

Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus

CHAPTER 7: HOW TO HAVE A KOSHER MOUTH

TERMS FROM THE CHAPTER:

lashon hara: an “evil tongue”—i.e., “all types of gossip, slander, and malicious speech.” Also includes “negative truths about others that are unnecessary and damaging”

motzei shem ra: To “put out a bad name”; to slander

avak lashon hara: Non-verbal or indirect forms of *lashon hara*; lit., “the dust of *lashon hara*”

geneivat da'at: “to fool someone into having a mistaken assumption, belief or impression, even if no lying is involved; lit. “stealing knowledge”

1. Tverberg describes *lashon hara*, the “evil tongue,” as follows:

Lashon hara is recounting to your coworkers about how the boss messed up his presentation. It's pointing out to your wife how poorly the worship leader sings. It's complaining to your sister that your husband forgot your birthday *yet again*. Any sentence that starts with “She's a great person, but it's annoying when she...” is always going to end in *lashon hara*. This habit tears down friendships, demeans others, and undermines trust. There are, of course, a few times when a person need to relay damaging information, but outside of that, this kind of negativity is frowned upon in Jewish law. (96)

Explore the gap (if any) between avoiding *lashon hara* and the grammar-school dictum, “if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.” For instance, if I am choosing programs for my child at the local parks & rec., I might be more inclined to talk to the non-Christians, who will tell me which teachers are lousy, than those Christians who will be so worried about slander as to avoid any negative speech. When *is* it appropriate to talk in negative terms about a person?

2. Does the avoidance of slander, *motzei shem ra*, tend to keep abusive leaders in power longer at Christian or Jewish organizations where the members are careful about their speech? i.e., will the faculty at a Christian college be less likely to speak openly about the faults of their leader for fear of being negative or having an evil tongue? If so, is this a necessary byproduct or a misunderstanding of Biblical prohibitions on speech?
3. *Read background material on guilt-innocence v. shame-honor cultures.* How might different forms of *lashon hara* have greater effect in shame-honor cultures v. guilt-innocence cultures? E.g., in the former is it more important what you say *about* someone, and in the latter what you say *to* them? Conversely, if an expression of love in an honor-shame culture is the truthful building up of another's reputation, what is the best expression of love in a culture such as ours which is more toward the guilt-innocence end of the spectrum?
4. In his article “The Reckless Tongue” (*Christianity Today*, Oct 5, 1992, p. 42), Richard Mouw writes,

Here are a few lines from an evangelical acquaintance in Northern Ireland, who wrote

recently to tell me of a proposal he has made to religious leaders in his country:

One way of assisting the promotion of peace in our society would be to arrange an annual debate between Roman Catholic and Protestant school teams on some topic related to Irish history. My suggested twist was that the Protestant team should argue the case from the Catholic viewpoint and vice versa. It seems to me that the ability to get right into the other person's shoes is sadly lacking in our situation.

Prominent leaders from both sides of the Catholic-Protestant divide have written, my friend says, to support his proposal. "As far as I know, however, nobody has taken the idea any further."

What person or group do you find so beyond the pale that they most tempt you to *lashon hara*? Do you think it would help you to try to articulate their point of view?

5. Does *lashon hara* only refer to speech about people? To what degree must we sift our speech regarding job, country, culture, food, weather, etc.?

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Fun fact: The book of Proverbs refers to the tongue, the mouth, the lips, and various modes of speech well over 100 times.

Passages on the Tongue

James 3:5-8:

Jas 3:2 For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.

Jas 3:3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies.

Jas 3:4 Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

Jas 3:5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

Jas 3:6 And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

Jas 3:7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,

Jas 3:8 but no one can tame the tongue--a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Jas 3:9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

Jas 3:10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

Jas 3:11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?

Jas 3:12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Prov 18:

Pro 18:6 A fool's lips bring strife, and a fool's mouth invites a flogging.

Pro 18:7 The mouths of fools are their ruin, and their lips a snare to themselves.

Pro 18:8 The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.

Pro 18:20 From the fruit of the mouth one's stomach is satisfied; the yield of the lips brings satisfaction.

Pro 18:21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

Psalms 34:12-13:

Psa 34:12 Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good?

Psa 34:13 Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.

1 Peter 3:10:

1Pe 3:8 Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

1Pe 3:9 Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called--that you might inherit a blessing.

1Pe 3:10 For "Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit;

1Pe 3:11 let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it.

1Pe 3:12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

1Pe 3:13 Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?

Matt 15:1-11:

Mat 15:1 Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said,

Mat 15:2 "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat."

Mat 15:3 He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?

Mat 15:4 For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.'

Mat 15:5 But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father.

Mat 15:6 So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.

Mat 15:7 You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

Mat 15:8 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;

Mat 15:9 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'"

Mat 15:10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand:

Mat 15:11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

Luke 6:22-23:

Luk 6:22 "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

Luk 6:23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

...

Luk 6:43 "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit;

Luk 6:44 for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.

Luk 6:45 The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; **for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.**

Luk 6:46 "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?

Luk 6:47 I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them.