



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

SHE SAID WHAT...?! TORAH'S VIEW OF SPEECH

SOURCE SHEET AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



SOURCE 1: BABYLONIAN TALMUD ARACHIN 15B

Gossip (about a third party) kills three people, the speaker, the listener, and the person being discussed.

לְשׁוֹן תְּלִיתַי קָטִיל תְּלִיתַי הָרוֹג
לְמַסְפָּרוֹ, וְלַמְקַבְּלוֹ, וְלַאֲמִירָיו עָלָיו.

Q: Though we all recognize that gossip is not very nice, isn't the Talmud's position comparing it to murder a bit extreme?

Let's examine the Talmud's strong claim that gossip kills the three people involved with it: the speaker, listener and the one spoken about.

THE ONE SPOKEN ABOUT:

Jewish folklore tells the story of a man who slandered the town's rabbi. Later, he begged the rabbi for forgiveness, wishing to make amends. The rabbi told him to cut open a pillow and scatter the feathers in the wind. "Now am I forgiven?" asked the man. "Yes," answered the rabbi, "as soon as you go and gather all the feathers." "But that's impossible. Exactly!" When we speak badly about someone, the damage spreads far and wide. It's impossible to fully repair it.

Gossip appears on page 1 of the newspaper, but the retraction or apology is buried near the "want ads". **You can't ever fully repair a reputation.**

BUT IT'S TRUE!

We all can understand that spreading lies about a person (slander) or even unsubstantiated gossip can cause irreparable damage to innocent people. But most of us don't think twice about sharing gossip we believe to be TRUE, even if it may cast the person in a negative light.

Yet the Torah actually prohibits us from saying anything negative about another person, EVEN if it is true. And it compares one who violates this to a murderer!

Q: What could be the Torah's rationale for this?

When someone speaks negatively about another person, the listener forms a view of that person **unfairly weighted by this negative "snapshot."** It's out of context, like holding up a picture of a pimple and creating the impression that this is what the entire person looks like.

Being true doesn't exonerate the gossiper, because since it is only a partial truth, it contributes to creating an overall impression that is almost always false. And in the process, reputations get ruined, and people get hurt.

THE ONE WHO SPEAKS:

Well, if gossip is likened to murder, I guess the gossiper can be called a murderer.

Q: But how does the killer himself die through his act? What do you think?

SOURCE 2: BEREISHES 1:3

G-d **said** let there be light, and there was light.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים יְהִי אוֹר.

SOURCE 3: BEREISHES 2:7

G-d formed man from the ground and blew into his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a **living being**.

וַיִּצְרֶה אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֹפֹר
מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפִּיו נֶשְׁמַת חַיִּים
וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה.

SOURCE 4: TRANSLATION OF ONKELOS ON TORAH

"Living Being" Means a **being that speaks**.

נִפְּחַ בְּאַפּוֹהִי נֶשְׁמַתָּא דְחַיִּי וְהוּת
בְּאָדָם לְרוּחַ מְמַלְלָא:

Just as G-d creates the world through speech, the essential power of man to build worlds and destroy them is also the power of speech. Our power of speech is the essence of our souls' and of our humanity.

One who **debases the gift of speech, debases his/her humanity, snuffs out a little of the vitality of his life force.** The gossiper experiences a type of death. This is why there is such a tremendous emphasis on speech in Judaism. The quality of our speech and the ideas and thoughts which give rise to it inexorably dictate the path and worth of our lives.

It's said that **small people talk about others, average people talk about things, while great people talk about ideas.**

THE LISTENER

The Talmud says of the three people, **the listener is the worst.** That's hard to imagine; it seems like he/she is merely an innocent bystander.

Q: Why do you think this is so?

CREATING THE MARKET

The answer is that without the listener there is no “market” for the gossip. Gossip is called *rechilus* in Hebrew and comes from the root word for “**peddler**.” A peddler of tales has nothing to sell if there are no customers. So, the listener is actually the only one that can stop the “character assassination” from happening. In fact, it is his/her responsibility.

WHAT WE GET OUT OF GOSSIP

Q: If it's this bad, why are we so drawn to gossip?

First of all, if we realized just how powerful our speech was and the damage that we can do with it, we would probably be a whole lot more careful with what we say.

Secondly, there is a deep psychological reason for gossip. No-one wants to be mediocre in life. Deep down we all long to be great – to be important.

THERE ARE TWO WAYS TO BECOME GREAT:

1. We can put in the hard work, long hours and overcome the myriad challenges of life to become great, thereby elevating ourselves through our actions.
2. Or we can take a shortcut and knock others down, thereby **temporarily** propping ourselves up.

Of course this is a counterfeit, because although there is a temporary high and feeling of importance from being the center of attention as the gossip king or queen, the feeling is short-lived, and our true self esteem actually takes quite a hit.

Even as the gossip flies, we know deep down that we are not one iota better; we have just dragged others down to our level.

A lot of us are just afraid of being great and we prefer a tacit **conspiracy where we all settle on being mediocre rather than opening ourselves up to the** risk of failing.

THE PEP TALK:

Q: How about you? Can you say negative things about yourself?

Realize that the Torah laws on gossip apply not only to talking about people, but also to organizations, whole groups of people and an individual you probably never expected – YOU!

Yes, you are not allowed to speak badly about yourself. If you put yourself down, you are transgressing these laws. By doing so, in essence you are saying that G-d blew it. He doesn't blow it. **He made you in his image and He doesn't make junk!** So, forget the self-deprecating dialogue. You are unique, special. You have the potential for a particular greatness that no one else has. Now use that potential for the good. And just remember, you are **“too good to gossip.”**

GREAT ADVICE: THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF POSITIVE SPEECH

1. **Speak No Evil.** Say only positive statements. Let words of kindness be on your tongue.
2. **Hear No Evil.** Refuse to listen to gossip, slander and other negative forms of speech.
3. **Don't Rationalize Destructive Speech.** Excuses like "But it's true" or "I'm only joking" or "I can tell my spouse anything" just don't cut it.
4. **See No Evil.** Judge people favorably, the way you would want them to judge you.
5. **Beware of Speaking Evil Without Saying an Evil Word.** Body language and even positive speech can bring tremendous destruction.
6. **Be Humble; Avoid Arrogance.** These will be your greatest weapons against destructive speech.
7. **Beware of repeating Information. Loose lips sink ships.** Even positive information needs permission before being repeated.
8. **Honesty Really Is the Best Policy -- Most of the Time.** Be careful to always tell the truth, unless it will hurt others, break your own privacy or publicize your accomplishments.
9. **Learn to Say, "I'm Sorry."** Everyone makes mistakes. If you've spoken badly about someone, clear it up immediately.
10. **Forgive.** If you have been wronged, let it go.

Excerpted from "Gossip -- Ten Pathways to Eliminate It from Your Life and Transform Your Soul," by Lori Palatnik and Bob Burg (Simcha Press). Available at Amazon.com.

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