

Lashon Hara' – Evil Speech or Gossip

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The topic of *Lashon Hara'* (evil speech or gossip) is an important one for all of us to consider as we seek to serve our Lord, walking in His footsteps and sanctifying His Name upon the earth. I am convinced that Messianic communities intent upon living by the Scriptures face a wonderful and strategic challenge in these days. This challenge is to make known the glories of our Messiah Yeshua and the Good News that He is the way to be reconciled to the Father. Consider the prophecy of Zechariah:

Thus says Adonai of hosts, In those days ten men from the nations of every language will grasp the corner of the garment (i.e., the tzitzit) of a Jew saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.” (Zech 8:23)

This means that Messianic believers will be sought after by those seeking the truth, and given an opportunity to share the Good News of Yeshua, that He is the Messiah sent by the one true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Many indicators, including the return of our people to the Land, the increasing tensions in the Middle East, the fight over the city of Yerushalaim, point to this being a strategic time in the expansion and growth of the kingdom of Yeshua. Add to this the increasing interest of the mainline churches regarding the Jewishness of the Christian faith, and it is easy to see that Messianic believers have a very important role to perform now and in the future. I hope that we intend to accept the challenge that is before us, and that we will work diligently to prepare ourselves to serve our King as He desires.

With this in mind, a question for us all is this: what kinds of things will Satan attempt to put in our path in order to cause us to fail in the mission Yeshua has given us to accomplish? Surely his strategies are multifaceted, but I want to emphasize just one, that of *lashon hara'*, “evil speech” or “slander.” Perhaps nothing more diminishes the ability of a community of believers to work together in service for Yeshua than the sin of slander—seeking to ruin the reputation of another person through speaking gossip against them. Unfortunately, everyone of us must admit that in one way or another, we have engaged in this sin and to one extent or another have therefore weakened our ability to fulfill the mission Yeshua has designed for us. A recommitment to guarding our tongues will therefore help strengthen us against Satan's schemes.

Consider the words of James in his Epistle where he teaches that the ability to control the tongue is a genuine mark of spiritual maturity (2:1); that the tongue is like a fire, able to set an entire forest ablaze (2:5) and able to burn all the other members of the body, defiling them and even setting the course of life on fire. He boldly states that the slandering tongue is set on fire by hell itself (2:6). He calls the tongue “a restless evil and full of deadly poison” and chastens his readers with the thought that with the same tongue we bless the Lord and curse our fellow man who is created in His image (2:9). Clearly, James recognized that *lashon hara'* could easily do severe damage to the cause of Messiah. He therefore warns the Messianic community in his time, as well as warning us, about engaging in evil speech.

How might we define *lashon hara'*? What is it? Evil speech, in its simplest definition, is talking about a person in such a way as to degrade them in the eyes of others. Even if what is being communicated is true, to do so may constitute slander, for we are called upon to love one another, and love seeks to cover rather than broadcast a person's faults: “...love covers a multitude of sins” (1Pet 4:8). Moreover, Yeshua taught us that if a brother has sinned, we are to go to that person privately, and even take a second person with us if rebuffed. Only when the sin is unchecked and unresolved is the matter to be made known to the whole assembly (Matt 18:15ff).

We should be careful, however, not to think that disagreeing with someone constitutes *lashon hara'*, so long as we can disagree without attacking the character of the person with whom we disagree. For instance, authors and teachers who write and put their writings into published formats should expect that there will be those who disagree with their methods as well as their conclusions. Disagreeing in a civil and careful way (meaning not resorting to *ad hominem* attacks) is not *lashon hara'* even if the disagreement is sharply stated.

If what I have suggested is true, that as Messianic believers we stand at a strategic crossroads poised to fulfill

a vital role in the expansion of Yeshua's kingdom, then I think we can count on it: Satan will urge us to engage in *lashon hara* as a means of defeating us and making us less than effective in the service of our Messiah. How can we guard against this sin? How can we thwart the deceitful schemes of the evil one? How can we prepare so that we do not fall into this trap of engaging in slander against a fellow believer in Yeshua?

First, we must agree that *lashon hara* is a sin, and commit ourselves to view it as such. Once again, *lashon hara* may easily be defined as speech about another person that will cause that person to be diminished or despised in the mind of those who listen. Thus, one may engage in *lashon hara* both by speaking slander and/or by listening to it. We must commit ourselves, therefore not to engaging in it, and gently but firmly refusing to listen to it. One may excuse oneself when such speech begins, or even warn the speaker: "I wouldn't want to be spoken of like this, so I don't want to participate in speaking about so-and-so in a negative way." This will be humbling, but if we all commit to guarding our tongues as James teaches, we will welcome the gentle reminder when we begin to slip into slanderous speech.

Secondly, we must commit ourselves to seeking the forgiveness of someone we have slandered. This is very difficult, but has a twofold benefit. It restores a path of fellowship between the slanderer and the one slandered, and it reminds the slanderer of the consequences of *lashon hara*.

Thirdly, if we find ourselves in a situation where we can neither leave the room nor encourage the speaker to stop, we must commit ourselves not to believe the slanderous speech. We simply are not allowed to have the person who is being slandered diminished in our opinion or perspective. We must think of that person and act toward him or her as though the slander had never occurred.

Fourthly, we must commit ourselves to wholesome speech, and to building each other up in the faith. Being mindful to speak good of each other is an obvious protection against the negativity of *lashon hara*. We must look for those qualities and actions in each other which can be the basis of our praise, and when speaking of one another we must do so with the intent of causing the person we talk about to be appreciated all the more by those who are listening. Moreover, we should always be mindful of Yeshua's teaching about seeing a splinter in the eye of our brother while having a log in our own eye:

Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matt 7:1-5)

Once the log is out of my eye, I will see more clearly to help my brother remove the splinter in his and do so with humility, gentleness, and love.

There are times when it is necessary to speak in a negative way about another person, but this must be reserved for issues where two or three witnesses are attempting to secure justice in regard to a crime committed, or where the welfare of the community of faith requires a warning about a given individual. Even here, however, every effort must be made to find ways of warning without specifically demeaning someone else. So while there are legitimate cases where negative speech must occur, let us not make the exception a rationale for *lashon hara*. May the Lord strengthen our respective communities as we seek to love each other in word and deed, and not allow the trap of *lashon hara* to diminish our effectiveness for Him!