

# The Ethics of Speech

## Jewish Ethics: Lesson 1

**By Rabbi Yudi Zarchi**

Chabad of Markham

- 1) You shall not go around as a gossipmonger amidst your people. You shall not stand by [the shedding of] your fellow's blood. I am the Lord. (Vayikra 19:16)

### Rechilus:

- 2) Who is a gossip? One who collects information and then goes from person to person, saying: "This is what so and so said;" "This is what I heard about so and so." Even if the statements are true, they bring about the destruction of the world. (Rambam, Hilchot Deot 7:2)
- 3) From where do we know that when a judge leaves the courtroom, he should not say to the losing party: I found you not liable; it was my colleagues, who found you liable, but what shall I do – my colleagues outnumbered me? Concerning this it is stated: Do not be a gossipmonger among your people, and it is stated (Mishlei 11:13): He is a gossipmonger, one who reveals secrets. There was this student regarding whom a rumor emerged that he revealed a secret matter that had been spoken in the study hall, after twenty-two years. Rav Ami expelled him from the study hall, saying: This person reveals secrets. (Talmud, Sanhedrin 31a)

### Lashon Harah:

- 4) There is a much more serious sin than gossip, which is also included in this prohibition: *lashon horah*, i.e., relating deprecating facts about a colleague, even if they are true. *Lashon horah* does not refer to the invention of lies; that is referred to as defamation of character. Rather, one who speaks *lashon horah* is someone who sits and relates: "This is what so and so has done;" "His parents were such and such;" "This is what I have heard about him," telling uncomplimentary things. Concerning this transgression, the verse [Tehilim 12:4] states: "May G-d cut off all guileful lips, the tongues which speak proud things..." (Rambam, *ibid.*)

### Avak Lashon Horah:

- 5) There are certain matters which are considered "the dust of *lashon horah*." What is implied? For example, a person says: "Who will tell so and so to continue acting as he does now," or "Do not talk about so and so; I do not want to say what happened," or the like. Similarly, it is also considered the "dust of *lashon horah*" when someone speaks favorably about a colleague in the presence of his enemies, for this will surely prompt them to speak disparagingly about him. In this regard, King Solomon said [Mishlei 27:14]: "One who greets his colleague early in the morning, in a loud voice, curses him," for his positive act will bring him negative repercussions.

Similarly, to be condemned is a person who relates *lashon horah* in frivolity and jest, as if he were not speaking with hatred. This was also mentioned by Solomon in his wisdom [Mishlei 26:18-19]: "As a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death and says: 'I am only joking.'" Also, to be condemned is someone who speaks *lashon horah* about a colleague slyly, pretending to be innocently telling a story without knowing that it is harmful. When he is reproved, he excuses himself by saying: "I did not know that the story was harmful or that so and so was involved." (ibid. 4)

### Sticks and Stones:

- 6) Death and life are in the hands of the tongue. (Mishlei 18:21)
- 7) Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina says: What does the verse mean when it says life and death are in the hand of the tongue? Does the tongue have hands? This is to teach us that just as a hand can kill so can a tongue. Is the tongue limited to kill in close proximity, like a hand? The verse says "Their tongue is a sharpened arrow (Yirmiyahu 9:7)." Is the tongue limited to a distance of forty or fifty cubits, like an arrow? The verse says, "They place their mouth in the skies [i.e., the limit of the damage of the tongue is the sky]." (Talmud, Arachin 15b)
- 8) Slander kills three: the speaker, the listener and the one being slandered. (ibid.)
- 9) And G-d formed man from dust from the ground, and he blew into his nostrils and man became a living soul. (Bereishit 2:7). A living soul: A speaking soul (Onkelos)

### Necessary Slander:

- 10) Tuviah transgressed and Zigud came by himself and testified against him before the Rabbinical Court of Rav Pappa. Rav Pappa, instead of punishing Tuviah, Punished Zigud. Zigud said to Rav Pappa, "Tuviah sinned and Zigud was punished?" Rav papa replied, "yes indeed, for it is written: 'A single witness shall not stand up to testify against any man (Devarim 19:15), 'and you have testified against him by yourself. Thus, your testimony is unacceptable in court. By making your statement, you have put forth a simple slander against him which is deserving of punishment in court.'" (Talmud, Pesachim 113a)