

# PROHIBITIONS AGAINST LISTENING TO OR ACCEPTING RECHILUT

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## 1. Not accepting Rechilut

Just as it is a Torah prohibition to accept L"H (Lashon Hara), it is also a Torah prohibition to accept Rechilut, since they both are rooted in the same commandment (Lev 19 - "Lo telech rachil...", do not go about as a talebearer among my people).

This prohibition means that one should not believe Rechilut told to him is true. For example, if someone told the listener what someone said about him or did against him, the listener should not believe him.

One who accepts Rechilut violates the negative commandment (Ex. 23:1): "Do not carry a false utterance" [understood as relating false information, in this case meaning upholding the false information], along with many other commandments detailed in the introduction [see also "Commandments" on the HaLashon web site].

The Talmudic Sages say: "Lashon Hara kills three - the speaker, the one who accepts it, and the one spoken about (as was in the case of Doeg who told Saul that the priests of Nob gave shelter and food to David, because Saul killed the priests, and later Saul was killed in retribution, as was Doeg [see Samuel I ch. 22]); and the one who accepts [the L"H] is worse than the speaker." The Sages also say that anyone who speaks or accepts L"H should be thrown to the dogs, because the verse "you shall not carry a false utterance" is immediately preceded by "you should throw him to the dogs."

[This is a "drasha" (exposition) based on the proximity of the last phrase in Exodus 22:30 ("You

shall be holy people to Me: you must not eat flesh torn by beasts in the field; you shall cast it to the dogs." - JPS translation) and the first in the next chapter (23:1 - "You shall not carry a false utterance; you shall not join hands with the guilty to act as a malicious witness..."). Since the verses in the different chapters seem to have no topical relationship, we probably wouldn't think of this connection as "logical." However, expositions are frequently made to explain the relationship between one topic and the next, with the understanding that the order of topics in the Torah is intentional and significant. Grammatical note: While its real meaning is "throw it to the dogs", the phrase "l'kelev tashlichun oto" is translated as "throw him..." in the drasha above. This is because the Hebrew "oto" is the direct object of a masculine "it," and it is also the direct object "him."]

## 2. Not hearing Rechilut

Even merely hearing Rechilut [i.e. but not accepting it] is a violation of the Torah, just as with Lashon Hara (discussed in chapter 6), even if when hearing it the listener hasn't decided whether or not to believe it.

In any case the violation of accepting Rechilut is more severe than merely listening. In the case of listening, there is the possibility that the listener recognizes the information - if true - as something that might affect him. For example, if he realizes that the speaker wants to tell him about someone who is planning to harm him, it is certainly permissible to listen and learn what to suspect and how to protect himself.

However, it is forbidden to conclusively accept the information. Rather, the listener must merely suspect the information to be true and take appropriate precautions, as the Sages state: "Regarding evil speech, although accepting it is unquestionably inappropriate, suspecting it is unquestionably appropriate."

[Aramaic sidenote: In Rabbi Yitzhak Frank's "Practical Talmud Dictionary," I finally found a satisfying translation for "b'alma" as used in this paragraph ("chashash b'alma"): mere, as in a mere suspicion.]

The Chafetz Chaim also refers us to Hilchot Lashon Hara chapter 6 regarding how a listener should conduct himself. This includes asking the speaker if the information is relevant, not showing any external signs of agreement with the information, judging favorably wherever possible, and making certain not to believe the information. In upcoming paragraphs, the Chafetz Chaim describes how to suspect Rechilut to be true.

## 3. Using rumored information to protect oneself

If an individual encounters substantiating evidence that another is planning to harm him (physically or monetarily), it is permissible for him to inquire of others for related information so that he may learn how to protect himself; he need not be concerned that he is encouraging others to speak desparagingly of the person (both L"H-general derogatory information against

the subject; and Rechilut-information that incites ill will against the subject). This is even if he did not hear any such information from others previously (but is investigating due to the evidence he encountered).

[The language of the Chafetz Chaim implies that the individual's inquiry should be specific, explicitly stating the nature of his concern. One reason why this is important is so that those he asks don't think he is encouraging them to speak Rechilut without a valid purpose.]

#### 4. Believing information acquired through Rechilut

All the principles we discussed in Hilchot Lashon Hara chapter 6 regarding suspecting the truth of information also apply to Rechilut. Therefore, one must be very careful not to believe any Rechilut he is told, whether about someone who spoke about him, harmed him, or is planning to harm him; one may only suspect the information to be true.

"Suspect" means that he may act to protect himself from the other person. However, the rumor must not be regarded as anything more factual; the person in question must be treated as a reliable person ("chezkak kashrut" - believed to be "kosher"), assumed not to have insulted or harmed the individual. It is therefore prohibited to act or speak against the rumored wrongdoer, and even prohibited to resent or hate him yet take no action (a violation of Lev. 19:12, "do not hate your brother in your heart").

The listener of the Rechilut should certainly not think this suspicion exempts him from matters in which he is obligated toward the person (i.e. monetary obligations such as paying damages for repaying a loan). He is also still obligated to treat the person with kindnesses according to the Torah (e.g. tzedaka/charity, lending money without charging interest, and many other commandments that are "bein adam l'chaveiro" between man and his fellow) as regards any other person. This is because a suspicion does not lower one's status whatsoever.

The halachic authorities [from earlier generations] have written about the principle that a suspicion in this case can only be regarded in order that the listener should protect himself; for any other purpose it is forbidden to suspect [and act on] the information's truth.

#### 5. Asking others about third-party comments

Many people often make the mistake of asking others what someone said about them, even when the information has no future implications. Further, they pressure a reluctant informant until he does speak inappropriately.

The error is even worse: this questioner listens to the derogatory information and typically believes it completely (when he should only suspect its truth), and because of this the questioner and the subject reported to have spoken about him become bitter enemies.

The number of transgressions one violates by acting in this manner is too great to list them all here (see the introduction). Even if someone hears Rechilut without asking for it, and accepts it,

he violates Torah prohibitions. As we discussed in paragraph 2, it is forbidden to hear Rechilut which does not serve a constructive purpose. And by forcing someone else to speak Rechilut, he transgresses even more.

Therefore it is very important to eliminate the habit of asking after what others said about them unless it might have future implications.

#### 6. Not accepting Rechilut: judging favorably

In addition to not believing the information, there is an additional component of the prohibition against accepting Rechilut: judging favorably. Even if the listener verifies that the Rechilut told to him is true (e.g. that the subject said or did something against him), there is a commandment to judge favorably (Lev 19:15 "B'tzedek tishpot amitecha" - in righteousness shall you judge your people).

The requirement to "dan l'kaf z'chut," judge favorably, means that the listener should believe that the intention of the subject who wronged him was not to provoke him, but something else. This other (unknown) intention would have been justifiable in the listener's opinion, despite the secondary effect of seeming to act against the listener. [Ideally, the listener should think of a reason or two which could explain what happened. Minimally, he should believe that something else was going on that he doesn't realize.]

By not following the commandment to "dan l'kaf z'chut," a listener violates the prohibition against accepting Rechilut. He also may cause himself more difficulties by acting upon this Rechilut, such as speaking against the person that wronged him, further violating commandments and severing social, business, or other ties that normally benefit him.

#### 7. Repenting from accepting Rechilut

If one already accepted Rechilut, yet has not repeated the information to anyone else, his spiritual recourse is as follows:

- He must remove his belief in the information from his heart. If it is difficult to believe that the speaker of the Rechilut made everything up, the listener should realize that perhaps the speaker exaggerated and added information, or put things in a negative light.
- He must commit to not accepting Lashon Hara or Rechilut again.
- He must confess (Viduy - the Hebrew term for private confession to G-d) this violation to G-d.

 **Chapter 4**

**Chapter 6** 

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