



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## THE MITZVAH OF CIVILIZED SPEECH

Humanity is distinguished from the animal kingdom in many ways. One of the most visible differences is our ability to use speech to communicate. People are able to communicate thoughts, memories, fantasies, and insights around the globe and across the generations.

Perhaps it is that gift, the gift of communication that transforms a random collection of people into a community. A room full of people who don't communicate with each other can never become a community – an extended family – for each other.

Being a community means that we speak to each other in ways that will strengthen our relationship, improve us as individuals, and deepen our ability to care and to do. Communities, in short, are really "speech-communities". We implement our caring through talking.

One of the central tasks of Judaism is to build a community among us. Particularly within the Conservative Movement, with our emphasis on the historical development of the Jewish People, our status as a caring community is essential. Building compassionate and observant communities is our most pressing need. To do that effectively, we must each focus on how we speak to each other, and on how we speak about each other.

Judaism has much to teach about guarding our speech (*Sh'mirat ha'Lashon*). Speech which damages another person's reputation, or which is an expression of malice or hostility is called *lashon hara*, which literally means "evil speech."

How we use our tongues determines the kind of society, the quality of community, we can all live in. The temptation to speak ill of someone else – whether to vent anger, to consolidate a friendship, or to get even – is pervasive and enticing.

But Judaism insists that human beings can overcome temptations, that not every impulse need be indulged. The urge to speak ill of someone else requires channeling and restraint.

A few simple guidelines might help:'

1. If you can't say it in front of the person you are speaking about, then don't say it at all.
2. If you say something unkind or disparaging about someone, follow it up immediately with something positive and true about that individual.
3. If you are in a conversation that turns to *lashon hara*, ask, "What can we do to help that person overcome or resolve that problem?"
4. Limit your conversation about people you don't particularly like.

Besides restraining ourselves in speaking about individuals, it is also important to recognize the other imperative of the Jewish law of proper speech. The Torah relates the command, "You shall reprove your neighbor." The import of that *mitzvah* is that we should address our grievances or disappointments to the person who caused them, the one who might be able to learn from our hurt.

To speak to someone – lovingly and calmly – strengthens a community's ability to foster relationship and meaning. To speak about someone to others creates an environment of skepticism and mistrust, in which we assume that others are saying harmful things about us because we are doing the same about them.

Let us resolve to work to becoming *ba'alei sh'mirat ha'Lashon* – practitioners of speech that is healing, supportive, and compassionate.

*Mitzvot* teach us how to live in such a way that each person can best reflect the Divine image, that together we can testify to God's sovereignty in our midst. By speaking to each other, and by minimizing when and how we speak about each other, we will take a large step toward both of those worthy goals.

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