

DO NOT STAND OVER YOUR BROTHER'S BLOOD PART 2

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

Last week we began discussion of the Mitzva, 'Do not stand over your brother's blood'. We saw that this obligates us to do whatever is in our power to help our fellow when he is in difficulty. We discussed that one aspect of the Mitzva is to save him from physical harm.

Another aspect of the Mitzva is to save him from financial loss whenever possible. For example, if he plans to use his money in a way that you know is likely to have negative results, then you must try to prevent him from embarking on his plan.

This Mitzva is so important that it even allows us to speak lashon hara (negative speech) when necessary. For example, if you see that a person plans to be involved in business with an untrustworthy person then, if certain conditions are fulfilled, you are allowed, and in fact obligated to inform him that he should not trust this person. However, one must be very vigilant to ensure that he observe all the conditions that allow one to speak lashon hara for constructive reasons. Without any of these conditions, it is forbidden to speak out even to prevent one's fellow from harm. The conditions are listed below.

1. We cannot make any critical statement about a person on the basis of information obtained through hearsay. Only through first-hand information may one assume that someone's character or behavior is wanting [1]. Even if we have personally witnessed seemingly unacceptable behavior we must not hastily pass judgment. Circumstances must be carefully investigated before we can be sure that we understand a situation correctly [2].
2. Before we relate negative information we must carefully consider whether or not our words will in fact bring about the desired result. For example, we may seek to discourage a potentially harmful business association but often a final decision has already been made and speaking negatively of the other party will serve no constructive purpose.
3. Before speaking about a person with others, we must, if at all feasible, first discuss the issue with that person himself. For example, if someone is acting in an anti-social way speaking to the person himself may be effective, precluding the need to speak lashon hara. This condition does not apply if speaking to the sinner might make it more difficult to achieve the desired result through other means. An example of this is if we suspect someone of certain dishonesty - speaking to him may only succeed in causing him to be more careful not to get caught. In such a situation, we should not speak to him first.

4.If in addition to personal reproof, any other option exists that could preclude the necessity to speak negatively, it must be pursued.

5.Even if speaking negatively is necessary we should choose the least blatant means by which to communicate that information. Directing someone to where he will become aware of information on his own is preferable to expressing it verbally.

6.While derogatory information may be related for a constructive purpose, slander cannot be justified. In particular we must be very careful not to exaggerate - this is included within the definition of slander.

7.Having fulfilled all the above conditions we must be certain that his sole intent is for a constructive purpose. However, if we know that in our heart we are pleased to cast the person in a bad light then we are not permitted to speak - even though the purpose cannot be accomplished any other way. It is necessary first to eradicate any negative feelings towards that person and only then can the negative information be spoken.

[1] An exception to this rule is where we seek to protect someone from potential harm - such instances would permit us to pass on second-hand information. This will be discussed later.

[2] Indeed, there is a separate commandment which requires us to judge others favorably and not jump to negative conclusions about people's actions.

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