

## 6. “Death and Life are in the Power of the Tongue”

*Chafetz Chayim*, 10:12, “Laws Prohibiting *Lashon Hara*”

Israel Meir Hacoen, “*Chafetz Chayim*,” 1839-1933



Synagogue2000

In the Book of Proverbs we learn: *Death and life are in the power of the tongue*. The Hebrew word for “tongue” can also mean the pointer on a scale that indicates when the sides of the balance are even. This “tongue” recalls the imagery of the High Holidays, when all our actions come under scrutiny and every deed has the capacity to sway the scales of justice toward merit and life for all. In context in the Book of Psalms, it is the tongue as the creator of speech that is intended. Life hangs in the balance, the Bible says, and the determining factor will be how we use our tongue—our speech.

Proverbs 18:21

Rabbi Israel Meir Hacoen, the author of the passage below, is universally known by the name of his first book, *Chafetz Chayim*. The title comes from a widely known passage in Psalm 34:13-15: “Who is the person who is eager for life (*he-chafetz chayim*), who desires years of good fortune? Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech, shun evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.” *Chafetz Chayim*, published anonymously in 1873, is a detailed compilation of the *halakhah* and teachings about *lashon hara* and *rechilut*, speaking ill of others and tale-bearing. The *Chafetz Chayim* asked Jews to monitor their speech and behavior carefully, since a person can easily slip into using words and behavior that injure or defame another person.

In the business world of the mid-19th century in Eastern Europe, Jews were still largely excluded from participation in the larger community. Commerce took place largely within the Jewish community, and between Jewish towns or *shtetls*. Jews were expected to help each other, and Jewish business people depended on the welcome of Jews in other towns to help them as they made their way doing business. In this selection, the *Chafetz Chayim* describes a particular sort of *lashon hara*—the disgruntled but truthful report of a disappointed business person. In the previous section, the *Chafetz Chayim* prohibits a business person from complaining about the dishonest dealings of a counterpart, even if truthful, so long as the intent of the complaint is solely to embarrass the other person, rather than to warn others away from a crook, or to encourage the scoundrel to make amends and change. This passage addresses the complaints of one who simply was not treated kindly. The consequences of this speech, as we will see, can be harmful far beyond the individuals involved.

*Chafetz Chayim 10:12, "Laws Prohibiting Lashon Hara"*

קל וְדוֹמֵר: אִם לֹא הִרְע לּוֹ, רַק לֹא הֵיטִיב עִמּוֹ בְּטוֹבוֹת,  
אֲשֶׁר הָיָה רָאוּי לְהֵיטִיב עִמּוֹ בְּעִנְיָנֵי הַלְוָאָה וְצַדִּיקָה  
וְהַכְּנֻסֹת אֲוִרְחִים וְכִיּוֹצֵא בְּזֶה, בּוֹזֵה  
אִם הוּא הוֹלֵךְ וּמְגַלֵּה אַחֵר כִּף דְּבַר זֶה לְאֲנָשִׁים  
לְגַנוֹת פְּלוֹנֵי בְּזֵה, לְשׁוֹן הִרְע גְּמוּרָה הִיא מִן הַדִּין...  
וְעוֹבֵר בְּזֵה עוֹד עַל כַּמָּה לְאוִיִן אַחֲרָיִם, לְבַד אִסּוּר לְשׁוֹן הִרְע,  
וְכִמוֹ שֶׁבְּאַרְנוֹ בְּכֻלָּל הַנ"ל. וְנִכְשְׁלִין בְּזֵה, בְּעוֹנוֹתֵינוּ הַרְבִּים,  
הַרְבֵּה אֲנָשִׁים, כִּמוֹ שֶׁאֲנִי רוֹאִין בְּעֵלְלִיל, שֶׁאִם לֹא יִקְבְּלוּ לְאַחַד  
בְּסִפֵּר פְּנִים יְפוֹת כְּרִצּוֹנוֹ בְּעִיר אַחַת, כְּשֶׁהוּא נוֹסֵעַ אַחֵר כִּף  
לְעִיר אַחֲרָת, מִפְּרִסָּם לְגַנוֹת עֲבוּר זֶה הָאֲנָשִׁים הַחֲשׁוּבִים דְּשֵׁם,  
מִפְּנֵי שֶׁלֹּא סִיעֵדוּהוּ בְּעִנְיָנוֹ.  
וְכֹל שֶׁכֵּן אִם מִבְּזֵה עֲבוּר זֶה סֵתָם לְכֹל  
הָעִיר, בְּיַדֵּי עֵוֹן פְּלִילִי הוּא, כִּי אִסּוּר לְשׁוֹן הִרְע,  
אֲפִלּוֹ עַל אֶמֶת, שֶׁכֶּתְבֵנוּ לְמַעֲלָה,  
הוּא אֲפִלּוֹ אִם מְסִפֵּר עַל אִישׁ פְּרִטִי,  
וְכֹל שֶׁכֵּן עַל עִיר שְׁלֵמָה שְׁבִישְׂרָאֵל הַמְּחֻזְקִים בְּאַמוּנַת ה',  
וְיַדֵּי עֵוֹן גְּדוֹל הוּא:



This prohibition [against complaining] extends to a situation where the other person did him no harm, but simply did not extend himself for him—to help him with business loans, or *tzedakah*, or welcoming guests and the like. If the businessperson, or traveler, should later go and reveal these events to others in a vilifying manner, it is absolute *lashon hara*, and what is more, he transgresses many other negative commandments, beyond *lashon hara*, . . . Many people (woe our many sins) will later stumble due to this matter, as we can easily see: if a person is not welcomed cheerfully, as one had wished, in one city, when he travels to another city, he will complain about the worthies of the first city who did not help him in his affairs. And, what is worse, he might simply indict the whole of the city, and that would be a clear transgression. For the sin of *lashon hara*, even if it is the report of some truth, applies even if it is only told about one person, but when it is told about a whole community who seek to follow the ways of God, it is truly a great sin.

### Probing the Text

1. Is there a difference between dishonest dealings that cause another person loss, and non-engagement that may inhibit success?
2. What are the expectations of the traveling business person in this example? Are these appropriate expectations?
3. Why is the *Chafetz Chayim* concerned that the behavior of the “worthies” will be attributed to the whole town?
4. The *Chafetz Chayim* does not elaborate on the consequences of defaming “a whole town.” Why is this truly “a great sin”?



## Ourselves and Our Congregations

1. The Jewish world of the 21st century is unlike that of the *Chafetz Chayim*. We no longer have self-contained Jewish communities, but we do have synagogues. Retell this passage, substituting “congregation” for community.
2. What are the modern circumstances that are parallel to the business person or traveler of the passage? Who shows up at our congregations with expectations of welcome, help or support? What are our responsibilities toward them? What happens if they are disappointed?
3. There was an old practice of a *yeshiva* or other charitable institution sending a *meshullah*, an emissary from community to community to raise funds for the institution. He would arrive in a town, find the synagogue, ask for food and lodging, and perhaps offer to deliver a sermon or lesson and thereby merit receiving contributions. He might expect the rabbi to intercede on his behalf with the “worthies” of the community to raise money. Is there an equivalent phenomenon today? Does anyone arrive at the congregation needing lodging or food? In our response to the individual, are we concerned for how our response will be reported at the next stop?
4. Who is responsible for the reputation of the congregation in the larger community? The Rabbi? Cantor? Executive Director? Educational Director? Janitor? President? Board Members? Congregants?
5. What responsibility does one congregation or community have toward others with regard to receiving or listening to reports that people bring about other places?

## For Further Reading

Israel Meir Hacoen and David Morchant, *Sefer Chofetz Chaim [with the commentary] Yad Dovid*. New York: Feldheim, 1998. 2 vols.

