

LASHON HARA PART 7

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

Last week we began discussing the situations in which it is permissible to speak lashon hara. However, there are no less than seven conditions that must be fulfilled before we can do so.

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 wanting². 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 correctly³.
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 to others about him. 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.

Needless to say that we must be well-versed in the laws of lashon hara before we permit ourselves to speak negatively even when we see a constructive purpose. The Torah guides us as to what really does justify speaking badly about others.

¹ The information for this essay is taken from 'Lesson a Day', p.134.

² 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.

³ 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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