

# THE PROHIBITION AGAINST LISTENING TO LASHON HARA

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## 1. The prohibition against accepting (believing) Lashon Hara

It is forbidden according to Torah Law to accept Lashon Hara, whether the Lashon Hara is regarding issues between man and G-d (see [chapter 4](#)) or issues between man and man (see [chapter 5](#)). We should not believe that the story is true, because by doing so we lower our opinion of the subject. [It is even forbidden] if the listener doesn't explicitly agree with the speaker's story - but if he does agree with the story he doubles the violation, for the listener becomes a speaker [by voicing agreement] as well as accepting the Lashon Hara.

One who accepts Lashon Hara violates the prohibition "*Lo tisa shema shav (Ex. 23:1) - Do not raise a false report.*" [While the verse is generally understood against the speaker,] the Sages explain (Mechilta) that is also an exhortation to the one who [might] accept the Lashon Hara. Additionally there are other positive and negative commandments [transgressed by accepting Lashon Hara] discussed previously in the introduction.

The Sages teach us, "Anyone who accepts Lashon Hara should be thrown to the dogs, for it is

written (Ex. 23:1), *'Do not raise a false report' immediately following 'throw it to the dogs (22:30).'*" The Sages also teach us that one who accepts Lashon Hara is worse than the speaker.

## **2. The prohibition against listening to Lashon Hara**

Even merely listening to Lashon Hara is a violation of the Torah, even if the listener intends not to believe anything while he is listening. Simply bending his ear to hear constitutes a violation.

There is of course a distinction between hearing and accepting, because in the case of listening there is no prohibition unless the information has no future relevance to the listener. If, however, the information - should it be true - does have relevance to the listener, for example if the listener realizes at the outset that the speaker that he wants to show through his story that the subject is untrustworthy or some other such trait and the listener is considering a business dealing or partnership with the subject, or arranging a marriage for him or any similar involvement, it is permissible to listen in order to explore the information and protect himself. The listener's desire to hear the information must not be to listen to the disparagement of his friend, but rather to protect himself so that he will not sustain damage or end up in a dispute, or any other sort of misfortune.

It is also a principle that if the listener will not benefit by hearing the information, but through his listening good can come to others, it is permissible. For example, if he listens to the information so that he can later verify it and then rebuke the individual in question such that perhaps through [his involvement] the sinner will repent, or he will return stolen goods to their owner or he will appease the person he incensed, or similar rectifications, his listening would be permissible, as explained above.

In any case, accepting the Lashon Hara as true is forbidden.

## **3. When it is permitted to listen to Lashon Hara**

Let this not be a surprise to the reader that he should say: "How can we possibly satisfy the expectations of Heaven, for you have defined [the parameters of the law such that] even listening to the disparagement of one's fellow is forbidden, yet what if the information is relevant to me, with regard to my business or for other reasons?"

The answer is: one who wants to satisfy his obligations with regard to listening [to Lashon Hara] should conduct himself as follows: if someone were to approach him and should want to talk about another, and he understands that the speaker wants to speak negatively about the other person, he should ask the speaker, "Will the information that you want to tell me have future relevance to me, or will I thereby be able to rectify a situation by rebuking the offending individual, or some other positive outcome (as discussed above in [paragraph 2](#))?" If the speaker replies that it does have future

relevance or that he could correct a situation as discussed above, it is permissible to listen to the information.

[Although he is permitted to listen to it,] the listener should not believe the information when he hears it; rather, he should only suspect [its veracity] until he investigates the matter.

However, if the listener understands from the speaker's response that there is no purpose in what he says, or that he detects that the information is merely words of spite and hatred, such that the speaker wickedly ascribes false accusations to the subject and defames him out of sheer hatred, listening is prohibited.

#### **4. When it is a Mitzvah to listen to Lashon Hara**

In some cases it is a Mitzvah (fulfillment of a positive commandment) to listen to the disparaging words one says against another. For example: if the listener determines that through listening to the entire story he will then be able to show the speaker or other listeners that the information is inaccurate, or some other explanation to exonerate the subject of the Lashon Hara.

An additional situation in which it is a Mitzvah to listen is when someone approaches the listener to complain about something one's fellow did against him, and the listener recognizes that by listening to the speaker he might be able to quiet his anger so that he will not continue to speak to others (since they might believe him and accept his Lashon Hara) and through his listening peace is enhanced among the Jewish people.

With regard to any of these exceptions that we have discussed with regard to listening [to Lashon Hara] one should take great care not to definitively believe it when it is heard, but only to suspect its veracity. [The listener should follow this guideline carefully] so that he is not also caught in the snare of the sin of accepting Lashon Hara.

#### **5. One who unknowingly joins a Lashon Hara gathering**

Now let us return to the concept we mentioned above in paragraph 2, that even listening to Lashon Hara is forbidden according to the Torah: this is in the case when one goes out of his way to listen. However, if one is sitting with a group of people, gathered for a [non-gossip] purpose, and the people begin speaking forbidden words [of Lashon Hara], and the person judges that his words of rebuke will not make a dent [in their behavior], what he can do depends on the following if it is possible for him to leave the group or put his fingers in his ears, it is a great Mitzvah for him to do so, as our Sages tell us in Ketubot (page 5a). If, however, it is not possible for him to leave their presence, and he judges that the advice to place his fingers in his ears would be very difficult for him because those in the group will mock him so that he certainly will not do it, in any case he should

muster all of his internal strength at such an oppressive moment and fight the Divine war against his inclination that he should not fall into the Torah violation of listening and accepting Lashon Hara.

[Regarding the case in which the person will not leave or plug his ears,] there are three items which, if the listener is very careful to follow them, will save him from the Torah violation mentioned above:

- He should decide in his heart with absolute certainty that he will not believe the derogatory talk being said about others.
  - He should not enjoy hearing these forbidden stories.
3. He should also take care not to show the speakers any movement that would indicate agreement with their words; rather, he should remain mute as a stone. And if he can display an angry face such that they will realize that he does not agree with their empty words, even better.

## **6. One who knowingly joins a Lashon Hara gathering**

When does [paragraph 5] apply? If at the time that the person joined the group they were not speaking forbidden words [Lashon Hara] and also if now he cannot take leave of them. If, however, at the time that he wants to join them they were already speaking forbidden words, or he can depart from their company but is too lazy to do so, or he recognizes them to be a group that is the type to always want to speak badly of others and he goes and joins them, even if he does nothing to add to or support the conversation and he is not interested in it, he is nonetheless called a sinner just as the others in the group. For this person has violated the words of the Sages who commanded us to avoid listening to improper conversations.

And if the listener intended to hear their talk, all the greater is the sin he bears, and he will be inscribed in the heavenly Book of Remembrance as an evil person and Ba'al Lashon Hara (habitual speaker of Lashon Hara). Similarly it is written in Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer, who said the following to his son Hyrkanus: "My son, do not sit with a group speaking ill of their fellow man, for when their words ascend to Heaven, [the conversation] will be recorded in the Book, and all who stand there will be recorded as a part of this wicked group and Ba'alei Lashon Hara." Therefore one must distance himself very, very far from such an evil group.

## **7. Judging favorably**

Know well, that just as we have studied that the poskim (authorities of Jewish Law) regard it a Torah violation to believe derogatory words about another, it is also a violation even if the

listener knows that the information he was told is true and the information could be interpreted in different ways. If the speaker is judging the subject as guilty, and he thereby dishonors the subject, and the listener knows that it is a mitzvah to judge him favorably (a law discussed in the Talmud, Shavuot 30a, and a Torah commandment according to some poskim), if one violates this by not judging him favorably but rather agrees with the one speaking derogatorily - not only has he violated "*With righteousness you shall judge your people*" (Lev 19:15) but he also accepts Lashon Hara, since by not judging the subject favorably he has accepted the derogatory statements.

## **8. Judging the righteous favorably**

All this [the requirement to judge favorably discussed in [paragraph 7](#)] applies if the story was about an ordinary person, who typically takes care not to sin, but succumbs occasionally. How much more so if the story were about a G-d fearing person [who is even more scrupulous in his observance of mitzvot] would the commandment of "With righteousness shall you judge your people" apply (as is discussed by Maimonides in chapter 1 of Pirkei Avot and also by Rabbeinu Yona in Shaarei Teshuva 218). So when one judges the subject as guilty and agrees with the speaker's disparaging remarks, he violates this commandment [judging favorably]; clearly, he also violates the prohibition of accepting Lashon Hara.

## **9. Prohibition against accepting parallels that of speaking**

Just as the prohibition of accepting Lashon Hara applies when the speaker talks about one who acted improperly, in that we are commanded not to decide in our hearts that it is true as discussed above in [paragraph 1](#), the prohibition of accepting Lashon Hara applies to all instances in which speaking the Lashon Hara is prohibited (such as embarrassing him because of his older relatives' behavior, or his own past actions when he now conducts himself appropriately; or degrading him on account of lesser intelligence, whether in Torah or worldly matters; and the other categories that we have discussed in [chapter 4](#)) with regard to anything which disparages the subject. For we are commanded not to accept what a speaker says when through his words he causes us to look negatively upon the subject.

The guiding principle is as follows: anything for which the speaker is prohibited to say, there is a prohibition upon the one who believes it for accepting it.

## **10. Using Lashon Hara to protect oneself**

Even though we learn that accepting Lashon Hara - for one to decide in his heart that the

information is true - is forbidden according to the Torah, suspecting [the veracity of the information] is appropriate.

[The story of Guedalyah ben Achikam's assassination, in the last chapter of Kings, is the basis for the Gemara's discussion (Nidah 61a) about suspecting Lashon Hara to be true. The Gemara relates that Guedalyah was warned about Ishmael, the leader of the assassination, yet he rejected the informer's story because, "it was Lashon Hara."]

To clarify: the Lashon Hara must be accepted to the extent that it is of concern, in order that one may protect himself from damage by the subject. Yet this should not even be viewed as a "safek" (legally binding suspicion against someone), since the subject retains the supposition of "kashrut" (legally established as an upstanding citizen). For this reason [that we may only feel concern about the hearsay], we are required to do him favors and kindness as we are commanded in the Torah to do for all of Israel.

His caliber is not diminished whatsoever by the Lashon Hara; rather, the Torah permits us to be concerned in order to protect ourselves and others from him. Therefore, the halachic commentaries write that it is permissible to suspect the information only in the case where damage could come to the listener or others by his not listening (and with respect to protecting others, much elaboration is needed for understanding--see the commentary in this section and also in [Hilchot Rechilus 9](#); however, for any other reason, it is forbidden to suspect the Lashon Hara as true or pay any heed to it.

## **11. Suspicions cannot affect the suspected**

Many people make mistakes when suspecting the veracity of Lashon Hara and this subject needs much discussion; while there isn't enough room to elaborate upon the different kinds of mistakes here, with the help of Heaven I will discuss them in the last chapter of the section on Lashon Hara. However, the general guidelines are as follows: when Lashon Hara is to be regarded as a concern, this is only in order to protect oneself from the subject. However, Heaven forbid one should not act against the subject, or cause him harm, or embarrass him on account of the information, either in a large or small manner. Even if the Lashon Hara was spoken by a trusted witness whose testimony the Beit Din (religious council of the city) would accept, the report is only valid when asserted with an oath (a very serious assurance in the eyes of Jewish law).

Furthermore, just to hate the subject in your heart (i.e. secretly, without letting the feeling affect one's actions) on account of the Lashon Hara is forbidden according to the Torah. Certainly the listener cannot allow the Lashon Hara to weaken his fulfillment of positive commandments that benefit the speaker (as we are commanded to fulfill obligations between ourselves and

others, such as lending money and giving charity to them].

## **12. Repentance for accepting Lashon Hara**

If one has already violated the prohibition of listening and believing Lashon Hara, whether Lashon Hara about someone's religious observance or about his personal characteristics, repentance is as follows:

1. The listener must strengthen himself and remove the words from his heart so that he does not believe them again.
2. The listener commits himself not to accept any other Lashon Hara about one of his fellow people.
3. The listener performs Viduy (in private prayer, confess this sin to G-d).

Through this process he repairs the violation of the positive and negative commandments which he violated through accepting Lashon Hara (listed in the introduction), provided that he has not yet repeated the Lashon Hara.

 **Chapter 5**

**Chapter 7** 

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