

Shtikah-Shmirat HaLashon/ Silence and Mindful Speech¹

Speech is one of the defining features of humanity. So central to our identity is speech that the Aramaic translation of the Torah defines the human soul as “*Ruach Memalela*,” “A speaking spirit.” Speech is a source of creation and connection between people. We communicate with God through speaking our prayers.

Speech can also be destructive. Proverbs warns us, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” (18:21). So seriously do the sages of the Talmud consider harmful speech that they equate slander with murder. While *Shtikah* literally means “Silence” it implies much more in the *middot* literature. We will explore the aspects of this *middah* that relate to thoughtful speech, *shmirat HaLashon* and how silence can assist us to maximize the life-giving potential of this powerful tool.

Shmirat HaLashon/Mindful Speech

We know from experience how painful and how uplifting speech can be. You probably do not need to scan too far back to find memories of things you said that make you cringe. Or to find zingers you received that still sting. On the other hand, do you remember the many words of encouragement you’ve given to your children, to colleagues or to friends? These words were life-giving and probably made a difference helping them get through challenging times. Think back to words of comfort and encouragement you received that reinforced your sense of connection and inner-strength.

The stakes are high regarding how we use speech. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov encouraged his followers to only use “*Divrei Chizuk*,” words of encouragement with each other in order to build each other up. He recognized that people were vulnerable to such intense self-criticism that they could lose faith in their ability to better themselves. It is essential we encourage each other and use positive self-talk to keep a healthy perspective.

What words of encouragement, Divrei Chizuk, have you received recently? How did they impact you?

Shmirat HaLashon, literally “guarding speech,” refers to being thoughtful about how we use this tool. Most of Torah literature focuses on the dangers of misusing speech. The great early 20th century sage Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, the *Chofetz Chaim*, wrote an entire book on the topic entitled *Shmirat HaLashon*. The proliferation of written speech through texting, email and blogging may seem to reduce the value of our words, but the impact of these words remains. A hostile email or text is called a “flame” because those words destroy like a fire out of control. So dangerous are thoughtless and intentionally harmful speech to relationships and communities that the rabbis equated *Lashon Hara* – “thoughtless, harmful speech,” to the three most grievous sins: idol worship, murder and incest (Maimonides, *Hilchot De’ot*/ Laws of Character Development 7:4).

It is clear that the victim of slander suffers from this harmful speech. In the code of Jewish law, the *Shulchan Aruch*, Rabbi Moshe Isserles exempts victims of *Lashon Hara* from the general obligation to forgive wrongdoing when the perpetrator sincerely apologizes. We know how

¹ The structure of this essay is loosely based on [Everyday Holiness](#), Chapter 16, Dr. Alan Morinis



damaging slander can be to one's reputation and how hard it is to build back a reputation once it is sullied by harmful speech. This is why *Lashon Hara* is likened to feathers in a pillow. A rabbi once told a slanderer to cut open a feather pillow and scatter the feathers in the wind. The next day he told him that he would only be forgiven for his *Lashon Hara* after he gathered all the feathers. This story captures the difficulty to fix harm that such speech does to its victim.

Our rabbis also emphasize the damage *Lashon Hara* causes to the speaker by including those who speak *Lashon Hara* among those with whom the *Shechinah* (indwelling presence of God) does not dwell. The *Shechinah* represents the immanent, in-dwelling aspect of God. The term is also related to the word שכן, neighbor -- the root ש.כ.נ. means "to dwell." When we use harmful speech, we dull ourselves to spiritual experience. While our degrading or mocking speech might be an attempt to draw some people close, as it often is with young people, in fact it makes others wary and destroys trust. We literally make it difficult to "dwell" together as neighbors when we speak *Lashon Hara*. At the same time, if God desires closeness between people, we also desensitize ourselves to experiences of God and make it more difficult to "receive" such experiences.

Think of a time you spoke Lashon Hara. What impact did it have on your relationship with others and on your spirit/soul?

Lashon Hara also impacts the listener. Maimonides (Laws of Character Development) emphasizes this point:

ועוד אמרו חכמים, שלושה לשון הרע הורגת - האומר, והמקבלו, וזה שאומרין עליו; והמקבלו, יותר מן האומר:

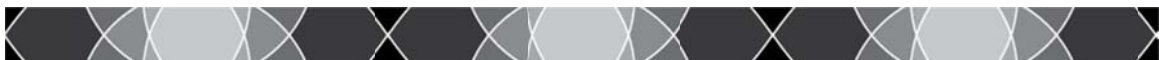
Lashon Hara kills three people: The speaker, the listener and the subject of the harmful speech. The listener suffers more than the speaker.

Why would the listener suffer more than the speaker? The speaker already possesses information or decides to make up something about the victim of his *Lashon Hara*. Perhaps the listener is harmed more because he now has to integrate this new, painful information about someone he knows. I know from experience that when I hear something negative or titillating about someone it is almost impossible not to associate that information with the person forever, even if it is not true. The way I think about this person is impacted forever. If the listener does not protest or stop the speaker from saying *Lashon Hara*, the listener is now implicated in the wrongdoing.

Why do you think the listener suffers more than the speaker from hearing Lashon Hara? How has hearing Lashon Hara impacted you? What was it like to try to intercept or stop it?

The Importance of Deliberation

Deliberation is the key to thoughtful speech, especially when one feels emotionally triggered. In the regular banter of a relaxed conversation it may make sense not to be overly cautious about what you say. The interpersonal warmth and connection that comes from such banter has value in and of itself. However, the stakes are high when we feel triggered in any way. This is when we are vulnerable to using speech to bring ourselves *Kavod* by putting someone else down, lashing out because we feel hurt, or using speech in any of the myriad possible



destructive ways. In these situations we want to heed Rabbi Menachem Mendel Leffin's direction in his chapter on *Shtikah*/Silence:

Before you open your mouth, be silent and reflect: "What benefit will my speech bring me or others." *Cheshbon Hanefesh*/Soul Accounting

The Role of Silence in Cultivating Mindful Speech

Jewish gatherings tend to be loud, rambunctious affairs. Our prayers are full of words -- even our "silent" prayer! Jewish culture values the written and spoken word, and we have a lot of them. Less well-known is that Jewish tradition also values silence. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, the scion of the leading family of his day, said, "All my days I grew up amidst the sages and I never found anything as beneficial as silence" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:17). The great sage Rabbi Akiva also praised silence, saying, "Silence is a fence for wisdom." (*Pirkei Avot* 3:13).

Rabbi Akiva teaches that silence preserves wisdom that is already present; Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel goes even further. Although he was surrounded by great wisdom, this was not enough. He needed something else -- perhaps the inner space to make sense and integrate all the wisdom he heard. Silence also provides greater access to the wisdom within us.

Access to this inner wisdom is essential to our spiritual lives. Without it we are in danger of functioning like robots, mindlessly moving from one task to the next. Silence offers us the inner space to make meaning of our lives and be more attentive to our actions and underlying motives. So important is silence that Rabbi Yisrael Salanter would undertake a "*Ta'anit Dibur*" (Fast of Speech") during the Ten Day of *Teshuvah* between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Through silence, Rav Yisrael gained a heightened sensitivity to how he used speech throughout the year.

Mindful silence heightens our spiritual sensitivity. Dr. Alan Morinis contends that "the soul needs silence as the body needs sleep. Sleep to refresh; silence to cleanse. Sleep to dream; silence to awaken to the deeply real. The Talmud points to this in saying, 'There is no better medicine than silence.' (*Megillah* 18a)" (*Everyday Holiness*, p. 144).

There is no shortcut to spiritual growth. Every spiritual tradition values quiet contemplation as essential to growth. In Judaism this interior time is called *Hitbodedut*, the reflexive form of the word for "solitude" or "alone." Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe teaches that a primary strategy of the *Yetzer Hara* is to keep us busy. When we always run from one activity to the next, we have no opportunity to connect with the deeper meaning of our lives. The *Yetzer Hara* thrives in such an environment of unreflective living. Setting aside at least few minutes each day for silent contemplation is an essential tool for taking charge of our spiritual lives. Through *Shtikah*, we nurture our capacity for mindful living and action.

There are many techniques to practice mindfulness through silent contemplation: following the breath, visualizing an object, using a focus phrase, speaking out loud to God. These methods all require setting aside time for contemplation. *Hitbodedut* creates space to settle into deeper connection with ourselves, God and others. As we grow in our ability to stop and grow in awareness of what is happening within and around us, we deepen our capacity to choose, freely and wisely, wholesome words which can enhance life and nurture the relationships and world we truly desire.

What is the quality of your contemplative practice/s?



Learn the Sources – *Shtikah-Shmirat HaLashon/Silence/Mindful Speech*

Speech is a defining feature of humanity. The Aramaic translation of the Torah defines the human soul as “Ruach Memalela,” “a speaking spirit.” Speech is a source of creation and connection between people. We communicate with God through the speech of prayer.

Speech can also be destructive. Proverbs warns us, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” (18:21). The sages of the Talmud equate slander with murder. While Shtikah literally means “Silence,” it implies much more in the middot literature. We will explore the aspects of this middah that relate to mindful speech, Shmirat HaLashon, and how silence can assist us to maximize the life-giving potential of this powerful tool.

Shmirat HaLashon/Mindful Speech

Babylonian Talmud Sotah 42a:

א"ר ירמיה בר אבא, ארבע כיתות אין מקבלות פני שכינה: כת ליצים, וכת חניפים, וכת שקרים, וכת מספרי לשון הרע. כת ליצים, דכתיב: +הושע ז+ משך ידו את לוצצים; כת חניפים, דכתיב: +איוב יג+ כי לא לפניו חנף יבא; כת שקרים, דכתיב: +תהלים קא+ דובר שקרים לא יכון לנגד עיני; כת מספרי לשון הרע, דכתיב: +תהלים ה+ כי לא אל חפץ רשע אתה לא יגורך רע

Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Abba said: There are four types of people that do not experience [lit. receive] the face of the *Shechina*: Scorners, flatterers, liars and those of speak *Lashon Hara*...Those who speak *Lashon Hara*, as it is written: (Psalms 5:5-10) “You are not a God who desires wickedness, **Ra (evil) will not dwell with You**...for there is no sincerity in their mouths; in their heart is malice; their throat is an open grave....”

Think of a time you spoke Lashon Hara. What impact did it have on your relationship with others and with God/your spiritual state? How did it distance you from others and from God (or the Shechina – the felt presence of the Divine)?

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Character Development 7:3, Maimonides (d. 1204, Egypt):

ועוד אמרו חכמים, שלושה לשון הרע הורגת - האומר, והמקבל, וזה שאומרין עליו; והמקבלו, יותר מן האומר:

The Sages said: Lashon Hara kills three people: The speaker, the listener and the subject of the harmful speech. The listener suffers more than the speaker.

- *In your experience, how does Lashon Hara “kill” people?*
- *Why do you think the listener suffers more than the speaker from hearing Lashon Hara?*
- *What has it been like for you to receive Lashon Hara? What was it like to try to stop it?*

The Role of Silence in Cultivating Thoughtful Speech

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, the scion of the leading family of his day, said (*Pirkei Avot* 1:17):

אָמַר רַבֵּן שִׁמּוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל, כָּל יְמֵי גִדְלֹתִי בֵּין הַחֲכָמִים, וְלֹא מָצָאתִי לְגוֹף
טוֹב אֶלָּא שְׁתִּיקָה

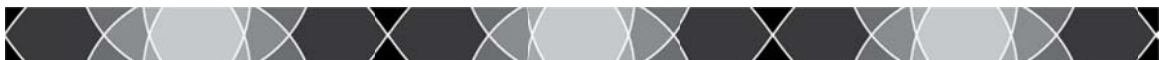
All my days I grew up amidst the sages and I never found anything as beneficial as
silence

Rabbi Akiva, the greatest sage of his generation also praised silence, saying (*Pirkei Avot* 3:13):

סִיג לַחֲכָמָה - שְׁתִּיקָה

Silence is a fence for wisdom

- *What do you think Rabbi Shimon Gamliel meant by saying, "I have not found anything better for the body than silence?" What might the relationship be between silence and the body?*
- *What does it mean that something is a "fence for wisdom?"*
- *How has silence increased your wisdom?*
- *What is the quality of your contemplative practice/s?*
- *What impact might having more silence in your life have on your use of speech?*



For Further Study – *Shtikah-Shmirat HaLashon/Silence/Mindful Speech*

Source 1: Laws of Right Living 7:3, Maimonides (D. 1204, Egypt)

אמרו חכמים שלש עבירות נפרעין מן האדם בעולם הזה ואין לו חלק לעולם
הבא עבודת כוכבים וגילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים ולשון הרע כנגד כולם

The Sages teach (Babylonian Talmud Arachin 16a) us that that there are three transgressions about which a person suffers consequences in this world and for which he loses his portion in the world to come: idol worship, incest and murder. And *Lashon Hara* is equal to them all.

The “World to Come” is a world of pure spirituality. When the rabbis of the Talmud want to indicate the extent of one’s evil, they tell us that it causes one to lose one’s portion in the world to come. Idol worship, incest and murder are the three major transgressions about which, in some cases, one should die rather than transgress.

Questions:

- What are some of the consequences “in this world” of speaking *Lashon Hara*?
- How does speaking *Lashon Hara* damage one’s spirituality?
- What do you think is so bad about *Lashon Hara* that the rabbis would compare it to the worst possible actions like murder and incest?

Source 2: *Orchot Tzaddikim/The Ways of the Righteous* (Anonymous, 16th century)

The 16th century Mussar classic, *Orchot Tzaddikim/The Ways of the Righteous*, divides the types of speech into five categories:

The first, a *mitzvah*; the second, to be shunned; the third, petty; the fourth, beloved; the fifth, permissible. A *mitzvah* – speaking of Torah and awe of Heaven; to be shunned – false testimony, indecent speech, and slander; petty – speech containing neither transgression nor benefit, as most of the worlds’ talk, such as speaking of what has already been done and the customs of kings and other such things of the affairs of the world; beloved – speech in praise of good deeds and in deprecation of evil deeds, ... permissible – speech of trade for one’s livelihood, and of clothing, food and drink and one’s other needs, but one who minimizes his speech even in this area is to be praised...

These categories invite us to be particularly mindful of our speech, and to bring our complete attention to the full range of choices we have in exercising speech or remaining silent in any given situation. Are the words I am about to say going to encourage, or harm? Be useful, or add verbal clutter? Increase connection, or alienate?

Think about conversations you’ve had or texts/emails you’ve written today. Which of the Orchot Tzaddikim’s categories did you employ?



Shtikah and Shmirat HaLashon/Silence and Mindful Speech Practices

Torah Learning:

Sources in the curriculum

Everyday Holiness, “Silence”

Focus Phrase

Suggested phrases:

מֹות וְחַיִּים בְּיַד לְשׁוֹן

Death and life are in the power of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21)

סִג לְחֻכְמָה - שְׁתִּיקָה

Silence is a fence for wisdom. (Pirkei Avot 3:13)

Kabbalat (Choose one):

Set a fixed time each day, for approximately 20 minutes, to focus on speech. During this time, notice any thought arising which would be negative words. Pause and breathe; bring attention to the body and the emotions arising; consider something positive to say about the person about whom you are thinking, in order to learn “*Lashon Tov*.” A communal meal is a good time to try this practice.

Dedicate, or rededicate yourself to a contemplative practice every day during our work on this *middah*. Choose a reasonable amount of time that will fit into your schedule.

Cheshbon HaNefesh (Hitbodedut or journaling):

Keep a daily record of insights and experiences you have with this *Shtikah/Shmirat HaLashon* practice. You can respond to the following prompt if useful:

- What was it like to hear *Lashon Hara* today (verbally or in print)?
- How might your life change if you really understood that “death and life are in the power of the tongue?”
- How does a certain amount of silent time impact your day?

Sichat Chaverim Chevruta:

Set a 30 minute period of time to meet with your partner at least once between meetings.



Fill in dates for your practice period in the top row. Check each day you do the practice. This form can be printed on card stock paper and folded over to put on a desktop or dresser for easy viewing.

Phrase														
Kabbalah														
Cheshbon														
Chevruta														

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Shtikah and Shmirat HaLashon/Silence and Mindful Speech Practices

Focus Phrase:

מֹות וְחַיִּים בְּיַד לְשׁוֹן

Death and life are in the power of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21)

סִג לְחֻכְמָה - שְׁתִּיקָה

Silence is a fence for wisdom (Pirkei Avot 3:13)

Kabbalat

Set a fixed time every day, for approximately 20 minutes, to focus on speech. During this time, if any thought arises within us to say something negative about someone, immediately push oneself to say something positive about this person, in order to learn “*Lashon Tov.*” A communal meal is a good time to try this practice. Dedicate, or rededicate yourself to a contemplative practice every day during our work on this *middah*. Choose a reasonable amount of time that will fit into your schedule.

Cheshbon HaNefesh (Hitbodedut or journaling) – 3-7 times/week

Sichat Chaverim Chevruta – Weekly



Shmirat HaLashon – A Mindfulness Perspective

Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg

We are going to use the letters of the aleph bet as objects of our meditation along with the breath. This is a practice to help us settle the mind and see more clearly so that we can choose our words with greater care. May our words heal rather than to hurt. May they be useful and truthful and filled with wisdom.

Please, take your seat for meditation.

Allow your spine to be erect and your face, shoulders and heart to be soft. Allow your belly to be soft and relaxed.

Settle into your body. Notice sensations and sounds. Allow the thoughts to pass like clouds in the open sky.

Now connect to your breath – wherever it is easiest for you – throat, nostrils, back of throat, belly, chest, whole body breathing.

On the next full breath visualize the letter aleph in your mind and softly say the word *aleph* to yourself, on the second breath visualize the letter *bet* and softly silently note to yourself *bet*, on the third breath, visualize *gimel* and softly note *gimel*.

Then repeat again and again the sequence of *aleph, bet, gimel*. Each letter receives a full breath (inhale and exhale). Try to allow the breath to come naturally. Bring your attention to the breath and add the visualization of the letter and the soft note.

Try this for a while. If you get distracted and forget your place, be kind and gentle. Return to the *aleph*.

(2-3 minutes)

If this is very easy you might try going all the way to *zayin* in the same manner.

Aleph – one inhale and exhale, *bet* – one full breath, *gimel* – one breath, *dalet* – one breath, *hay* – one breath, *vav* – one breath, *zayin* – one breath and return to *aleph* for another cycle. Include the visualization of the letter and the soft note.

(2 minutes)

If you have a lot of time and energy you might try the entire *aleph – bet, aleph* through *tav*.

Bell