

# LASHON HARA PART 4

*by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen*

Last week we mentioned that as well as the prohibition to speak lashon hara (negative speech) it is also forbidden to actively listen to it. There are two main reasons for this:

Firstly, by listening to the speaker you are enabling him to continue his gossip and consequently causing him to sin. By doing so, one transgresses a separate commandment in the Torah known as, 'do not put a stumbling block in front of a blind person'. One application of this is that we cannot cause someone else to sin. The reason for this commandment is that Judaism does not see each person as a separate individual who only needs to be concerned about his own spiritual well-being. We are enjoined to care about the spiritual well-being of our fellow man and therefore we cannot cause him to perform an action that is spiritually damaging to him.

One may think that listening to lashon hara would only involve a transgression of not putting a stumbling block if you are the only listener but if there are others there then the speaker would be able to say his criticisms anyway. However, it is still possible that the presence of another person may strengthen the speaker's conviction to speak and therefore listening could still involve putting a 'stumbling block'.

The second problem with listening to lashon hara is that it is very likely that the listener will believe what is being said and will allow it to cloud his opinion of the person under discussion. Accordingly, it is highly advisable to try to not put oneself in the position of hearing negative words. However, there are situations where it is unavoidable to hear lashon hara - what should we do when this happens? The great scholar, Rabbi Yisroel Kagan, known as the Chofetz Chaim, says that we must strive not to believe the negative words that have been spoken.

This is no easy task, but one way of making it easier is to realize that although the speaker may not be intentionally lying in what he is saying, but nevertheless he is only saying things from his subjective point of view. We all know that there are two sides to every story - when we hear both people's versions we understand how two people can see one event in drastically different ways. Thus, for example, when John describes in detail how Dave committed a deplorable act we cannot really know if the way he saw the story is an accurate account of what actually happened. Having this awareness can help us develop an ability to remain unaffected by the negative speech that we hear.

---

Text Copyright © 2008 by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen and **Torah.org**