



A Family Education E-Resource
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The Importance of Words: Jewish Tradition and the Power of Speech for the 21st Century

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In this age of rapid group communication, e-mails, blogs, instant messages (IMs) and online news reports, whatever we say or write can be carried to many intended and unintended readers.

Is a little gossip really a crime? According to our tradition, it is!



Leshon HaRa - tale-bearing or gossip, even if true, is speech or words that can be hurtful. In Jewish tradition, *Leshon HaRa* is taken very seriously because it is considered a form of stealing - stealing one's good name. It is also likened in the Talmud to a capital crime. Samuel ben Nachman said, "Gossip kills three people: the speaker, the spoken of, and the listener."

If it is so serious, then why do both children and adults do it?

To understand *Leshon HaRa*, we need to examine the psychosocial factors involved. First, when we "put down" others, we raise our own self-esteem. Second, when we have juicy information to share, it raises our importance. People will listen to us! Third, by spreading *Leshon HaRa*, we avoid responsibility. The blame falls on someone else. The problem, whatever it is, is because of *their* inadequacies, not ours. For these reasons, resisting such speech is, indeed, quite difficult.

- **Help children develop their self-esteem through mitzvot and acts of loving-kindness, not gossip.** Perhaps friends will listen if they gossip, but will our children ultimately be trusted or admired?
- If you hear your child gossip on the phone, you can intervene by saying, "This conversation is not for you." By reproaching your child, you can actually raise his or her self-esteem!

We should be clear that we disapprove of *Leshon HaRa* in any form.



- Teach your children to assertively let their friends know that they do not want to participate in such talk.
- Model the avoidance of gossip. If a child hears a parent gossiping about a neighbor, a teacher, or a child's classmate, the child will internalize the message that this kind of behavior is condoned.

When we speak ill of others, whether or not what we say is true, it seems harmless - that is, until we ourselves are the victims of *Leshon HaRa*.

- Help children "step into the shoes of others." The ability to empathize is an important step in breaking this habit. Children need to imagine their own secrets, their weaknesses or their problems being discussed in person, on the phone, online, or even in a blog, to understand the pain *Leshon HaRa* can cause.
- Help children to understand how a rumor can hurt someone's feelings or even damage someone's life. *Leshon HaRa* can be dangerous!
- Tell children this famous Jewish folktale about *Leshon HaRa*:



A person was once brought before a rabbi due to her constant gossiping. To teach her a lesson, the rabbi handed her a feather pillow. He instructed her to cut open up the pillow and scatter the feathers about the town. When she completed this job, he asked her to retrieve them. The woman protested that it would be next to impossible to retrieve the feathers that had been spread. "Yes" said the rabbi, "and think how difficult it is to retrieve the *Leshon HaRa* that you have spread!"

Is gossip always bad? Is it ever all right to speak negatively about someone?

- Teach children how to differentiate between *Leshon HaRa* and the importance of speaking up if an adult is behaving inappropriately towards them or if someone they know is in danger.
- Give children guidelines to decide if what they are going to say will be helpful or hurtful - being able to tell the difference is a great gift!

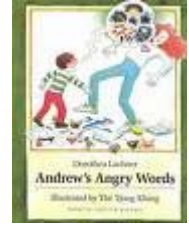
Learning to make good choices is an important part of growing up. As Americans, we recognize the value of "free speech." Judaism adds the value of *Shemirat HaLashon* - Guarding Your Tongue. We want our children to feel that it is in everyone's (including their own) best interest to do so.



WANT TO LEARN MORE? CHECK OUT THESE BOOKS AND WEBSITES!

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

Andrew's Angry Words by Dorothea Lachner, illustrated by The Tjong-Khing. North-South Books, 1995.



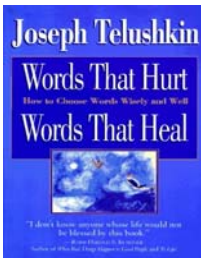
Yettele's Feathers by Joan Rothenberg. Hyperion Books for Children, 1995.

BOOKS FOR TEENS - ADULTS

Apples of Gold: The Art of Pure Speech by David Bernstein. Torah Umesorah Publications, 1988.

Ethics of Speech by David A. Teutsch. Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Press, 2006.

It's a Mitzvah: Step-by-Step to Jewish Living (chapter on *Sh'mirat ha-Lashon*/Guarding Your Tongue) by Bradley Shavit Artson. Behrman House, 1995.



What's Right? What's Wrong? A Guide to Talking about Values for Parents and Kids by Jeffrey A. Marx and Risa Munitz Gruberger.

Words that Hurt - Words that Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well by Joseph Telushkin. William Morrow and Co., 1995.

WEBSITES

http://www.aish.com/family/mensch/Stopping_Lashon_Hara.asp - "Stopping Lashon Hara" by Sara Chana Radcliffe - A primer on how to raise our children to look at the positive and speak well about others.



<http://www.jewfaq.org/speech.htm> - Judaism 101 - Resources on "Speech and Lashon Ha-Ra"

http://jewishimpactfilms.com/topics.asp?topic_id=6&view=learn - is a short film clip demonstrating *Leshon HaRa*. Parents and kids can watch, analyze and plan how to avoid participating in *Leshon HaRa*.



http://www.myjewishlearning.com/daily_life/Speech/TO_Types_Speech/Gossip_Rumors_Leshon_Hara/Dust_of_Leshon_Hara.htm#top is a short excerpt about *Leshon HaRa* from Rabbi Joseph Telushkin's, *The Book of Jewish Values*.

<http://www.ounetwork.org/ncsy/ncsylashonhara.swf> - A colorful 1-minute video that presents the essence of *Shemirat HaLashon* and emphasizes how important a mitzvah it is. A "must-see" for all ages!



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