

# Prevent Ear Pollution

PARSHA INSIGHTS - MATOS MAS'AI (5758)

## PLEASE DO NOT NOD IN AGREEMENT WHEN YOU HEAR LOSHON HORA

“Do not pollute the land which you are in...” (*Parshas Mas'ai*, 35:33). The words for “do not pollute” are “*lo sachanifu*”. What is the meaning of this admonition? We will approach this from one angle. The *Sifri* explains that it is a warning directed at “*chanaifim*” [people guilty of false flattery]. Let us demonstrate how this is relevant to *shmiras haloshon* [guarding our speech].

Recall that the *Chofetz Chaim* lists seventeen *mitzvos lo sa'aseh* [negative precepts] which one can violate by speaking and/or listening to *loshon hora* [evil gossip]. (The number transgressed depends on the circumstances.) In number sixteen, he writes as follows. Sometimes, a person involved in *loshon hora* will transgress the prohibition of flattery - “do not pollute the land” (35:33). We have already stated that this “pollution” is interpreted by some to mean destructive flattery. The *rishonim* [early authorities] who enumerate this as a negative commandment are listed by name in the *Chofetz Chaim*; one of them is a *Ba'al Tosfos*. What is the case of “*chanufa*”, flattery, relevant to *loshon hora*?

Let us say the speaker intends to get on the good side of the listener through his *loshon hora*. If the one saying the derogatory remarks knows that this listener bears hatred toward the person being discussed, his objective might be to flatter him. Once the listener hears that this speaker ALSO feels negatively toward this other person, the listener will like the speaker even more.

The *Chofetz Chaim* declares this a grievous sin. Besides the *loshon hora* being communicated, this speaker is guilty of something else. He knows that the listener holds a grudge against the one being talked about, and he has not rebuked him for violating the prohibition of harboring feelings of animosity toward others. Plus, he himself is saying destructive words against this individual! In doing so, he strengthens the negative attitude of this listener toward the person. This often causes another flare-up, a new phase of their ongoing friction.

We have shown that a person who tells *loshon hora* might violate the warning not to flatter the listener by showing him that he also dislikes the person about whom he is talking. Flattery can also be a problem when the listener tries to flatter the speaker. This will be illustrated by the following case, where the one on the receiving end expresses agreement to the derogatory words being said. This is sometimes done to show sympathy or allegiance to the speaker.

It is quite prevalent, says the *Chofetz Chaim*, that one hearing *loshon hora* will try to find favor in the eyes of the speaker by agreeing, somehow, to his *loshon hora*. Let us say you find yourself in a conversation with your boss, parent, superior, or any person whom you respect a great deal or to whom you are indebted in some fashion. I would like to add that this can also occur if a friend of yours begins relating derogatory information. You want to maintain a warm relationship with this person, so the evil inclination persuades you to indicate that you feel the same way he does. You realize that words of denigration, real *loshon hora*, are going into your ears. What does the *yaitzer hora* [evil inclination] tell you to do? Nod your head to acknowledge the *loshon hora*! Or, add a few words of agreement to make the conversation smoother. Show that you are alive! After all, this is the person who signs your checks; you have to be respectful. This is an individual to whom you owe so much; the least you can do is to act friendly and responsive. The *yaitzer hora* also tells us that if we sit like a silent stone when someone talks to us, we will appear unfriendly. What could be worse than having a reputation of being unsociable?

To combat this attitude, the *Chofetz Chaim* reminds us that it is better to appear apathetic, even foolish, than to succumb to the temptation to acknowledge *loshon hora*. The nod of one's head or the contribution of just a few words to slanderous dialogue is a clear violation of the Torah's warning not to flatter - not to “pollute the land”, as stated above. Sometimes we need to hold ourselves back from even making movements or gestures that go against *halacha* [Jewish law]. All the more so, we are supposed to have enough self-control to refrain from participating in a *loshon hora* conversation, even with a word or two. “Place a knife in your throat if you possess a wise soul...” (*Mishlai* [Proverbs] 23:2 with *meforshim* [commentators]). This *pasuk* [verse] in *Mishlai* is quoted by the *Chofetz Chaim* as applicable to our topic. Interpreting this with an idea from the *Me'am Loez*, we are being

advised to build a fence, a barrier, in our throats. This is like a knife, a firm restraint that will prevent us from uttering even one word antithetical to Torah values.

*Chofetz Chaim* instructs us how to behave if we are stuck in such an uncomfortable situation. The listener must strengthen himself not to assist the speaker in the slightest manner. One nod, a single movement, which indicates agreement with what is being said, constitutes an *avaira* [sin]. What about the risk of appearing foolish? The *Chazal* [Sages] already informed us that this should not concern us. In *Tractate Idi'os* 5:6, Akavia Ben Mahalalail teaches that it is better to be called a fool for one's whole life than to be a *rasha* [wicked person] in front of Hashem for even a moment. The speaker might consider the listener's lack of interest to be stupidity. Hashem tells us that to encourage the speaker or to respond in the affirmative is wicked. We must remain silent and unhelpful. Whose opinion should we value? The answer is obvious.

Of course, this requirement to be totally passive and not help the speaker by adding words or nods applies in many, but not all, cases. Sometimes we can do even better.



If the one relating the gossip might heed the listener's advice to stop talking this way, there is a solemn obligation on the listener to prevent the sin of *loshon hora* from being done.



Or, if the listener can change the topic of conversation or use any other method mentioned in chapter six of *Sefer* [book] *Chofetz Chaim*, he must do so to prevent himself from even hearing the negative speech.

In cases where rebuke will be counterproductive, and there is no way to avoid hearing the evil words, the only option is to sit like a non-living object, not acknowledging the gossip at all.

We have not presented the entire matter here; it is thoroughly analyzed in chapter six of the *Chofetz Chaim*. We have only viewed it from today's angle of *chanufa*, the flattery aspect. Perhaps we will continue this discussion at a later date, since there is a great deal more to say. In summary, our *pasuk* in *Mas'ai* is a warning not to flatter others by saying *loshon hora* to them to find favor in their eyes by showing that we also dislike a certain person. Also, it is reminding us not to agree with *loshon hora* statements by contributing a nod of the head or some words of acknowledgement. This is learned from "do not flatter." In the merit of *shmiras haloshon* [guarding our speech], may we be *zocheh* [meritorious] to see a rebuilding of the *Bais Hamikdosh* [Temple] in the near future.

*By Rabbi Moshe Heigh*

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