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CLEAN SPEECH UK
STUDY BOOK

30-DAY DOSES OF DAILY STUDY INSPIRATION

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CLEAN SPEECH UK 2023



LAST YEAR **75**
COMMUNITES &
SCHOOLS RAN
CLEAN SPEECH
EVENTS



OVER **1500**
PEOPLE SIGNED
UP FOR 30 DAY
VIDEOS



80% OF PEOPLE
SAID IT
IMPACTED THE
WAY THEY
SPOKE

THIS YEAR THE IMPACT IS UP TO YOU!

WELCOME TO YOUR CLEAN SPEECH UK STUDY GUIDE

THIS BOOK CONTAINS ONE IDEA TO READ FOR EACH DAY OF THE PROJECT

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	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY
WEEK 1: FEB 11TH IS IT IMPORTANT TO CARE ABOUT "CLEAN SPEECH?"	1 Defining us	2 Our speech defines our reality - once said, lashon hara shapes the world	3 The difficulty of repairing lashon hara (potentially part of Day 2)
WEEK 2: FEB 18TH TALKING ABOUT HOW WE TALK	8 It's denigrating or harmful? Defining terms	9 Well, it's TRUE! As opposed to Motzei Shem Ra	10 It's not about any ONE, it's ALL of THEM! Shmiras Halashon applies to groups of people
WEEK 3: FEB 25TH TALKING ABOUT HOW WE LISTEN	15 It's okay if I just listen, right? Nope	16 I don't believe it	17 As a listener, what should I do?
WEEK 4: MAR 3RD TOELES & TIMES YOU MUST SPEAK UP	22 Exceptions	23 Victimization	24 Fights
WEEK 5: MAR 10TH TOELES & TIMES YOU MUST SPEAK UP	29 The seven conditions	30 Reentry- How to make the inspiration last	

WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SHABBAT
4 Lashon hara is denial of differences, people are due respect even when they argue	5 Judging others favorably	6 Judging others if it's a good value, as Jews we practice what preach. Let's visit planet CSC for a month - the Whole30 like a Holy30 speech diet	7 We're proud this is our heritage, the world values our lessons
11 Just kidding! Even when said in jest	12 Hey, no names, but did you know... It's a problem whenever the identity could become known	13 But I didn't SAY anything!! Being careful with implication, gesture, facial expressions, etc.	14 Care with texts and social media behaviors + review
18 How exactly do I "rebuke" the speaker?	19 Hierarchy of responses	20 Everyone already knows this! Repeating common knowledge - avoid asking in a way that will elicit l'h	21 But I like them, just not how they speak! Avoiding baalei lashon hara
25 Teaching proper behavior	26 Exploring other options	27 Business recommendation	28 Social/marriage recommendation



**ONE MONTH OF
MINDFUL SPEECH
FOR THE BETTERMENT
OF HUMANKIND
AND TO REFLECT
OUR DIVINE IMAGE**



Dear Reader,

You may have heard about the Clean Speech Project UK. You may not. But you've definitely connected to what the project is all about: the power of words. Words, speech and communication are such key areas of our lives – they underpin so many of our daily spheres; work, friends, family. But do we ever invest in spending concentrated effort improving the way we communicate? This is where the Clean Speech Project UK comes in.

The Clean Speech Project UK is all about the power of words and choosing positive words over negative words. Based on a highly successful initiative started in Colorado, Clean Speech UK is a joint project between Seed & GIFT, sponsored by The Wohl Legacy. The Clean Speech Project UK creates resources, programmes and events, in partnership with schools and communities. Last year over 15 schools ran Clean Speech parent-child learning sessions and over 70 schools and communities were involved in programmes and events. For more information about the project and to sign up to the 30-day videos from top educators, please visit www.cleanspeech.co.uk

From our experiences of media bias, discrimination and hate speech down to celebrity law suits and social media - we have seen how words can divide and create schisms. Words and their impact are everywhere to be seen, heard, spoken and read! The goal of this month-long project is to draw on Jewish wisdom to combat lashon hara – negative and divisive words – and be more mindful of the way we communicate.

Let's do this for Israel. Let's do this for ourselves and our nation.

Happy reading,

Rabbis Fine & Zeidman

Seed & GIFT



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL WORLD

Advertising. Marketing. Therapy. Teaching. Journalism. Media.

These are a few of the multi-billion pound industries that revolve around speech. Tens of hours of research can be invested in choosing the right words for a headline or advertisement – because we know the right words make a huge difference.

This is not a book about speech. It's a book about us.

Clean Speech UK is not just about what we say. It's about who we are.

The Jewish guidelines for communication are our timeless plan for how people should live with one another. They are the tools to remove anger, bitterness, and jealousy from our hearts and to eliminate strife, hurt, and divisiveness from our world. This study book contains 30 lessons. The first week is an introduction to speech and communication, then we launch into a study of lashon hara – negative speech – to understand it from all angles and to create positive speech patterns.

When we think about words, we realise that they, more than any other human faculty, define us. What we say and how we say it is who we are. Angry, hurtful words define an angry, hurtful person. Kind, considerate words define a kind, considerate person.

“Consider the unique nature of the tongue — partly hidden and partly revealed. It is usually not seen, but it is heard. Rabbi Yehuda Loew (d. 1609), explained that God designed the tongue to reflect its function, which is to reveal the hidden self — one's thoughts, ideas, and personality. The tongue takes these hidden elements from within us, and, through words, brings them into the open.”

¹ *Chofetz Chaim: A Lesson a Day*. Artscroll, p. xxi.

It is actually a simple principle: If we remove negativity, gossip, slander, and divisiveness from our vocabulary, we automatically and dramatically improve our own lives and the lives of everyone around us.

“Be mindful when it comes to your words. A string of some that don't mean much to you, may stick with someone else for a lifetime.”
— Rachel Wolchin, blogger and author

Judaism teaches that the words we choose determine how we experience our lives. By taking hold of our power of speech, we take hold of life itself.

Through Clean Speech UK, an awareness month devoted to mindful speech, each one of us can make a real and lasting impact on the way we speak to dramatically improve our lives and the lives of everyone we connect with. By familiarising ourselves with the Torah's timeless laws of proper speech for just a few minutes each day, we will develop a heightened awareness of the impact of our words. And by continuing the exercise consistently for a month, we can train our tongues to avoid the destructive speech patterns that tear us apart.

DAILY TO-DO:

Listen to your own words today. Start to develop an ear for the kinds of things you typically say.



WORDS CREATE REALITY

Thoughts exist in a separate, private sphere. Once articulated, however, the thought is no longer a private matter. It becomes an item on the world's agenda. Our deeper Jewish sources teach that humankind is defined as 'someone with the ability to speak.' Speech reflects our Divine essence –when we speak we take infinite-esque thoughts and package them into finite words, mimicking the Divine process of creation.

A person may work side by side with someone for years, harbouring the thought that the colleague is "annoying." For all those years, the thought has no power to affect anything or anyone beyond the person thinking it.

Then, one day, this person enters into a conversation with a coworker and offers her assessment of the other woman, saying she's "annoying." The instant that thought is released into the world, it sets out on a path of destruction. Now another person's attention has been drawn to this woman's allegedly "annoying" mannerisms. She shows a little less patience with her. After all, she's "annoying." The relationship is damaged forever.

"Before you speak, you are in charge of the word. Once you speak, it is in charge of you. You are its hostage." — Rabbi Avraham Kohan, Rabbi of Torah Ohr in Great Neck, NY

We can think a million things in our head. Some nice, some not so nice, some compassionate, and some critical. It's the rare person who never thinks a negative thought about anyone.

But once we say the words, we've changed the fabric of reality, and we're stuck with that change. Now others will see that person in a different light. Perhaps it will cost that person a job, a friendship, or a piece of their dignity. It may well cost us a friendship, too.

This powerful idea can help us hold our tongues and give us time to process our negative thoughts. As long as our thoughts are unspoken, we can work on them. "Is it really such a big deal? Am I any better? Can he help being that way? Could I help him change?"

The world is a much better place when we are the masters and our words work for us, accomplishing what we really want to accomplish in life.

**"I can retract what I did not say, but I cannot retract what I have already said."
— Solomon Ibn Gabirol,
11th-century Jewish poet and philosopher**



DAILY TO-DO:

When you talk to people today, watch their faces to see their reactions to your words.

NO BAND-AID BIG ENOUGH

According to some studies, in the 1970s the average person saw 1,600 ads per day. By 2007 this jumped to over 5,000 and today it is over 10,000! An average person is exposed to 490,000 words a day (War and Peace is 'only' 460,000). In day 5 we will note how many words the average person speaks per day!

"Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me."

Although this might be a common childhood defense mechanism to avoid being deflated and depressed by some bully's ugly comment, it certainly isn't true.

The destructive impact of words can last a long time, deeply affecting the course of a person's life, compromising their self-esteem, and eroding their significant relationships.

To make matters worse, once said, words are virtually impossible to retract.

Consider this: Something we say about a person might cause them to lose a job, a business opportunity, or even a spouse. How can we fix that?

**"Be careful with your words. Once they are said, they can only be forgiven, not forgotten."
— Carl Sandburg,
American poet and author**



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO

Once upon a time in a small Jewish town, there was a young man who was a real gossip. As Rosh Hashanah was approaching, he decided he wanted to make things right, so he went and asked the town Rabbi.

"Rabbi, I spread some awful rumours about my neighbors. Oy! Now what do I do?" he asked.

The Rabbi told him to go and get a feather pillow, climb up to the roof with it, tear it open, and shake out all the feathers into the wind.

The young man thought this sounded like a strange way to repair the awful rumours he had spread, but he dutifully followed the Rabbi's instructions, and went back to see what to do next.

"Now, I want you to go and collect every single one of those feathers," the Rabbi said. The young man was stunned.

"But, Rabbi, I can't possibly gather up every one of those feathers. There are so many of them, and they've blown all over town," he said.

"You're right," said the Rabbi. "It's not really possible — and neither is it possible to repair the damage caused by all of the lashon hara you said. We must be very careful with how we use our words."

DAILY TO-DO:

Think of some words that affected you deeply from a long time ago and how they impact you today.



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO

LEARN TO ARGUE

Speaking without insult or denigration is often difficult when discussing issues we care deeply about. The more heated the debate, the more likely we are to ridicule and demean those who disagree with us. Long after the argument is over, any mention of the "other" opinion or its adherents can trigger a tirade of verbal abuse, vitriol, and snide comments.

Our historic role models in this particular struggle are the students of the great sage Hillel.

The names Hillel and Shammai are synonymous with great debate. Their Talmudic arguments span the breadth of Jewish law and define Jewish life as we know it today. As a general rule, Jewish law always follows the opinion of the School of Hillel. Why?

"The students of Hillel were gracious and tolerant, quoting the opinions of the School of Shammai along with their own. Not only that, but they even quoted the opinions with which they differed before their own opinions" (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b).

Lashon hara emanates from the mistaken belief that everyone and everything should conform to my standard. It arises out of an intolerance of differences between oneself and others — someone else's opinions as opposed to my own, someone else's politics as opposed to my own, someone else's beliefs as opposed to my own.



Words are the barometer of ego.

Such intolerance is a denial of the uniqueness with which God has endowed each human being.

"Just as people's faces don't resemble one another, so too their thought processes don't resemble one another" (Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 21:2).

Rabbi Yisroel Alter of Ger (1895-1977) commented on the above Midrash, saying that we should accept differences in thought as readily as we accept differences in appearance.

PIPE DOWN! OR PIPE UP?

Q: Doesn't an attempt to curtail speech stop us from expressing our opinions or standing up for what we believe in?

A: No. Reducing *lashon hora* in our community should cause an **increase** in our collective ability to discuss issues about which we differ. Rather than clamping down on substantive conversation over the many issues of interest and concern to us, we can build bridges of respectful dialogue, allowing even strongly held differences of opinion to be aired without personal attack, character defamation, or insult.

DAILY TO-DO:

During one conversation today, acknowledge an opinion with which you don't agree.

JUDGE OTHERS FAVOURABLY

The average person says thousands of words every day — as many as 20,000 by some accounts. That’s a lot of words.

It’s daunting to try to police so many words each and every day. If some of those words are negative, critical, and insensitive, it would be hard to lock them inside our mouths and never let them out.

The real way not to *speak* badly about people is not to *think* badly about them in the first place. Judge others favourably.¹ See the positive and overlook the negative. We won’t say anything negative if we don’t see anything negative.

A person is a mixture of finer points and rougher edges. We all know ourselves, and we are well aware that we’re not perfect. We have certain things that we’re not proud of, that we don’t want anyone to notice, and we certainly don’t want them posted online! We’ll make every excuse for ourselves, and we certainly judge ourselves favourably.

Shouldn’t we do the same for others? Yes, this person may be impatient, and that person may be self-absorbed. But if we look closely, we can find positive qualities in everyone. And that’s what we should focus on.

More than being just a good strategy not to speak *lashon hara*, focusing on the positive qualities of others also makes the world around us that much more beautiful. Who wants to live in a mean, critical world where everyone is annoying?



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO

“When you judge others, you do not define them, you define yourself.”
— Earl Nightingale,
an American radio personality and author

With a pair of “judging others favourably” glasses on, we live in a beautiful world, surrounded by interesting and colourful people from whom we can learn and with whom we can share.² A place that is safe from constant criticism, that supports growth and peace.³ That’s a world we all want to be part of and which can only become a reality if we upgrade the way we think — and speak — about each other.

The Smag commentary writes that judging others favourably is about redressing attribution bias. We tend to ascribe our successes to ‘me’ and failures to external circumstances. Why did I do well on the test? Because I’m intelligent! And why did I fail the other test? The teacher set poor questions. But when it comes to others the bias is reversed; we ascribe their failures to them and their successes as ‘they got lucky!’ Judging others favourably moves us to admit ‘*they may be right, which means I need to change myself.*’ Rav Diskin further writes that this mitzvah means a person is effectively creating a positive environment by surrounding themselves with more positive people and influences.

¹ Another beautiful Jewish value, as expressed in Leviticus 19:15, immediately preceding the verse that prohibits speaking *lashon hara*.

² Our Sages teach: “Who is wise? One who learns from everyone.” (Pirkei Avos 4:1).

³ There may be times when it is important to notice things that are wrong, such as when a problem needs to be addressed. We will discuss this in Week 4.

DAILY TO-DO:

Today, when something negative about someone crosses your mind, quickly think of something positive about them.



PRACTICE

This is not a book to *study*. It is a book to *learn*.

You *study* anthropology. You *learn* to ride a bike. When something is more than just theory, when you're going to “Just Do It,” it can't stay in the world of theory. It has to be practiced.

My principles affect the way I interact with the world. The way I speak to my neighbor, my colleague, my family member.

No one wants their tombstone to read, “Here lies Jane Doe. She had many great ideas, but didn't accomplish any of them.” You want everyone to say, “She really put her money where her mouth was.”

The principle of not speaking unkindly about others is easy to buy into. It's a clear and meaningful value that makes the world a better place. The challenge is putting it into practice.

Starting next week on day 8 we will delve into the laws of speech and lashon hara.

THE HOLY30

In 2009, Melissa Hartwig Urban blogged about a diet experiment she tried for 30 days. She cut out all kinds of things from her diet and created a life-changing, best-selling health program called the Whole30®, which is practiced today by millions of people.

Similarly, to bring about real and meaningful change in our speech habits, our relationships, and our world, we have the 30-day Clean Speech UK program. Think of it as the Holy30. For the duration of this month, let's take practical steps to eliminate problematic speech patterns and put the value into practice.

The formula for this transformation is:

Education: A few minutes each day of clarifying the kinds of things we shouldn't say

+

Awareness: Daily reminders for 30 days straight

=

Change: A life of greater peace and improved relationships

And you know what? That's what Judaism is all about. It's not just a bundle of good ideas and values; it's a principled life to be lived to the fullest. Actualised. Realised. Practiced. We feed the poor, we care for the sick, and we build community — we don't just think about doing these things. We take genuine steps toward improving relationships by bringing our values to life.

Here we go!

DAILY TO-DO:

Find and commit to a regular time each day when you can spend 5 minutes reading this book and practicing its lessons

#KeepingItClean

WHAT A LEGACY WE HAVE

Spend two minutes looking up what Judaism has brought to the world. What do you think are the most striking and world-changing? Monotheism? Important inventions? Famous leaders?

At this moment, in the UK, there seems to be popular recognition that speaking civilly to one another is a good thing.

It may be difficult, and may not always be practiced, but it's important.

It is a meaningful, positive value.

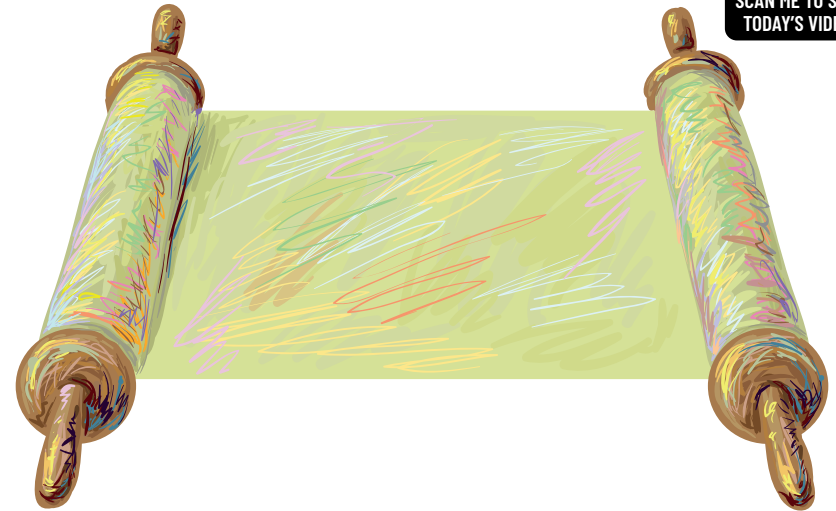
This, and many other positive values that we hold dear, are our Jewish contributions to the world. Love your neighbour as yourself. Be fair and righteous in judgement. Watch what you say.

Our Torah, the world's most published book, which is more than 3,300 years old and which has been our guiding light for millennia, teaches the art of mindful speech.

For all of these years, our great thinkers, scholars, and teachers have further clarified, refined, and elaborated the general principles of proper speech, as well as the finer points. They give examples, discuss different circumstances, and show us how to navigate tricky situations. They pass down to us a legacy of greatness in this area, in human communication, to be a "light unto the nations" (Isaiah 49:6).



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO



As Jews, we don't build empires. We build communities. We don't conquer people, we care about people. What a legacy we have: warm, caring communities of people who treat each other with respect and dignity. If we haven't perfected it yet, at least the principles are there. The Rambam writes a crucial sentence that we all know and experience constantly: 'a person is influenced by their surroundings.'

For one month of Clean Speech UK, let's focus on our speech, familiarise ourselves with the detailed guidelines, and work together as individuals, families and communities to make some much needed progress in how we speak. The world needs it. Our community needs it. We need it.

DAILY TO-DO:

Can you think of a time something you said had positive ripple-effects? Can you try and repeat that phenomenon?



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO

DEFINING OUR TERMS

Perhaps the most important phrase to know in this primer is the term *lashon hara*. Literally translated from Hebrew, *lashon hara* means “bad language.” In English, when we tell our children not to speak with bad language, we generally mean not to use “four letter words” (i.e. profanity).* However, what is meant by the term *lashon hara* is quite different.

The term *lashon hara* refers to speech that is hurtful or harmful.

For example, discussing someone’s poor character traits, bad habits, or embarrassing moments would be *lashon hara*, since it’s hurtful to a person to have these things said about them.

“Ethel is a real nudnik.” “Don’t ask Harold to borrow his lawn mower, he never lends out a thing.” “Did you see how Brittany kicked her dog?!”

Saying something unflattering, insulting, or unkind about another person is *lashon hara*. It’s a lowly thing to draw attention to the shortcomings of another person. If they would be hurt by knowing that something was said about them, don’t say it.

If you talk about someone, make sure they would be happy to hear what you say.

Sometimes, we can say something that doesn’t appear to be so negative, but it can cause harm to the person we spoke about. Harm in this context could be financial loss, such as causing someone to lose a job opportunity; emotional distress, such as causing a fallout between friends; or damage to a person’s reputation, such as causing others to question someone’s integrity.

“I don’t know if Sam is at full strength these days.” “Jennifer would never be interested in such a relationship.” “I hear that Harold and Freida had to sell the house.”

Hearing about Sam’s lack of perfect health could influence a decision about whether an employer hires him. An offhand remark about Jennifer’s dating preferences could mean she doesn’t get asked out by someone who would be perfect for her. Mentioning Harold and Freida’s financial woes could affect how people in the community treat them socially.

We should consider the possible impact of our words and, even if they aren’t clearly insulting, if they will cause harm, those words are *lashon hara*.

These two types of speech, hurtful and harmful, comprise the basic cases of *lashon hara*, speech that the Jewish People has considered off limits for thousands of years. In the next few pages, we’ll clarify the parameters of *lashon hara*, focus our energies for the month of Clean Speech UK, and work on removing *lashon hara* from our daily lives.

*Interestingly, Maimonides wrote that Hebrew is known as the Holy Language, *lashon hakodesh*, because it does not contain any profane words. Nonetheless, even in Hebrew, and certainly in any other language, it is possible to express oneself in a coarse, undignified manner, something which the Talmud strongly discourages.

DAILY TO-DO:

Imagine that Siri or Alexa is transcribing your every word and sharing it with the person you’re talking about.



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO

WELL, IT'S TRUE!

Jeff and his friends stood under the hoop on the basketball court at break time, wishing they had the ball. Inside the school building, Sam sat outside the head teacher's office, waiting to explain how one of his classmates had thrown the ball at him and broke his glasses.

"Sam made us lose the ball. He's such a wimp," Jeff said belligerently.

"I don't think you should say that," pointed out one of the other boys. "It's *lashon hara*."

"Well, it's true!" retorted Jeff.

In American law, if something can be proven to be true, it may legally be said, even if it is negative and harmful. It's not considered slander if it's accurate, no matter how damaging it may be to the person about whom it was said.

However, something that is hurtful or harmful is *lashon hara*, and should not be said, even though it may be 100 percent true. (In fact, if it's a fabricated statement that's not true, it's called *motzi shem ra*, literally slander, which is a separate prohibition that's even worse.) The term *lashon hara* refers to hurtful or harmful words that are true, and that are nonetheless prohibited.*



true + negative = lashon hara

Sometimes, when we're about to say something unkind, a voice inside our head says, "I really shouldn't say that."

And then another voice inside our head blurts out, "But it's true!" as if that's justification to go right ahead and say the *lashon hara*.

However, just because something is true doesn't mean we should say it. Let's think about why we're saying it. Although there are times when negative things need to be said, which will be discussed further on in this book, most of the time, it's just *lashon hara*. And the fact that it's the truth, doesn't make it OK.

*There are exceptional times when certain things that are true and negative should be said, such as when protecting others from danger. This topic will be addressed in Week 4.

DAILY TO-DO:

Practice "the pause," by taking a moment to think before you speak.

THOSE KIDS

Speaking *lashon hara* is bad enough when speaking unkindly about one individual. But talking about a whole group of people is exponentially worse.

One should be very careful to avoid making derisive comments about this or that group of people.

You know the old joke about the Jew stranded on a desert island? By the time he was rescued, he had built himself a whole town. Before he left the island, he gave his rescuers a tour of the house, the gym, and the two synagogues he had made. "Why do you need two synagogues?" they asked him. "This is my synagogue," he said. "And that's the synagogue I wouldn't set foot in!"

For some reason, it's easier to make offensive comments about "a kid" from that school or "a member" of that synagogue. We tell ourselves, "I wasn't talking about anyone in particular. I didn't say anyone's name."

But by leaving out the name of the person, the insulting comment then refers to every kid at that school, and every member of that synagogue. "The kids from that school are so disrespectful." "The members of that synagogue don't really care."

When Bernie Madoff was arrested in 2009 for his horrible Ponzi scheme, anti-Semites gleefully described him as a "Jewish" thief. The implication then, was that all Jews were thieves. It became an easy way to target one group: Jews.



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO

Similarly, if we draw attention to the fact that something wrong is being done by "one of them" or "one of those you-know-whos," then we are in fact besmirching that whole group.

It's prohibited *lashon hara* to express disdain for a whole group or community, whether Sephardic, Ashkenazic, Orthodox, Londoner, Mancunian, Israeli, Russian, or any other group.

**"Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people."
- Henry Thomas Buckle,
English historian and author**

And it doesn't help if we, ourselves, are members of the group that we're talking about. Even if we might not mind or take offense at our comments, other people in the group might.

For help developing the right mindset to stop criticising groups of people, see Day 4 on page 14.

DAILY TO-DO:

Today, keep your ears open for comments that address a whole group of people at one time, and consider how you might modify your own speech to eliminate such comments.



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO

JUST JOKING

One of the great Talmudic scholars of his time, Rabbi Akiva Eiger (1761-1837) took his son Shlomo (who became a tremendous scholar as well) to a neighbouring town in Eastern Europe to meet a prospective bride.

After an arduous journey by wagon, they arrived at the home of the girl's family. Her father greeted them and welcomed them into the parlour. As they began to get to know each other, the host made a humorous comment, and Rabbi Eiger looked at him quizzically.

"I was just making a joke," the host explained.

In astonishment, Rabbi Eiger said, "A prospective shidduch, and you make a joke? Come Shlomo, we're leaving!" And that was that.*

To our ear, the story may seem surprising. In our generation, it is totally expected that anyone and everyone, in almost any life situation, would tell a joke. After all, where would we be without "Jewish" humour?

What's critically important to recognise, however, is that making a joke is often at someone else's expense. A sarcastic comment, a witty pun, or a well-crafted joke can make people laugh, and simultaneously make the subject of that laughter want to disappear in a puff of embarrassment.

At a recent Jewish youth group conference, one of the young participants shared that he didn't think so-called "Holocaust jokes" were a big deal and, when his friends told them, he just went along with it or ignored it. Another kid stood up and said, "You're laughing at a joke about a situation that led to the murder of my grandfather? That's just as bad as telling it yourself!"

Frequently, after saying something hurtful, we'll say, "Well, I was just kidding" as if that takes away the sting of the insult.

Something said as a joke can be just as hurtful, and is just as problematic, as if it were plainly stated.

To relate an amusing incident for entertainment purposes that would cause embarrassment to any of the people involved is cruel — and it's *lashon hara*.

Perhaps that's why "Jewish" humor tends to be self-deprecating. No one else should be implicated in the gag but the speaker**.

* *shidduch*: a partnership or marriage between two people

**If the speaker makes a joke at his own expense, but others are implicated along with him, it is still considered *lashon hara*. See Day 10 on pg. Xx.

DAILY TO-DO:

Pay attention to when jokes are made today, and assess who is affected by the joke. What could you have done differently in the situation?

NO NAME

One good way to fix *lashon hara* while still being able to share a story is to leave out the name of the person the story is about.

Instead of saying, “I have to tell you about an obnoxious thing Miriam said to me today!” you can say, “I have to tell you about an obnoxious thing someone said to me today.”

As long as the identity of the person remains unknown to the listener, one does not violate the prohibition of speaking *lashon hara* when retelling the story.

However, you have to be careful that no one listening may be able to figure out who you’re talking about, either now or later.

Using phrases such as “Mr. You-Know-Who” or “your friend,” when the meaning is clear to everyone doesn’t help.

If you tell a story about someone in a small group of people, and everyone knows exactly who you mean, it would be *lashon hara* even if you never mention their name. For example, if only one coworker was missing from the meeting, and you said, “Some people will be late for their own funerals!” that’s *lashon hara*, because everyone knows that you’re ridiculing the person not yet in the room.



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO



Or, let’s say you tell a story about a neighbour whose car has an absurd bumper sticker on it. At the time you tell the story, no one listening knows whom you are referring to. However, they could very easily chance upon the car with that bumper sticker and then who you were talking about becomes obvious. That would be *lashon hara*.

Telling a story without names is a valuable skill to teach our children. When a child has something important that they want to communicate to an adult, we need to listen. However, if there is no need to know the name of the person or persons involved, and the story contains *lashon hara*, it’s much better for them not to mention any names. That way, we can be available to hear what they want to tell us, and we can teach them to avoid *lashon hara* at the same time.

DAILY TO-DO:

Practice telling a story without mentioning the name of the person involved.



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BUT I DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING

Throughout this 30-day study guide on the laws of *lashon hara*, we have focused primarily on words — choosing words, avoiding words, and using our words to build up rather than to tear down.

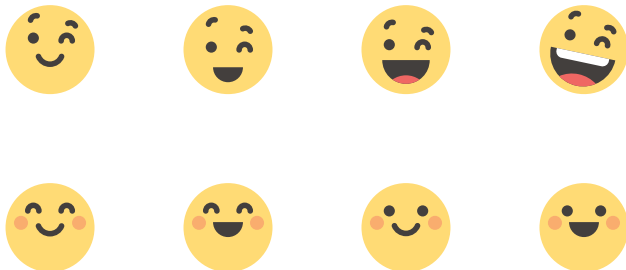
However, the human capacity for communication includes additional ways of getting the message across.

A smile of approval at just the right moment can be more heartwarming than a compliment. Or, with a wink and a nod, two people can share a moment of wordless derision that tears their victim apart. Often, facial expressions, gestures, and body language can tell a lot more of the story than the words themselves. Even the confessional prayer that we say on Yom Kippur mentions “disdainful eyes.”

After all, what’s an emoji, but a small, wordless facial expression? And, oh boy, can it say a lot.

Facial expressions, gestures, or body language that convey something negative are also considered *lashon hara*.

Your neighbour is a hypochondriac who often fails to show up where and when she's expected. You were supposed to go together to a fundraising meeting for your children's school, but she opted out. When you get there, the head of the committee asks you where she is. You shrug and turn your hands up in a gesture that says, "What do you expect?" The committee head says, "Oh, another mystery disease?"



Another *lashon hara* pitfall can be found in subtle implications that are not negative, but suggest something negative.

“I can’t tell you what Jeff did at school today. I don’t want to speak *lashon hara*.”

Sure, no real insult was said. But everyone listening still got the message. Jeff did something stupid.

Ever heard of a backhanded compliment? It sounds like something nice is being said, but it includes an implication that is quite the opposite. If you say, for instance, “Karen is doing well; she has come a long way,” then the implication is that, once upon a time, Karen must have been a hot mess.

Conclusion: Even the most silent or subtle person can still speak a lot of *lashon hara*.

DAILY TO-DO:

Pay careful attention to gestures and facial expressions. Note the emotions that are communicated, even more than any words that may be said.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD OF *LASHON HARA*

Speech can take many forms. For example, words can be written down. A thought or idea can be posted online and someone else can “like” it. And, as we all know, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Every new means of communication is a powerful new tool for connection and, likewise, a dangerous new weapon of potential lashon hara.

In every way that we speak we have to watch what we say, whether with good old fashioned spoken words or digital-era technology and media.

Some 21st century examples of lashon hara include:

- Posting a picture or video of someone that would embarrass them, even if you are also in it
- “Liking” or posting a smiley face in response to such a post
- Forwarding something hurtful or harmful, even without adding a comment.



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**“Tweet others the way you want to be tweeted.”
– Germany Kent, award-winning print and
broadcast journalist**

Think about it: In the old days, even a nasty rumor would only make it as far as the edge of the shtetl*. Today, in milliseconds, digital lashon hara can make it all the way around the globe.

How many real people do you speak to during a normal day? A dozen? Two dozen? Compare that with your online interactions. How many people read things that you share on social media, email, and WhatsApp? A hundred? Two hundred?

The smartphone in every one of our hands is like a weapon of mass lashon hara destruction.

**shtetl*: Yiddish for small town or village

DAILY TO-DO:

Before you hit “send” or “post,” think to yourself: “How would I feel if this post were about me?”

JUST LISTENING

As the old adage goes, “It takes two to tango.” Like a dance, a conversation also takes two people: a speaker and a listener.

“The art of conversation lies in listening.”
— Malcolm Forbes, entrepreneur and Forbes publisher

It makes us feel good when other people pay attention to what we have to say. If people read what we post, forward our emails, or gather to listen as we tell a joke at a party, it makes us feel smart and popular.

Beyond that, listening to someone is a loving gift. By listening to someone, we show that we care about them, that they are important, and that we want to know what they have to say.

However, listening to someone can cause problems as well. Sometimes what is being said is not worthy of an audience—and then the act of listening enables the speaker to say what ought not to be said. Therefore, we have to be careful listeners as much as we have to be careful speakers.¹

What did I do wrong? I was just standing there!

When I speak, I’m in control. But what part do I play if I’m just listening?

Think about what it feels like to be on a phone call with a person who is clearly multitasking (e.g. watching TV and not paying attention to you). You might experience long pauses, irrelevant comments and lack of interest in what you’re saying. So you find some excuse to get off the phone and hang up.

**When no one’s listening,
the conversation ends.**



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When someone is really listening, on the other hand, we say more. Even as little as a nod and a smile of encouragement can make us embellish, repeat ourselves, and say much more than we might otherwise.

The listener has a much more powerful impact on what is said than we might realize. If no one was listening, there would be no *lashon hara*. The Torah forbids us to listen to *lashon hara*, just like it forbids us to say it.²

¹ Parenthetically, since both the speaker and the listener make the *lashon hara* possible, they are in effect accomplices to each other’s wrongdoing, like “aiding and abetting” in American law or “putting a stumbling block in front of the blind” in Jewish law.

² Listening to *lashon hara* is forbidden in the Torah by the verse, “Do not accept a false report...” (Exodus 23:1) in which the word “report” is from the word *shema* meaning “to hear.”

DAILY TO-DO:

Practice active listening. Pay attention, listen in order to understand, and recognise the power of listening.



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I HEAR YOU

“Hearing” can mean several things. It can simply mean, “I understand the words you’re saying.”

Or, it can mean, “I agree with you.”

“I’m with you.”

“I believe what you’re telling me.”¹

In terms of *lashon hara*, the worst part of listening is believing the hurtful or harmful report.

Allowing *lashon hara* to tarnish our impression of someone, to think less of them, is when the real damage occurs. That’s when relationships suffer, friendships break down, opportunities are withheld, and disharmony and disunity replace peace and community.

What if I need to know this information? It may be negative, but what if it’s important for me or others to know?



For example, what if someone begins to say that a certain person is untrustworthy? If I have any interactions with that person, in business or otherwise, I need to know if I can trust them. In that case, it’s permissible and appropriate to listen to what is said and take any necessary precautions. This would also be true if I didn’t have any personal interactions with them, but I know others that do — I can listen to what is said for their benefit.

But, even as I am listening to what is said as a precautionary measure, I shouldn’t automatically believe that it’s true and treat that person poorly as a result.

This nuance requires sophistication. For constructive purposes, I’m allowed to **know** what is being said and to take precautions, but I can’t **believe** that the report is true — or let it colour my opinion of that person — unless I know the information to be true from firsthand knowledge.²

¹ That’s what the word “amen” means. After someone says a blessing, we respond “amen” to express our agreement with the blessing, and belief in those words and the beautiful sentiment.

² Even when we witness something ourselves, we should strive to judge favourably whenever we can. See Day 5, page 16.

DAILY TO-DO:

When listening to a story about another person today, think about whether there is a constructive purpose for hearing the story, and firmly decide that you don’t believe it.

THE ART OF DISBELIEF

Which do you think is worse: being skeptical and untrusting or being gullible and naive?

Let's say Jack speaks *lashon hara* about Jill. Should you believe Jack and suspect Jill? Or should you disbelieve Jack and assume the best about Jill?

A common source of *lashon hara* is hearing it from a friend or relative, someone you would generally trust. Perhaps one might think that their word should carry more weight and be considered more legitimate.

A sophisticated person can develop the ability to hear something and reserve judgement about whether it's true. This is a critical skill if we hear *lashon hara*. It will allow us to remember what we hear for future benefit and simultaneously maintain respect for the person spoken about.

**“Believe nothing you hear,
and only one half that you see.”
— Edgar Allan Poe, 19th-century writer**



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Perhaps this is why God gave us imagination.

1. *Did Jack really know that the lashon hara he spoke about Jill was true?*
2. *Maybe Jack thought he knew what he saw, but he was mistaken.*
3. *Maybe Jack really did see Jill do it, but later Jill went and fixed what she did without him finding out.*

Maybe Jack was only repeating what he heard someone else say about Jill, without any firsthand knowledge at all.

If you tend to think that the negative side of the story must be the truth, here is a strategy that can help: Think to yourself, “Who says the negative side is ‘truer’ than the positive side?” When we focus on the negative, we think and speak the negative. But we are just as “realistic,” and infinitely wiser, when we focus, think and speak about the positive.

And, even if after all of your attempts at judging Jill favourably, you still can't help but think that the overwhelming likelihood is that what you heard is true, you still can't repeat that *lashon hara* about Jill to anyone else or cause her any harm because of it.

DAILY TO-DO:

Look for the positive side of the story, and use your imagination to come up with a creative explanation for how the entire situation was misunderstood.

STOP RIGHT THERE

What should you do when you're in a conversation and someone starts to tell you *lashon hara*?

The best possible response would be to rebuke the person who is speaking by interrupting and explaining that speaking *lashon hara* is wrong (this may sometimes be difficult or socially uncomfortable, so stay tuned for Day 19 for additional options).

After all, if you care about the person speaking, or you care about the person being spoken about, or you care about the issue of *lashon hara*, you should do something about it.

If you're rebuking someone, it should be done in a respectful and sensitive way. People generally do not like to be told that they're doing something wrong. Be careful to avoid instinctive defensiveness.

One good idea is to make your comment more about yourself than about them.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I'm really trying to watch what I say and hear and keep things positive. Do you mind if we change the subject? This is just something that's important to me ..."

On the other hand, criticism isn't a good way to rebuke someone.

"How rude! How would you like someone to say that about you?"



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It's actually better not to rebuke at all than to rebuke badly.

If you don't feel capable of being sensitive enough — or you feel confident that the speaker is not open to accepting your rebuke — don't offer any.

A risk of speaking up when someone speaks *lashon hara* to you is that you may actually prompt them to speak even more *lashon hara*. They might try to justify what they said with other examples or further confirmation of the insulting statement.

"But it's really true! He did it again this morning ..."

Another risk is that the speaker might get upset with you, and that disrupts the peaceful world we're trying to build. If you're going to raise the issue, make sure to do so respectfully and sensitively.

¹ There is a *mitzvah* (Torah commandment) to rebuke someone making a mistake (Leviticus 19:17).

DAILY TO-DO:

If you hear any *lashon hara* today, see if you can successfully speak up and stop *lashon hara* in its tracks.

THE NEXT BEST THING

Sometimes, when you hear *lashon hara*, you don't feel comfortable speaking up. Perhaps you know the speaker isn't open to rebuke, or perhaps social reasons just make it impossible.

**"It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends."
— Professor Albus Dumbledore,
*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone***

In that case, here are some other options:

1. Don't join in. Don't contribute, nod, smile, or encourage the speaker in any way.
2. Show disapproval. Make a sour face, as if you're shocked at what you're hearing.
3. Cover your ears. In fact, the Talmud explains why we have pointy little fingers and soft earlobes — to use to stuff up our ears when someone speaks *lashon hara*!
4. Look down or away. When the speaker sees that you're not listening, they'll get the message.
5. Change the topic of conversation. If you can't think of anything clever, you can always comment on the British weather.
6. Make up an excuse and leave the conversation. "I think I left something in the oven."
7. If you're on the phone, hang up and call back as if the call was dropped. Then bring up another subject.



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If all else fails and you're really stuck hearing *lashon hara*, make up your mind not to believe it.

If you're in a group, it's beneficial to defend the victim of the *lashon hara*, if possible. Be careful not to prompt the speaker to reiterate or embellish the *lashon hara* in the process.

If you're online, and someone posts something that's *lashon hara* in a chat or group, you can post the Hear No Evil emoji (👂) or leave the group.

DAILY TO-DO:

Take a moment to visualise yourself responding in any of the above ways when someone is speaking *lashon hara* to you so you're ready should it actually happen.

COMMON KNOWLEDGE

What if everyone already knows the *lashon hara*? Today, news travels at the speed of light. If that news includes something derogatory about another person, can we discuss it with others?

Even when information becomes common knowledge, it is still *lashon hara* and should not be repeated.

Before the information is verified as true, it should not even be believed. As the saying goes, “Don’t believe everything you read.” Even when an awful story makes the front page and captures everyone’s attention, when the story turns out to be false, the correction is barely mentioned on the bottom of page 12, where no one even sees it.

If the story is verified, it is still proper not to discuss it.

**And here we come to another important life lesson about speech:
Not everything needs to be said.**

Yes, it may be true. Yes, because everyone knows about it there may be no real damage being done to the person by repeating it. But no, it does not necessarily warrant discussion or make us or the people around us happier, healthier, or holier.

Sometimes, even messages that need to be communicated can be expressed without saying the words.



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There is an instructive story in the Book of Samuel about King Saul, his son Jonathan, and David (I Samuel 20:18-42).¹ Jonathan is concerned that his father may intend to eliminate David from the kingdom. Therefore, he tells David that he will assess King Saul's attitude toward him, and let him know.

They make up a special code for communication: Jonathan will shoot his arrows and then tell his attendant where to find them, all within earshot of David. If he says the arrows are closer in, it means that David is safe around the king. If he says that the arrows are farther away, it means that David should flee.

In fact, Jonathan's fears were justified, and he told his attendant that the arrows were further away, indicating that David should flee. After the attendant departs, David and Jonathan share a final, emotional farewell before David goes into hiding.

When you read the story, you’re left wondering why David and Jonathan needed the code, which seems to be the focus of the story. They were able to converse afterward, so why didn’t Jonathan just tell David about the King’s murderous intentions directly?

The lesson is powerful. Although Jonathan could have told David clearly that his father wanted to kill him, he chose not to. He found another way to communicate the message, and avoided verbalising the words.

¹We read this story in the *haftarah* whenever *Rosh Chodesh* occurs on a Sunday.

DAILY TO-DO:

Find an opportunity to express restraint and refrain from saying something that can — and should — be left out.

TECHNICAL SUCCESS

An important part of successfully changing our behaviour is to set ourselves up for technical success. This means looking out for ways to make the task easier by removing obstacles and surrounding ourselves with positive support systems.

An alcoholic who is trying to stay sober, for example, should not hang around in a bar. Someone on a tight budget shouldn't spend their spare time in the mall. Children should not be allowed to play in the street. You get the idea.

Likewise, there are certain situations in life that make it difficult to avoid *lashon hara*.

Maybe you have a coworker who is always gossiping about the rest of the staff. Or a cousin who insists on sharing the dirt about everyone in the family. And then there is that monthly poker group. Bam.

Set yourself up for technical success. Avoid the company of people who routinely speak *lashon hara* – and the situations that bring out the gossip in you – as much as possible.



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This may be easier said than done. The challenging relationships in our lives might be close friends, colleagues, or family members whose company we can't just quit.

Here are a few techniques for handling those tough moments:

1. *Plan topics of conversation in advance. Avoid talking about people and choose more neutral topics instead.*
2. *Mention that you're trying to speak positively at all times, and ask for the help of your conversation partner. You may be surprised how the idea catches on — and even if it doesn't, you will have set up some ground rules for future conversations.*
3. *Keep it short and sweet. Make a phone call at a time when you only have a few minutes to talk.*
4. *Don't get frustrated if you slip up. Change is hard, and mistakes are inevitable. Keep at it.*
5. *Eventually, the people in your life will realise that you're not someone who wants to hear or speak *lashon hara*. You will earn their respect and be a good role model as well.*

DAILY TO-DO:

Set yourself up for technical success by planning out a challenging conversation using the techniques above to avoid *lashon hara*.

SPEAK UP

The primary educational topic of this workbook is to define what *lashon hara* is and what kinds of things one should not say.

Sometimes, however, the right thing to do is to speak up and say something that otherwise might be considered *lashon hara*.

Why would it be correct to say something negative about someone?

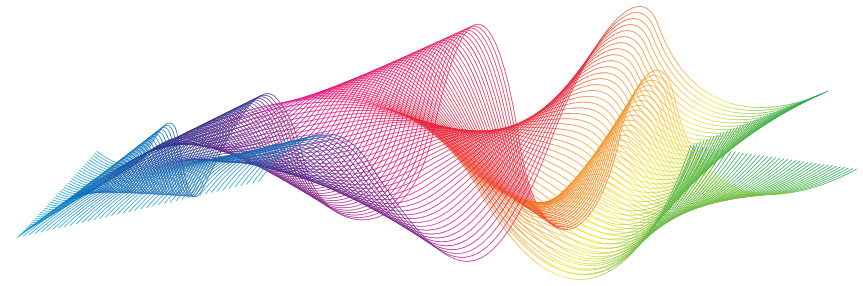
It may be permissible, or in fact obligatory, to say something negative about someone, when we are doing so to fulfill another *mitzvah* (Torah commandment). In this case, it's not destructive bad-mouthing, which causes hatred and acrimony. It's purposeful communication to accomplish a positive, constructive goal.

This is probably the most complicated topic of the month, because we're walking a fine line: being careful not to say *lashon hara* but speaking up when it's the right thing to do.

Before we begin, let us be clear: If speaking up could save someone from danger, such as from a predator or an abusive relationship, we must do so. The laws of *lashon hara* don't mean to silence us and allow harm to occur. When life and limb are at risk, we have to take action (i.e. speak up and share information to protect people).



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This is clear from the verse that commands us not “to stand on our brother’s blood” (Leviticus 19:16). This means that we can’t stand idly by while someone is in danger. We are required to help.

In fact, this phrase is the second half of the very same verse that forbids speaking *lashon hara*. It’s as if to say, don’t speak *lashon hara*, but if there is a need to act to save someone from harm, you should.

Generally speaking, however, the question of what to say is not literally a life or death issue. That’s the clear-cut case. Most of the time, the right thing to do is more subtle and complex. We still may need to speak up, but there are additional factors to consider, many of which we will discuss in the next few pages.

DAILY TO-DO:

Think about the “why” when you speak, and be careful to have a constructive purpose behind what you’re saying.



THE TRUTH ABOUT TOM

In the previous lesson, we began to discuss situations that would require us to say something which would otherwise be forbidden as *lashon hara*, such as to protect someone from danger.

Let's explore several other possible reasons why someone may need to speak about something negative, which don't involve serious danger.

Imagine that you work as a salesperson at a camping shop. One day, you see another employee, Tom, take a stack of twenty pound notes from the register and put them in his pocket. Oy vey! You think to yourself: Tom just stole some money from the camping shop!

*Before you say anything to anyone, you realise that there is a lot at stake here—for you, for the camping shop, and for Tom. If you say something that you shouldn't, you could cause real problems at work and spread *lashon hara*. If you don't say something that you should, you could be participating in a terrible perversion of justice.*

What should you do?

When dealing with people's lives, it's always a good idea to get some expert advice. When it comes to *lashon hara*, ask a Rabbi proficient in these matters.

For educational purposes, let's go through the case.

There are seven questions we have to ask ourselves before we say something hurtful or harmful about someone.

- I. **Is it true?** Do I know that Tom stole the money? In this case, I saw Tom take the notes out of the cash register. So yes, I know it happened.

On the other hand, let's say that you were in the employee lounge at the time and didn't see anything. Your coworker Sam came running in to tell you that he saw Tom take the money out of the cash register (Sam has not been reading his Clean Speech UK workbook). Since there is no constructive purpose for Sam to tell you this negative thing about Tom, it's *lashon hara*, and you should not believe it.¹ And since you don't know if it's true, in that case you should not say anything.

Stay tuned for questions two through seven, which we'll cover in the coming days.

¹See Day 16 for more about the obligation not to believe *lashon hara*.

DAILY TO-DO:

Check yourself today, and make sure you're saying things that you genuinely know to be true and not what you've only heard from others.



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RIGHTING WRONGS

Yesterday, we were introduced to Tom and a stack of twenty pound notes. We started by asking the first question—Is it true?—but we need to ask a few more questions before deciding what to do and say about Tom. Here are the next two questions to ask yourself before you do anything:

2. **Is it wrong?** You saw Tom take a stack of twenty pound notes out of the cash register and put them in his pocket. It looked like he was stealing, but maybe not. Perhaps he was asked by the manager to bring the twenty pound notes to the back office. Maybe the camping shop owed Tom some money, and he was justified in taking it. And even if Tom really stole the money, maybe his conscience got the better of him later in the day, and he quietly put it all back.

Before we say something about Tom, we have to be certain that what he did was genuinely wrong. If we are not sure, the right approach is to judge Tom favorably, and assume the best about him and the money.¹

***Special note:** If your intent in speaking up about Tom's potential theft is to protect the camping shop from further loss in the future, it would not be necessary to know clearly that what Tom did was wrong. It would be good enough to say, "I might have seen Tom steal some money."² This is assuming that the rest of the seven questions have been answered.*

**"Assume the best intent in others around you. You will often be right, and even when you're not, people can rise to your view of them."
— Sallie Krawcheck, CEO and cofounder of an investment platform for women**

The next question to ask is:

3. **Did I speak to the offender first?** The first person to speak to about Tom's potential theft is Tom. Perhaps Tom will sufficiently explain why he took the twenties and put the concern to rest.

Or, perhaps, rebuking Tom about his theft will encourage him to admit what he did to the owner of the Camping shop and return the money. Because the constructive intent here is to get Tom to repay the stolen money, if we rebuke Tom directly, we accomplish the goal without having to say anything that might be *lashon hara*.

If you know confidently that Tom wouldn't listen to your rebuke, you don't have to offer it.³

***Special note:** Also, as in question 2 above, if your intent in speaking up about Tom's potential theft is to protect the camping shop from further loss in the future, it would not be necessary to rebuke Tom first.*

¹ See Day 5 for more about judging others favourably.

² See Day 22 for more about the *mitzvah* not to stand idly by while someone is in danger, which includes financial loss.

³ See Day 18 for more about rebuking appropriately.

DAILY TO-DO:

Look for an opportunity to speak directly to someone who you feel concern about—and don't speak about them to others.



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PURE AND SIMPLE

Today, we're continuing with the seven important questions to ask before saying anything about Tom and the twenty pound notes. We've already asked three of the seven questions: Is it true? Is it wrong? Did I speak to the offender first? Let's take a look at the next two questions.

4. **Am I being completely accurate?** If you are going to speak up about Tom and the money, you must make absolutely sure that you're not exaggerating or omitting anything from what happened.

"He took a *huge* wad of twenty pound notes."

If you exaggerate what Tom did in any way, then you spoke slander about him. As you try to help Tom repay what he stole, don't lie about him in the process.

Similarly, don't leave out any details that would mitigate the severity of what he did. It's just as false to leave out a meaningful detail that would soften the listener's impression of what Tom did.

**"A truth that's told with bad intent,
Beats all the lies you can invent."
— William Blake, English poet, painter,
and printmaker**

5. **Are my intentions pure?** We stated previously that intent is a critical difference between *lashon hara* that is forbidden to say and what is appropriate and even obligatory to say. Your intent has to be constructive, which in this case is helping Tom to repay the stolen money.¹

Let's say that you and Tom don't get along so well. You may experience a little inner pleasure in telling the boss about Tom's misdeeds.

Or, let's say that instead of taking the money out of the cash register, Tom took money from your wallet. Even if you think you're talking about it for constructive purposes, you can't escape the desire to see Tom publicly disgraced for the financial loss that he caused you. In this case, even if you're sure you won't exaggerate—and even if all the other questions have been answered—you still shouldn't say anything.

Still not sure what, if anything, to say about Tom? We'll ask two more important questions tomorrow that will help you come to the right conclusion.

¹There is an explicit *mitzvah* in the Torah (Exodus 22:11) for someone who has stolen to repay what they stole.

DAILY TO-DO:

Check your intentions. Make sure there is nothing compromising your intent to bring harmony and peace.

JUST DESSERTS AND ALTERNATIVES

We're on the home stretch with Tom and the twenty pound notes, but there are still two final questions that we have to ask ourselves before we say something negative about Tom.

6. **Will I cause even more harm?** In our case, Tom stole money from the camping shop where he works. If you tell his boss, what will happen? Tom would be obligated to repay the money. However, if you know that Tom's boss has a vicious temper and a loose tongue—and would certainly malign Tom's name with a vengeance across the city—it's a problem. That isn't the fitting reward for Tom's crime. It's much worse than he deserves. And, because your words would cause Tom more harm than is really "due" to him, you can't say anything.

In real life, this is often a tricky question to answer. It may be hard to know what the fitting reward would be in the complex world in which we live. As we said before, when getting involved in other people's lives, it's always a good idea to ask for expert advice first.



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“Who is wise? One who sees what will result from their decisions.” – Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Tamid, Chapter 4

7. **Did I try alternatives?** The last question we have to ask ourselves is whether there is another way to achieve the constructive goal without saying anything negative about Tom. In this case the constructive goal is to get Tom to pay back the money he stole.

What might some alternatives be? Firstly, we mentioned that we could speak directly to Tom and encourage him to admit what he did and pay back the money. We also could try waiting to see if he regrets his misdeed and admits the act on his own. Or, perhaps the act was caught on the security camera, and we could simply suggest that the manager watch the recording closely.

It is powerful to note just how far one should go not to say *lashon hara*—even about someone who just stole money! If there is any other way to facilitate the just solution without saying something negative about Tom, we have to do everything in our power to do so.

Now that the seven questions have been asked, we'll tackle one more component of this difficult scenario on Day 27.

DAILY TO-DO:

When faced with an opportunity to say something today which is not so positive, try to find an alternative way to achieve the same result—and stay far away from any *lashon hara*.



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CONSTRUCTIVE THINKING

During Week 4, we've discussed the seven questions that we need to ask ourselves before saying something negative about someone like Tom, who seems to have done something quite wrong. Throughout the discussion, we've assumed a positive, constructive reason for needing to speak up about Tom.

But what qualifies as a positive, constructive reason? We've learned that simply demanding that the truth be made public is never a good reason, because something that's true and negative is still *lashon hara*.¹ Here are a few examples of positive, constructive reasons:

- **Facilitating Tom's repayment of the stolen money, which is a mitzvah:** *For this purpose, we would be allowed to speak to people involved in the issue, such as Tom's boss, the owner of the camping shop (the victim), or the police. Discussing the matter with anyone else would still be lashon hara.*
- **Warning coworkers to be more careful with their money around Tom:** *This reason would help others avoid experiencing loss or harm, a mitzvah that we discussed on Day 22. When doing so, you should tell them in advance that this is the reason that you're discussing the issue with them, so they don't think you're speaking lashon hara. They may then take precautions to protect themselves from Tom, but they shouldn't actually believe it to be true or treat Tom any less respectfully because of what they heard.²*
- **Teaching people a lesson about the significant problem of theft:** *It might be possible to accomplish this without identifying Tom, which would avoid the lashon hara issue altogether. Even educating Tom himself would be a constructive goal, so that he should learn to stop stealing.*

Of course, you still have to run through all seven questions (see Days 23 through 26) before speaking up for any of these reasons.

Another reason you may consider saying something negative about Tom and the incident at the camping shop would be if you're asked for a reference. If someone else is considering hiring Tom or forging a business relationship with him, you have a positive, constructive reason to help others avoid potential harm or loss.

In these situations, great care must be taken to carefully consider the needs of both parties. Remaining silent on a point of significance to a potential employer would be as problematic as overstating something negative about Tom. Some good general rules to follow:

- *Limit your answers to the specific information that you're asked for.*
- *Do not share anything that would be grounds for terminating the relationship.*
- *Imagine yourself in the position of the person asking you for the reference, as well as the person you're speaking about.*

¹ See Day 9.

² See Day 16.

DAILY TO-DO:

If you're drawn into a conversation about others today that includes the potential for something negative to be said, clarify for yourself what your positive, constructive reason is for speaking.



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO

PUT TO THE TEST

Sarah looked for a job for many months. She polished her CV, sent out dozens of copies with cover letters, and watched the classified ads for new openings like a hawk.

When she finally landed a job with a growing technology firm, she was thrilled.

Her first day at work went smoothly, meeting her new coworkers and settling into training for the new position.

At the end of the first week, Sarah's new boss called her into his office.

"Sarah, I can see you have great potential here. In addition to everything else you're doing, I have one other opportunity for you," the boss said. "I need an inside person on the team, to keep their ears and eyes open and take notice of everything going on. At the end of every week, you can update me on all of the other team members."

Sarah was shocked at the suggestion. How could she be asked to report on her coworkers? Wouldn't that be speaking lashon hara on a weekly basis?

The boss continued: "If you can do this for me, I'll make sure you move up the ladder. If not, I don't see much of a future for you here. Give me your answer when you come in Monday morning."

Sarah spent a restless Shabbat turning the question over and over in her mind. Should she accept the awful demand of her new boss or give up the job she worked so hard to get? As much as she thought about it, she knew she couldn't speak lashon hara about her coworkers. She had no choice.

Monday morning came, and Sarah headed into the office to hand in her resignation.

"Have you decided what you want to do here, Sarah?" her boss asked.

"As much as I like this firm and would really like to keep this job," Sarah began, "I can't agree to talk negatively about other people."

"Well, if that's your attitude," the boss replied, "you'll fit right in. That was a test. We don't want employees who would gossip about each other. Welcome aboard!"

Whether we see it before our very eyes like Sarah did, we will always win when we do the right thing—especially when it's avoiding *lashon hara*.

DAILY TO-DO:

Imagine what you would be willing to give up if asked to do so, in order to uphold your beliefs and values, such as speaking without *lashon hara*.



OUT WITH THE BAD, IN WITH THE GOOD

The seminal work on *lashon hara* is known as *Sefer Chofetz Chaim*, the *Book of One Who Desires Life*, published in 1873. The title comes from a verse in Psalms:

“Who is the one who desires life, who loves days of seeing good?
Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit”
(Psalms 34:13-14).

If a person desires life, they should be careful not to speak *lashon hara*. This means eternal life as well as the “good life” in this world. It boils down to how you speak.

The author of the book, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1839-1933) of Poland, compiled the many, intricate laws of *lashon hara* from Talmudic sources and commentaries in order to help the Jewish People combat the difficult challenge of cleansing our communities of *lashon hara*.

In the very next verse in Psalms, there is another powerful lesson of personal growth:

“Turn away from wrongdoing and do good; seek peace and pursue it”
(Psalms 34:15).

The verse first mentions turning away from wrongdoing and afterwards tells us to do good. The appropriate order for developing peaceful speech patterns, and for many similar things, is first to remove the bad and then replace it with good.

Based on this idea, the Clean Speech UK workbook was written to help us remove problematic language and hurtful or harmful words from our social interactions and communications.



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO

A next step would be to fill our conversations with positive words, affirming words, and complimentary words. Not only must we refrain from damaging the people around us with *lashon hara*, we should build them up with respectful, positive words.

**Just as *lashon hara* is so powerfully harmful,
speaking in a respectful and complimentary way
is powerfully helpful.**

“Everybody likes a compliment.”
— Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States of America

Stopping the damage comes first, followed by building and repairing. That's the formula for creating *shalom*, peace.

DAILY TO-DO:

Catch yourself before saying something negative about someone today, and replace it with a compliment.

AND THAT'S ALL FOLKS

Here we are, on the final day of our 30-day endeavor. Clean Speech UK is over. And you can go right back to the way things were before.

Or can you?

If you got this far, you hopefully have at least a small sense of, and maybe even a great appreciation for, the pleasure that comes with improving your speech. Your world is a more beautiful place. You have a sense of accomplishment, for even a small accomplishment brings us satisfaction.

“Small change isn't small change.”
– Rabbi Noach Orlowek,
international educator and author

You should know, however, that we have only scratched the surface of the topic. Much more detailed instruction can be found in other great books about *lashon hara*. In fact, avoiding *lashon hara* is just one of many such worthy endeavours. Related *mitzvot* of improved speech include not lying, not revealing other people's secrets, and not aggravating others in your conversations with them.

And then there are *mitzvot* such as not taking revenge, not bearing a grudge, and loving your neighbor as yourself.

Improvement of character is a goal of all of the *mitzvot* of the Torah, making us into dignified, noble, and admirable people. A kind, considerate, and just community. The kind of people who feel proud of themselves and are the desired company of their peers.



SCAN ME TO SEE
TODAY'S VIDEO



That lofty description does not generally apply to someone after only 30 days of effort. It takes a lifetime of work and self-growth. The good news, however, is that the reward is felt immediately, because making progress towards the goal is extremely satisfying.

You might now consider reviewing these lessons for another 30 days to absorb more about avoiding *lashon hara*. There are also groups of like-minded people in class settings with whom you can learn.

One thing is certain: You cannot return to a state of insensitivity about the power of speech. The way you speak has a very great deal of influence over you and everyone around you.

Go wield your power mindfully.

DAILY TO-DO:

Today, decide what you can do to ensure that this month wasn't for naught. Choose another helpful book, join a class, or start these 30 days once again, from the beginning.



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