

Lashon Ha-Rah

Leader's Guide

You shall not go about as a tale-bearer among your people (Leviticus 19:16)
You shall not wrong one another (Leviticus 25:17)

TEXTS

Conclusion of *Amidah*

My God, keep my tongue from evil, my lips from lies.

Psalm 34:13-14

Who is the person who is eager for life [*he-hafetz hayyim*], and who desires years of good fortune? Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech.

Leader: *Few concepts are as misunderstood as lashon ha-rah. What is lashon ha-rah?*

- **lashon ha-rah** refers to any statement that is true but that lowers the status of the person about whom it is said. The rabbis assigned terminology to different kinds of evil speech.
- **motzi' shem rah** is spreading lies about another person; literally spreading a bad name.
- **rechilus** is gossip, or literally "peddling" derogatory information about another

Leader: *The rabbis were well aware that words, once spoken are hard to retract.*

A Morality Tale

Once there was a man who had said awful things about another person. Realizing that he has done something awful, he goes to his rabbi and asks, "Rabbi, what can I do?" The rabbi thinks a bit and tells the man to bring him a feather pillow. The man brings the pillow, and the rabbi tells him to go outside, rip the pillow open, and shake out the feathers. The man does that. As he shakes out the feathers, the wind catches them, and they start flying everywhere. The man comes back to the rabbi and says, "I did as you said. Now what?" The rabbi says, "Now go back outside and pick up all the feathers." The man looks startled and says, "How can I? The wind took them! I don't even know where they are now." The rabbi says, "Exactly. Just like your words. Once they're out, it's impossible to get them back"

Leader: *Can you think of stories from the Bible and from other literary and cultural sources that reflect this notion of the difficulty in retracting words?*

- *Othello, The Crucible, On the Waterfront*

The repetitiveness about **cautious and judicious speech** reflects its importance as a mitzvah.

1. Each day we recite the petition to help guard our speech at the end of the *Amidah* (see above text).
2. A large percentage of the Yom Kippur liturgy having to do with the confession of sins (in the *'al Chet* and the *Ashamnu*) focuses on evil speech.

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Take the **Speech Quiz**, then break up into groups and discuss their answers. This should lead to a lively discussion! Some answers might be more readily apparent than others.

Answers: (1) c; (2) b When Sarah is told that she will have a child she laughs and says: 'Now I am old and withered, am I to have enjoyment with my husband **so old?**' But God reports to Abraham that she says 'shall I bear a child, old as *I* am?' (Genesis 18) According to a midrash, when God omitted Sarah's ridicule of her husband's advanced age, only focusing on hers – God was "keeping shalom bayit;" (3) The midwives told Pharaoh that by the time they arrived, the Hebrew women had already given birth; (4) c; (5) d; (6) c The rabbis viewed vows as serious and to be kept. The only way an individual can be released is at Kol Nidrei (when all oaths are nullified). But oaths were discouraged, lest people make them lightly, knowing that they can be erased once a year; (7) d The listener is pretending to take the high ground, while at the same time casting more innuendo; (8) c; (9) b; (10) c.

Activity 2

Create your own acrostic (each line begins with a successive letter of the alphabet, from A-Z) a popular literary form in High Holiday liturgy. Each line should deal with the misuse of language.

On Yom Kippur, pay careful attention to all of these sins. As you recite them, note which are about language.

Activity 3

Discussions, in either small or large groups

Question 1: *Why do we like to engage in lashon ha-rah?*

- It gives us a sense of power and mastery; not knowing the scuttlebutt (in an office, for example) gives the impression that one is "out of the loop." The person who knows what everyone's up to is considered well connected. One way you know you're a member of a group is when people start listening to what you say about others.
- Lashon ha-rah also keeps us from facing our own shortcomings. If I say what I tightwad so-and-so is, or how badly she treats her family/co-workers/fellow volunteers, it makes me feel magnanimous and a paragon of virtue.
- Our culture encourages it. Political news is often more allegation than explanation. We spend time talking about the personal lives of celebrities who sometimes seem to be professional objects of lashon ha-rah.

Question 2: Why is lashon ha-rah so bad?

[Solicit answers. Some might include rabbinic responses.]

The rabbis teach that lashon ha-rah is like killing three people: it destroys the reputation of the victim, damages the perceptions of the listener, and diminishes the standing of the speaker.

The Maharal, Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, said: the common thread of all lashon ha-rah is its capacity to create division and separation.

The Hafetz Hayim (Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, 1838-1933) is considered one of the modern authorities on the subject; his writings focused principally on the misuse and potential hazards of speech. He is better known by the title of his first book, *Hafetz Hayyim*, which is derived from the Psalms 34:13-14 (above). He established these principles:

- you are not to say derogatory things about anyone whether true or not
- you are not to imply derogatory things about anyone
- you are not to listen to derogatory things about anyone (in listening to them, you are tacitly involved in the process)

Question 3: When is lashon ha-rah permissible?

What if someone is truly despicable?

What if you know someone about to go into business with someone known for shady deals?

What if your friend is involved with someone known to be violent?

You are permitted to speak lashon ha-rah to prevent someone from being victimized, or to resolve major disputes, but only when what you say is based on firsthand information, what you're saying is true and accurate and the person who is in the wrong has been spoken to and refuses to change.

In such cases, we are permitted to speak about these things. But the laws of permissible lashon ha-rah are very clear.

You can't excuse lashon ha-rah by saying: "I'm just trying to help."

Activity 4: How to Confront Prejudice

[Using the How to Confront Prejudice handout, have a discussion about Jewish responsibilities and limitations for combating prejudice.]

Leader: *Our participation in a vast and free society has brought us into contact with a broad spectrum of non-Jews of many diverse religious, national and ethnic groups.*

The rationale for the mitzvot of not oppressing the stranger ("we were strangers in Egypt") is repeated twice. Is that still relevant? What other reasons can we offer for why we should treat one another with respect?

[Print a copy for each participant to use in the session]

A Quiz on Speech

(answers in Leader's Guide)

Question 1: A passage in the book of Psalms advises those who love life to:

- Tell the truth on every occasion.
- Speak as little as possible.
- Guard against evil or deceptive speech.
- Imitate God by creating worlds through speech.

Question 2: This biblical figure and incident are cited in rabbinic literature as modeling desirable speech behavior:

God repeats the instruction to Jonah to warn Nineveh of its impending destruction, this time specifying exactly what he is to say.

God deliberately misquotes Sarah when citing to Abraham her expression of disbelief at the promise of a son.

Saul begins his rebuke of his son Jonathan with the words, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman!"

Eliphaz the Temanite points out to his friend Job the latter's faults: "You subvert piety and restrain prayer to God. Your sinfulness dictates your speech, so you choose crafty language."

Question 3: When the midwives in Exodus were asked by Pharaoh why they had disobeyed his order to kill all the Israelites' newborn sons, what did they say that earned them the Bible's approval?

- They confessed their "crime" and died as martyrs.
- They escaped punishment by lying about the circumstances.
- They confessed their "crime" and were given another chance.
- They denied receiving such orders, but Pharaoh was not fooled and had them killed.

Question 4: If asked "What did so-and-so say about me?" when disparaging remarks were in fact made, Jewish ethics encourages us to:

- Tell the truth but mitigate it with observations such as "I am sure (s)he did not really mean that."
- Tell the truth but express support for the injured subject.
- Refuse to comment.
- Deny that anything negative was said.

Question 5: May I offer to do someone a favor if I know that he or she is unable to take up the offer?

- No. To do so would be taking unfair advantage of my knowledge of the other situation the other person is in.

Yes, if I intend it as a gesture of friendship that will cost me nothing and please the other person.

Yes, as long as I cross my fingers.

Yes, as long as I would have been pleased to perform the favor if the offer could have been accepted.

Question 6: The prevailing rabbinic attitude toward vows and oaths is:

They are an excellent form of self-discipline, and their use is to be encouraged.

They may be regarded as expressing no more than intent, and may be disregarded at will, so they are of negligible value.

They are of questionable moral value, since a person may entrap himself into an unwanted situation, and they are therefore best avoided.

They border on blasphemy and are to be avoided at all costs.

Question 7: Someone who says "Please do not talk to me about so-and-so. I would not want to tell you what I know about her" is regarded as:

Praiseworthy for distancing himself from temptation

Morally neutral for having expressed neither praise nor disparagement

Somewhat at fault for the potential negative interpretation of his words

Worthy of punishment for having effectively disparaged the subject of his remark

Question 8: If you have been the recipient of generous hospitality, you should:

Tell everyone you can think of, to bring honor to your hosts.

Tell anyone who might be in a position to praise the hosts.

Tell people selectively, so that your hosts are not inundated with unwanted guests.

Tell no one, assuming that your hosts want the satisfaction of doing the right thing, not the praise of others.

Question 9: If you learn that a friend is about to invest in an enterprise run by someone about whom you have heard that he has a record of fraudulent activity, you should:

Repeat the rumor with the warning that it is only a rumor and not necessarily true.

Suggest that your friend should, of course, investigate anyone with whom she might intend to invest money, without reference to the rumor.

Say nothing on the subject, since by spreading information that may be false, you are at risk of committing slander.

Know that Jewish scholars disagree about the answer, with all three positions above having their advocates.

Question 10: Lashon ha-rah is:

The spreading of false information

The spreading of accurate information without permission from its subject

The spreading of information, whether true or false, that is injurious to the reputation or interests of another person.

How to Confront Prejudice

Mitzvot

Love your fellow as yourself (Leviticus 19:17)

You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers... (Exodus 22:20)

You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers ... (Deuteronomy 10:19)

1. Don't ignore it. When you let offensive remarks pass, you send the message that you are in agreement with such behavior or attitudes.
2. Choose the time and place to respond, best in private. If the comment was made in public, wait for a moment when you're alone to bring up your concern, maybe while in the car driving home, or suggest that you take a moment away from the group.
3. Don't shy away from tension or conflict. Sometimes they produce positive changes.
4. Think about what you want to get out of the intervention. When a comment or action hurts, the tendency is to strike back. But a tit-for-tat is not productive. If your goal is to challenge someone's behavior, be sure not to escalate matters into confrontation or negate her right to speak his beliefs.
5. Project a feeling of understanding and support. Without preaching, state how you feel and firmly address the hurtful behavior and attitude while supporting the dignity of the person making the prejudiced remark. Try to assume good will.
6. Use "I" rather than "you" to explain how you feel. Use humor when appropriate. Ask questions to help figure out the real concern underlying the comment. Listen closely. Consider that there might be some hurt motivating the bigoted comment, and be ready to acknowledge it.
7. Be non-judgmental but know the bottom line. Don't act superior – patronizing is not productive. Make it clear, however, that the issue is one of human dignity and justice.
8. Be aware of your own attitudes and stereotypes. Everyone has biases. Be sure that you have examined yours.
9. Gather accurate information to challenge stereotypes and biases. Take responsibility for educating yourself about your own and others' cultures.
10. Distinguish between categorical thinking and stereotyping. Categories help us sort out information and make sense of the world. Acknowledging obvious differences is not a problem, but placing negative values on those differences is called stereotyping.
11. Be a role model. Reflect and practice non-discriminatory values in all aspects of your behavior, both personally and professionally. Teach others through positive examples.
12. Provide examples of individual whose lives challenge stereotypes.