

Topic 19



Gossip and Speech

✿ What's Kosher ✿

Is it ever kosher to use language that would shame another?

Although Jewish law in most circumstances strictly forbids embarrassing a person, there are always exceptions to the rule. Many of the exceptions deal with validating the competency of a person regarding the performance of a Jewish ritual on behalf of another. For example, in the Talmud (Chullin 3b) is a discussion concerning a kosher slaughterer. Because of the importance to the Jewish people of keeping the kosher dietary laws, the rabbis remark that if the person who slaughtered the animal is present, it is permissible to examine him and ask him whether or not he is knowledgeable in the laws of ritual slaughtering. If he does not know the laws, there is no concern about embarrassing him, and it is permitted to ask him outright: “Why did you slaughter the animal? You had no right to slaughter an animal before being examined by a rabbi about the laws of ritual slaughter.”

Is it kosher to call someone by a nickname rather than that person's given name?

It is perfectly kosher to call a person by his or her nickname. Nicknames are often used as terms of endearment, reflecting a special relationship that one has with the other. Most of my close friends and

others who know me well call me by the nickname my grandmother gave me: with her Eastern European accent, she turned my Hebrew name, Reuven, into Reeven, which then was shortened to Reeve.

It is, however, not kosher to call someone by a cruel nickname. Children often have to endure years of being called by a nickname they dislike, a name that is often both hurtful and humiliating. I myself was surprised to learn that calling a person by a cruel nickname is a serious offense in Jewish tradition. According to the Talmud: “All who descend to *Gehenna* [hell] will ascend except three who descend, never to return: One who sleeps with a married woman, one who shames his friend in public, and one who calls his friend by a cruel nickname” (Talmud, Baba Metzia 58b).

Is it ever kosher to pass on a rumor to others?

Unless there is an ethically compelling reason to pass on a rumor, it is best to simply let it die. However, every once in a while an occasion might arise that morally obligates a person to pass on a rumor privately. For example, if you were to hear that a certain physician in town was practicing medicine that was harmful to patients, rabbinic consensus would be that one has a moral obligation to pass the information on to others. When disclosing the rumor, though, you must report it as a rumor that requires further investigation. Don't say that it's definitely true, for it may well not be and may cause devastating damage that likely will be irrevocable. Rather, the prudent thing to say is that it is well worth checking into the matter.

✿ What's Not Kosher ✿

I know a person who doesn't stop talking about some person she dislikes. Is this kosher?

As children we are all taught, “If you have nothing nice to say, don't say anything at all.” Jewish tradition goes one step further: don't say anything about anyone; that way, there's no chance of saying something bad.

Words are powerful and unyielding. Once uttered, they live a life of their own. And words do many things, including desecrate, attack, and tear down. Too often we hurl words without bothering to see where they land or what effect they have. And once words leave our mouths, retrieving them is impossible. A famous rabbi graphically illustrated this point. Assembling his followers, he ripped open a pillow and waved it in the air. The feathers floated upward in all directions. Catching them was impossible. The feathers, the rabbi explained, are the unthinking, often inadvertent evil words we speak. There is no way to retrieve them. So you have to make sure not to utter them in the first place.

Here are a number of pieces of advice from Jewish sources that I have found useful in helping control the words that we speak.

Do not speak too much. As the book of Proverbs (10:19) rightly suggests, “one who holds one’s tongue acts wisely.” The Menorat HaMaor suggests that a person should try to discipline himself not to speak too much so that he should not come to the point of uttering slander or indecent words and should not become a constant complainer. He should rather stress silence. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi once said: “A word is worth a sela [small coin], but silence is worth two.” (Leviticus Rabbah 16:5)

Keep silent. Martin Buber, in his book *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters*, describes Rabbi Mendel, who teaches the art of silence by practicing it. When Reb Mendel was in Kotzk, that town’s rabbi asked him, “Where did you learn the art of silence?” He was on the verge of answering the question, but then he changed his mind and practiced his art!

Keep a civil tongue. The Menorat HaMaor also advises each person to try to keep a civil tongue in his head, whether he is engaged in the study of Torah or discussing affairs of the world. Especially learn to restrain your tongue when you are with a person who is in the heat of anger. Many people become enraged when provoked. It is better to wait for them to calm down before trying to appease their anger.

Study Torah. A midrash to the book of Psalms advises that if one's tongue turns to uttering slander, it would be best for that person to go and study the words of Torah.

Put your hands in your ears. This suggestion, one of my favorites, comes from the Talmud (Ketubot 5a-b), which advises that if one hears something unseemly, one should simply put one's hands in one's ears and not listen.

Minimize small talk. In the Ethics of the Fathers (6:6), we learn that the Torah is acquired through forty-eight virtues. Minimizing small talk is one of them. It is difficult to learn and contemplate righteousness if one is chattering away. It's not that talking and conversation are wrong. Rather, it's just that getting caught up in trivialities can often cause one to lose focus on what is truly important. An excess of small talk takes away focus from learning and personal involvement and can often lead to inappropriate use of language.

Is it kosher to talk behind a person's back?

Talking about someone behind his back is a form of *lashon hara*, evil talk, and strictly forbidden. *Lashon hara* is the subject of a famous book by Rabbi Israel Mayer Kagan, *Chafetz Chayim: Shemirat Lashon*. Rabbi Kagan believed that the ability to express our thoughts is one of God's greatest gifts to us. Speech, he said, is not inherently evil, but everything we say must be guarded, guided, and well intended. Taking care about what we say is not popular in the modern United States. Instead, we try to be spontaneous, using free-flowing words, which often get us into trouble.

A group of people in Jerusalem continually study the teachings about *lashon hara* and for two hours each day refrain from saying anything that might harm anyone else. One of their leaders is Reb-betzin Samet, who is quoted as saying: "If we care very much about someone else, we become creative in finding ways to avoid speaking *lashon hara*."

Jewish tradition and law has three categories of evil speech that we are to avoid. The first category, *lashon hara* (literally the "evil

tongue”), includes making unfavorable, damaging, or false comments about someone or something. Sharing ethnic jokes, spreading negative gossip or rumors, or even telling a true story that places a person in a bad light are all harmful.

The second category, *motzi shem ra* (giving someone a bad name), includes even inadvertently spreading gossip that is untrue. People must learn that they cannot repeat negative stories, especially because they cannot be sure that such stories are even true. They must also learn that it’s nonkosher to embarrass or humiliate someone deliberately, even a person they dislike, by telling lies. Exodus (23:1) teaches, “Do not carry rumors that are untrue.”

The final category, *rechilut*, involves telling our friends the negative gossip about them that we heard from someone else. Nothing is gained by reporting such gossip—except hurt feelings and disruption of the peace. One of the most important lessons that we can give ourselves is to realize that we cannot ever know the ultimate outcome of such unfavorable speech. As the Talmud says, “What is spoken in Rome may kill in Syria” (Genesis Rabbah 98:23).

A person I know continually interrupts me when I speak. Is this kosher?

It is not proper to interrupt a person when he or she is speaking to you. Listening is a virtue in Judaism, and it is best to allow a person to finish speaking before responding. The Ethics of the Fathers (5:9) offers details and suggestions relating to how a wise person uses speech:

There are seven characteristics which typify the fool, and seven the wise person:

- Wise people do not speak in the presence of those who are wiser than they are;
- They do not interrupt their friend’s words;
- They do not reply in haste;
- They ask what is relevant, they answer to the point;
- They reply to questions in an orderly sequence;
- Of what they have not heard, they say, “I have not heard”;
- The opposite of these typify the fool.

My son loves to listen to a particular radio show, known for its use of profanity. Is this kosher?

Although the use of vulgar and obscene language has certain protection by the First Amendment, Jewish tradition demonstrates and holds other values. For Judaism using profanity in speech is inappropriate and improper. The Talmud (Pesachim 3a) says that “one should not utter a gross expression.” Jewish tradition also suggests that we try to avoid hearing foul language from others: “If one hears something improper, he should put his fingers in his ears” (Talmud, Ketubot 5a). Rephrased today this would mean turning off the radio show.

Because Judaism values purity of speech, we have a responsibility openly and unapologetically to point out what we find offensive and vulgar. We may not be able to do anything about vulgarity on T-shirts, bumper stickers, or even radio shows known for their obscene language; but we can write letters to radio stations and advertisers, when the material they have presented has offended us.

A Hasidic teaching states that “human beings are God’s language.” I think this teaching says it all.

Is it nonkosher to complain that you never received a thank-you note?

Everyone enjoys receiving thanks for something that one does well or gives to another. Thanking someone is the gracious and proper thing to do. However, if one failed to receive a thank-you note, complaining and making an issue of it would be improper. Complaining would likely only serve the purpose of making the person feel bad. It is entirely possible that a person unintentionally forgot.

Is it kosher to speak badly of yourself?

Although humility is a virtue in Judaism, being modest does not mean that a person has to deny one’s own virtues. The book of Leviticus (19:18) commands us to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Just as you would not wish to hear other people speaking badly of someone you love, so too it would not be kosher for you to speak ill of someone you are supposed to love, namely yourself.

✻ What the Experts Say ✻

Whoever dirties his mouth, even though it had been decreed in heaven that he should live seventy years, causes the decree to be reversed. (Talmud, Ketubot 8b)

Whoever tells tales about someone secretly has no place in the World to Come. (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, 53)

The person who utters foul language commits a great transgression and becomes despised in the eyes of others, for that person has abandoned the traits of decency and modesty that are the distinguishing marks of his people Israel, and walks the path of an insolent and defiant person. (Menorat HaMaor, chap. on gossip)

The speech of a person should always be clean and his words polite. (Talmud, Pesachim 3a)

The person who is vulgar of speech descends to the deepest region of the netherworld. (Talmud, Shabbat 33a)

A person should try to discipline himself not to speak too much so that he should not come to the point of uttering *lashon hara* or indecent words and should not become a chronic complainer. He should, rather, stress silence. (Menorat HaMaor, chap. on gossip)

The Holy One hates the person who says one thing in his mouth and another in his heart. (Talmud, Pesachim 113b)

Just as one is commanded to say that which will be listened to, so is one commanded not to say that which will not be heeded. (Talmud, Yevamot 65b)

If you say of a rabbi that he does not have a good voice, and of a cantor that he is not a scholar, you are a gossip. But, if you say of

a rabbi that he is no scholar and of a cantor that he has no voice, you are a murderer. (Rabbi Israel Salanter)

Have you heard something? Let it die with you. (Apocrypha, Ecclesiasticus 19:10)

I can retract what I did not say, but I cannot retract what I already have said. (Solomon ibn Gabirol, *Pearls of Wisdom*)

✿ Sources ✿

Do not go about as a gossipmonger among your people. (Leviticus 19:16)

Who is the person that desires life and loves days, that he may see the good therein? Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking guile. (Psalms 34:12–13)

A person who guards his tongue and lips is worthy to be clothed with the spirit of holiness. (Zohar 4:183b)