in handling the information, but they might also add false or exaggerated information to the conversation due to their strong feelings against the subject.

Finally, it is important to think about the listener of the Lashon Hara. It is forbidden for the listener to believe or accept the information as true; they can only suspect the information in order to take proper precautions or to bring the issue to a Beit Din for resolution. Also, it would be forbidden for the listener to carelessly circulate the Lashon Hara out of anger or disgust, since that would violate condition (5) above. When possible, the speaker should preface his remarks with instructions reflecting these concerns; if the listener would not heed such instructions, the speaker should consult his Rabbinic authority before relating the Lashon Hara.

III. Additional Guidelines for Speaking Lashon Hara

When someone either speaks or requests Lashon Hara for constructive purposes, they should state the constructive purpose. Otherwise, the other party in the conversation will think they are speaking Lashon Hara without any halachic justification.

Also, it would be foolish to include the subject's enemies in a constructive discussion. Not only would they be unlikely to have truly constructive intentions in handling the

information, but they might also add false or exaggerated information to the conversation due to their strong feelings against the subject.

Finally, it is important to think about the listener of the Lashon Hara. It is forbidden for the listener to believe or accept the information as true; they can only suspect the information in order to take proper precautions or to bring the issue to a Beit Din for resolution. Also, it would be forbidden for the listener to carelessly circulate the Lashon Hara out of anger or disgust, since that would violate condition 5, to have purely constructive intent. When possible, the speaker should preface his remarks with instructions reflecting these concerns; if the listener would not heed such instructions, the speaker should consult a Rabbi.

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<http://torah.org/learning/halashon/review1.html>



Hilchot Rechilut Review, Part 1

Thank you to David Solomon for this review material, which was part of his class for BMT students in Jerusalem in 1993.

1. The Definition of [Rechilut](#)
2. The Definition of [Avak Rechilut](#)

This is the first of three review classes on Hilchot Rechilut.

Hilchot Rechilut Review: Part 1

I. Definition of Rechilut

Rechilut is sharing information about a subject which will incite or increase the listener's ill feelings against that subject. Often the information is derogatory, in which case it is Lashon Hara as well as Rechilut. Some examples:

1. Reuven tells Shimon that Levi is obnoxious (which is Lashon Hara). Then Shimon tells Levi what Reuven said about him (which could make Levi angry at Reuven, and is Rechilut).
2. Two years ago, Diane got a disastrous haircut from Evelyn; Diane was very angry and told many of her friends (which was Lashon Hara), including Sarah. The dispute was never resolved, and Diane does not go to Evelyn's salon anymore. Sarah tells Diane about Evelyn's fabulous salon renovations (even though this is not derogatory information, this stirs up the anger that Diane has about the bad haircut, which is Rechilut; Sarah should not have mentioned it).
3. Karen told David that Elizabeth cheated him out of \$5.00 by not giving him the same discount she gave other customers that day. (This might be permissible in order to rectify the situation, but only if certain conditions are met; see the third Hilchot Rechilut review or Hilchot Rechilut chapter 9.)
4. Darren and Shari applied for the same scholarship. It was announced that Shari won. Later that day, Jerry was telling Darren how great Shari's entry was (this emphasis on Shari's winning could make Darren jealous of Shari, so it's better left unsaid).

Rechilut causes arguments, hatred, and can incur damage. It is considered more severe than Lashon Hara, or a more severe form of Lashon Hara (depending upon terminology).

Even if the speaker's intention was not to create a dispute or ill will between the listener and the subject, if ill will results, the speaker has committed the sin of speaking Rechilut.

II. Definition of Avak Rechilut

Avak Rechilut is an implication that causes ill will, rather than an explicit statement of what the subject did or said. In "Chofetz Chaim: A Lesson a Day," Rabbi Berkowitz points out that this would only be when the result of Rechilut was unintentional (p. 312, 314, 316). There are several types of examples of Avak Rechilut:

1. An implication that there is Rechilut to be spoken. Someone asks, "What did Jennifer say about me," and you reply, "I cannot say." The questioner takes this as an implication that Jennifer said something against him.
2. Praise about an action of the subject which was at the listener's expense. Jim and Jane are business partners. John tells Jim how nice Jane was to extend him \$100 in credit last week so he could purchase equipment from them. Jim might be upset that Jane was so generous with their business funds.
3. Conveying that someone gave information about the listener that he didn't want getting around. Ed asks Harry if he can borrow some power tools. Harry says no, and Ed replies, "But you let Fran borrow them last week." Harry might be angry with Fran for telling people that he lent his tools to her. Rabbi Berkowitz (p. 320) adds that revealing secrets is the most severe type of Avak Rechilut.

Repeating non-derogatory information that would bother the listener. Deborah tells Leah that Rachel is "very organized." If Leah knows Rachel would be bothered by this compliment (maybe Rachel thinks it means she isn't spontaneous), Leah shouldn't tell Rachel.

Hilchot Rechilut Review, Part 2

Thank you to David Solomon for this review material, which was part of his class for BMT students in Jerusalem in 1993.

1. The Prohibition Against [Speaking](#) Rechilut
 2. The Prohibition Against [Accepting](#) Rechilut
 3. [Repentance](#) for Speaking or Accepting Rechilut
-

This is the second of three review classes on Hilchot Rechilut.

Hilchot Rechilut Review: Part 2

III. Prohibition Against Speaking Rechilut

It's Rechilut even if:

- it's true
- someone persuaded the speaker to say it
- communicated in a form other than speech (i.e. writing, gestures)
- names are not mentioned (but are easily deduced)

With certain exceptions (most notably an intentional and spiteful sinner) it does not matter who the subject of the Rechilut is. Even if it's a member of the speaker's family, the speaker has no special permission to speak against that person more than any other. Also, speaking against an "am ha'aretz" (person oblivious to most Torah laws due to limitations of intelligence or education) is forbidden. It is important to note that speaking against a Talmid Chacham (Torah

scholar) is two offenses in one: speaking Rechilut against an individual, and speaking Rechilut against the Torah which the scholar represents.

The audience hearing the Rechilut does not matter; causing ill will against the subject is forbidden regardless of who feels the ill will against him.

It's important to be careful not to speak Rechilut when trying to straighten out a problem. For example, if Reuven tells Shimon that Levi called him a klutz, Shimon can't ask Levi "Why did you call me a klutz?" because Levi might realize that it was Reuven who repeated it. Also, if two children are fighting, it might not be a good idea to tell the parents since it could start a fight between them and not resolve anything. It's important to review the parameters of speaking Rechilut for a constructive purpose very carefully before taking action.

It's also important to try to avoid speaking Rechilut when trying to avoid speaking Rechilut. If Sonny asks Terri, "What did Elise say about me?" and Terri replies, "I cannot tell you," then Terri has implied that Elise spoke against Sonny, which is Avak Rechilut. Instead, Terri should try to respond in a way that doesn't make any implications. If she cannot do this without lying, she is even permitted to tell an outright lie to avoid stirring up ill will between Sonny and Elise.

IV. Prohibition Against Accepting Rechilut

It is forbidden to hear and accept Rechilut, even if:

- the listener has a special relationship to the speaker
- the information is widely publicized
- it is spoken in front of everyone involved
- there is more than one speaker relating the information
- the speaker is speaking in a state of innocence (unaware of the implications of what he says, which might make it more likely to be believed)

If the information has relevance to the listener, he is permitted to hear the information but may not accept it as true. He can investigate the validity of what was said to the extent that it can help protect him or resolve a situation. When listening, he should indicate to the speaker that he has a constructive purpose in listening to the information so that the speaker or any other participants do not assume that they are conducting a "gossip session."

V. Repentance for Speaking or Accepting Rechilut

Like Lashon Hara, repentance for speaking Rechilut involves 2 components:

(1) Repentance Between Man and Fellow Man - If the Rechilut he spoke was accepted, and especially if the Rechilut caused harm or distress to the subject, the speaker must ask the subject's forgiveness. If the subject is unaware of what was done against him, it is prohibited to inform him since that would cause him grief; instead, the speaker should ask for forgiveness in a more general way ("I sinned against you").

(2) Repentance Between Man and G-d - Maimonides lists three parts to the repentance process between man and G-d:

- (a) regret for one's actions
- (b) private confession to G-d (i.e. in prayer or similar format)
- (c) commitment not to repeat the sin in the future

However, this repentance is not complete until repentance between man and fellow man is completed (if required).

As with any sin between man and fellow man, the sinner should attempt to make amends. If he spoke Rechilut, he should try to retract what he said to the original audience (unless, of course, that would further remind the listener of his dispute or other hateful feelings against the subject). In the case of accepting Rechilut, the listener should undo the damage in his mind by convincing himself that the information is not true, or perhaps by ending his dispute in a respectable way. Someone who accepted Rechilut but did not speak or encourage it might not have to make any active amends between man and man other than in his mind; however, if his participation in a conversation appeared to be an agreement or approval of the Rechilut spoken, he should retract his agreement (if that can be done without causing further damage).

Hilchot Rechilut Review, Part 3

Thank you to David Solomon for this review material, which was part of his class for BMT students in Jerusalem in 1993.

1. Circumstances Under Which Speaker Rechilut is [Permissible](#)
 2. [General Caution](#)
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This is the final review class on Hilchot Lashon Hara and Hilchot Rechilut.

Hilchot Rechilut Review: Part 3

VI. Circumstances Under Which Speaker Rechilut is Permissible

If a relationship is about to be formed which will cause harm to one party, it is a "mitzvah" (positive action) to warn that individual. However, the following conditions must be satisfied before it is permissible to relate the information:

1. Actual danger - it must be verified that there is a real threat.
2. Accuracy - no exaggeration or lie regarding the danger can be added to the description.
3. (a) Constructive intent - the speaker must have constructive intentions, i.e. to help the individual in danger ("Reuven"), not out of dislike towards the other party ("Shimon").
(b) Constructive effect - the result of relating the information must have the desired effect only; if Reuven would ignore the warning, or if he would go about speaking Lashon Hara against Shimon, it is forbidden to warn him.
4. Lack of alternative - there is no other way to achieve the result other than to speak Rechilut. Speaking with Shimon; convincing Reuven not to establish the relationship in a way that doesn't involve Rechilut; or an undetectable, more roundabout method are all possible ways in which someone might avoid speaking Rechilut, depending upon the situation.
5. No unwarranted harm - if Shimon would be harmed more than is deemed appropriate by Jewish Law, it is forbidden to warn Reuven. For example, if Shimon would be persecuted or embarrassed, speaking Rechilut would be forbidden. (However, for Shimon to not get

a job or other benefit which the relationship would entail would be "appropriate" according to halacha.)

[Note: Some terminology in the section above is from the book "The Sanctity of Speech".]

Once a partnership or other relationship has been formed, the laws involving dissolving the partnership must be reviewed very carefully. If there is no basis according to Jewish Law for breaking the partnership, it is forbidden to tell Reuven the information.

General caution: It is very important to recognize the severity of the prohibition, and to realize that a sin is committed whenever someone well-intentioned speaks Rechilut without fulfilling the above conditions. Even by speaking more negatively against Shimon that absolutely necessary to warn Reuven would constitute such a violation.

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