

LASHON HARA

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

Dear Rabbi Travis,

I really battle knowing what lashon hara is and what isn't. If I need to get advice about a problem with another person, I need to inform them of the "bad" for them to be able to help advise, right? The way I've understood lashon hara so far is that any negative or positive is not to be said about anyone anytime? I would appreciate any explanation and help on this. I do know I feel guilty about mentioning anything negative about anyone. Is this my indication that it was wrong to say?

Hjanalin

Shalom UVrachah!

Lashon Harah is any speech said with the unconscious or conscious intent to harm someone else. This seems pretty straightforward but what is and is not in that category is quite complicated and to know that one has to become familiar with the halachos. I recommend the sefer A lesson a day by Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz. Regarding your specific question in most cases it is not necessary to mention a specific name and this is not lashon hara.

Rabbi Daniel Yaakov Travis

But It's True!

In any case, she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. (Bereshith 20:12)

There is a strong tendency for people to justify a misleading, libelous or outrageous remark with the disclaimer, "But it's true!" Avimelech was upset with Avraham for having claimed that Sarah was his sister, for although his statement was true, its incompleteness nearly caused Avimelech to sin. Even though Avraham was justified in his remark, the fact that it was true did not negate the potentially harmful repercussions of not stating the whole truth: that Sarah was his sister and his wife.¹

Anyone can find countless examples in his own life of "true statements" he felt "justifiably" tempted to make. People often repeat derogatory information unnecessarily - information that, although it is true, could seriously damage the reputation of the subject of the gossip. The fact that on the surface a statement appears to be true does not rule out the possibility of falsehood. Nearly every slanderous statement contains some element of falsehood. In fact, the Torah injunction to distance

oneself from sheker teaches us that we must not speak lashon hara.²

On another note, our Sages tell us that publicizing bad news is a foolish act, albeit the information is true. Thus, if someone asks about a certain person who has passed away, or about some other item of bad news, if the information is not important for him to know, it is preferable not to relate the news.³ One can respond with a simple "I don't know."⁴ By the same token, if someone is doing something wrong, and one knows that this person will not accept censure, it is preferable to remain silent and not attempt to correct him (unless he is transgressing a violation expressly stated in the Torah, as opposed to a Rabbinical injunction). In this way, at least the transgression will be an unintentional one, rather than an act of deliberately disregarding the reproof.⁵

The bottom line is that not everything which is true should be said. Beyond the technical measure of the veracity of a statement, Torah law is a standard in and of itself in establishing the "truth" of a matter. Therefore, if the Torah prohibits saying it, that is sufficient to render a statement "false."⁶

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1. Ramban on Bereshith 20:12.
 2. Mechilta - Parashath Mishpatim.
 3. Pesachim 3b.
 4. Titein Emeth L'Yaakov 5:43, who cites numerous rabbanim who concur with this opinion.
 5. Rema Orach Chaim 608:2
 6. Eved HaMelech - Parahsath Mishpatim

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