



The Power of Words: How What We Say Affects Us and Those Around Us

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Dr. Diamond is the author of a chapter on the rabbinic period in the *Schocken Guide to Jewish Books*, and entries in the *Reader's Guide to Judaism* and *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*. He is the author of *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2003). The book provides a thorough reassessment of the role that asceticism plays in rabbinic Judaism, suggesting that asceticism is more pervasive than is generally thought. Dr. Diamond has written on prayer, asceticism, and issues of environmental law and ethics. He is currently editing a commentary on *Yerushalmi Pesahim* written by the late Professor Louis Ginzberg, as well as a book on prayer. The prayer volume will address the problem of cognitive dissonance for the contemporary worshipper and will offer readings of traditional liturgy that use midrashic methodology to find meaning and relevance in these prayers for the modern Jew. Dr. Diamond has taught in a variety of settings, including Stern College, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the 92nd Street Y, and several Ramah camps. Dr. Diamond was ordained at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University and received his doctorate in Talmud from JTS.

A. The Power of Names	
1. <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> , Act 2 Scene 2	
Juliet: What's in a name? That which we call a rose By any other word would smell as sweet.	
2. Genesis 1:3-5	
<p>God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.</p> <p>God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.</p> <p>God called the light Day and called the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אֹר וַיְהִי־אֹר:</p> <p>וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ:</p> <p>וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ לַיְלָה וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד:</p>
3. Genesis 2:19, 23	
<p>And God יקוק formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the Human to see what he would call them; and whatever the Human called each living creature, that would be its name...</p> <p>Then the Human said, "This one at last Is bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman, For from a Human was she taken."</p>	<p>וַיִּצְרֵהוּ יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה כָּל־חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֵת כָּל־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֵּבֵא אֶל־הָאָדָם לִרְאוֹת מֵה־יִקְרָאֵלוּ וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאֵלוּ הָאָדָם בְּפֶשֶׁת חַיָּה הוּא שְׁמוֹ:...</p> <p>וַיֹּאמֶר־הָאָדָם זֹאת הִפְעַם עֵצָם מֵעֲצָמֵי וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי לְזָאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לִקְחָהּ זֹאת:</p>
4. Genesis 27:36	
<p>[Esau] said, "Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant [literally: snatch away from me through stealth] me these two times? First, he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing!"</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר הַכִּי קָרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וַיַּעֲקֹבֵנִי זֶה פְעַמַּיִם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי לָקַח וְהִנֵּה עַתָּה לָקַח בְּרִיתִי</p>
5. Genesis 32:29	
<p>Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יִאמָר עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׂרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּגְבַּל:</p>

<p>6. Rosh Hashanah 16b</p> <p>And Rabbi Yitzhak said: A person's sentence is torn up on account of four types of actions. These are: Giving charity, crying out in prayer, a change of one's name, and a change of one's deeds for the better...</p> <p>a change of one's name, as it is written: "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be" (Genesis 17:15), and it is written there: "And I will bless her, and I will also give you a son from her" (Genesis 17:16).</p>	<p>ואמר רבי יצחק: ארבעה דברים מקרעין גזר דינו של אדם, אלו הן: צדקה, צעקה, שינוי השם, ושינוי מעשה... שינוי השם, דכתיב: "שְׂרֵי אִשְׁתְּךָ לֹא תִקְרָא אֶת שְׁמָהּ שְׂרֵי כִּי שָׂרָה שְׁמָהּ", וכתיב: "וּבֵרַכְתִּי אוֹתָהּ וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לְךָ בֵן".</p>
<p>7. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance, 2, 4</p> <p>Among the paths of repentance is for the penitent to</p> <p>a) constantly call out before God, crying and entreating;</p> <p>b) to perform charity according to his potential;</p> <p>c) to separate himself far from the object of his sin;</p> <p>d) to change his name, as if to say "I am a different person and not the same one who sinned;"</p> <p>e) to change his behavior in its entirety to the good and the path of righteousness; and f) to travel in exile from his home. Exile atones for sin because it causes a person to be submissive, humble, and meek of spirit.</p>	<p>מדרכי התשובה להיות השב צועק תמיד לפני השם בבכי ובתחנונים ועושה צדקה כפי כחו ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר שחטא בו</p> <p>ומשנה שמו כלומר אני אחר ואיני אותו האיש שעשה אותן המעשים ומשנה מעשיו כולן לטובה ולדרך ישרה וגולה</p> <p>ממקומו, שגלות מכפרת עון מפני שגורמת לו להכנע ולהיות עניו ושפל רוח.</p>

<p>B. Holding and Letting Go of the Past</p>	
<p>Rabbi Dr. Asher Meir "Forgiving and Forgetting Ourselves," OU Torah/Jewish Ethicist</p>	
<p>...Should a person then "forgive and forget" himself? That depends. On the one hand, there is an advantage to always keeping our past misdeeds in mind. A person who made a mistake in the past needs particular vigilance from falling into his past ways. The book of Psalms (51:4-5) states: "Thoroughly cleanse me of my transgression, and purify me from my sin. For I know my crime well, and my sin is before me always". Based on this, the Talmud teaches that even if one has already made a frank confession of one's sins before God, it is praiseworthy to repeat the confession once a year on subsequent Days of Repentance. This corresponds to the person who intentionally delays forgiveness for the benefit of the wrongdoer.</p> <p>On the other hand, excessive attention to past misdeeds can be an obstacle to putting them behind us. A competing opinion in the Talmud claims that someone who repeats confession on a past misdeed is likened to "As a dog who returns to his own vomit, so is a fool who persists in his folly" (Proverbs 26:11).</p>	

<p>2. Jeremiah 9:3</p> <p>Each of you, beware of your friend! Trust not even your kinsfolk! For every sibling takes advantage, Every friend goes about as a talebearer.</p>	<p>אִישׁ מִרְעֵהוּ הַשְּׂמֵרוּ וְעַל-בְּלִיאָח אֶל-תִּבְטְחוּ: כִּי כָל-אָח עֶקְוֹב וְעֵלֵב וְכָל-רֵעַ רָכִיל יִהְיֶה:</p>
<p>3. Virginia attorney general admits to wearing blackface at 1980 college party (CNN 2/7/2019)</p>	
<p>Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring admitted Wednesday that he appeared in blackface at a 1980 party, further plunging Richmond into chaos as Democrats here struggle to overcome a trio of scandals rocking their three top statewide elected officials.</p> <p>Herring said Wednesday that he wore blackface as a 19-year-old to dress up as a rapper at a party. The admission comes days after the Virginia Democrat called on Gov. Ralph Northam to resign after he admitted a racist photo in his medical school yearbook featured him, a charge Northam later denied.</p> <p>“In 1980, when I was a 19-year-old undergraduate in college, some friends suggested we attend a party dressed like rappers we listened to at the time, like Kurtis Blow, and perform a song,” Herring said in a statement. “It sounds ridiculous even now writing it. But because of our ignorance and glib attitudes – and because we did not have an appreciation for the experiences and perspectives of others – we dressed up and put on wigs and brown makeup.”</p> <p>He added: “This was a onetime occurrence and I accept full responsibility for my conduct. That conduct clearly shows that, as a young man, I had a callous and inexcusable lack of awareness and insensitivity to the pain my behavior could inflict on others. It was really a minimization of both people of color, and a minimization of a horrific history I knew well even then.” Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring admitted Wednesday that he appeared in blackface at a 1980 party, further plunging Richmond into chaos as Democrats here struggle to overcome a trio of scandals rocking their three top statewide elected officials.</p> <p>Herring said Wednesday that he wore blackface as a 19-year-old to dress up as a rapper at a party. The admission comes days after the Virginia Democrat called on Gov. Ralph Northam to resign after he admitted a racist photo in his medical school yearbook featured him, a charge Northam later denied.</p> <p>“In 1980, when I was a 19-year-old undergraduate in college, some friends suggested we attend a party dressed like rappers we listened to at the time, like Kurtis Blow, and perform a song,” Herring said in a statement. “It sounds ridiculous even now writing it. But because of our ignorance and glib attitudes – and because we did not have an appreciation for the experiences and perspectives of others – we dressed up and put on wigs and brown makeup.”</p> <p>He added: “This was a onetime occurrence and I accept full responsibility for my conduct. That conduct clearly shows that, as a young man, I had a callous and inexcusable lack of awareness and insensitivity to the pain my behavior could inflict on others. It was really a minimization of both people of color, and a minimization of a horrific history I knew well even then.”</p>	
<p>4. South Carolina Sheriff's Candidate: I Wore Blackface 10 Years Ago (NPR 10/10/2019)</p>	
<p>Craig Stivender, a Republican candidate for Colleton County sheriff in South Carolina, released a photo of himself in blackface in a recent campaign video. He says he was dressed as Demetrius "Big Meech" Flenory, who was sentenced to 30 years in prison for his role in the Black Mafia family. "[If] I'm going to run on honesty and integrity, I'm willing to put out things bad about me," he said...</p>	

[M]ore than halfway through the video, Craig Stivender, a Republican candidate for sheriff in Colleton County, S.C., reveals a picture of himself in blackface with his arm around an African American woman. "To those of you who may be upset, I understand your disappointment," he says in the video... "Basically, if I'm going to run on honesty and integrity, I'm willing to put out things bad about me," he said in a telephone interview... In the video he says, "I did it to disparage a criminal whose actions hurt our community and country. That was a different time." Stivender insists there was no racial bias or motivation, adding that if that was the case, he would not have attended the party with a black woman. He calls her a friend he's known since sixth grade who he says did not question the blackface. "To be honest with you, 10 years ago I had never heard of blackface," he said. "I didn't know it was a legitimate thing."

5. Bava Mezia 58b

MISHNA: Just as there is a prohibition against **exploitation [ona'a] in buying and selling, so is there ona'a in statements**, i.e., verbal mistreatment...The mishna lists other examples: **If one is a penitent, another may not say to him: Remember your earlier deeds. If one is the child of converts, another may not say to him: Remember the deeds of your ancestors, as it is stated: "And a convert shall you neither mistreat, nor shall you oppress him"** (Exodus 22:20).

מתני' כשם שאונאה במקח וממכר כך אונאה בדברים...אם היה בעל תשובה לא יאמר לו זכור מעשיך הראשונים אם הוא בן גרים לא יאמר לו זכור מעשה אבותיך שנאמר (שמות כב, כ) וגר לא תונה ולא תלחצנו:

C. When Is Lashon Hora Permitted

1. Rabbi Israel Kagan, *Hafetz Hayim*, introduction

If the evil inclination sees that it cannot overcome someone in this way [i.e. by tempting one to speak *lashon hara*] it deceives one through the opposite tactic, by insisting on such a stringent definition of *lashon hara* so as to convince one that everything one says [about someone else] falls into this category; and if this is to be so, one cannot live in this world until one separates oneself from all worldly matters

2. Sefer Hasidim no. 987 concerning לשון הרע לתועלת; constructive sharing if negative information

If someone sees that something is being entrusted to one's parent or teacher, and he knows that they will not handle the money or object responsibly...one should dissuade them from entrusting the object and reveal the truth to them... And one should not say about one's parent or teacher that they are evil people, but rather should share the truth with those who are responsible community leaders (?).

אם רואה אדם שמפקידים ביד אביו או אמו או רבו, והוא מכירם שלא יעשו נאמנות... יאמר לו שלא יתן בידם, ויגלה לו האמת...ואל יאמר על אביו ועל אמו ועל רבו רשע הוא, אלא לטובים יאמר האמת

3. R. Azriel Ariel, "Lashon Hara in the Context of a Communal Democratic System"

In an ["open" democratic] regime there is a basic obligation for every public figure to be a trusted servant of the public and to supply a full accounting of his political activities, his actions, and his shortcomings; therefore, one cannot avoid doing so by seeking protection by appealing to the prohibitions against *lashon hara* and *rekhilus*. Public sharing of information and debate are an inseparable part of the contract between the public and its elected officials. Even Moses provided a full accounting of his use of the donations on behalf of the construction of the *Mishkan*, in fulfillment of the verse "And you shall be free of guilt in the eyes of God and Israel" (Numbers 32:22).

...If so, what is the leniency upon which one can rely upon to justify what seems to be sinful behavior? It would seem that one could say as follows: In the Knesset the television cameras are always present. An elected official knows that everything one says will be made public. Thus, the official accepts the sharing of information but not commentary and criticism that is not relevant.

D. Why do we speak *lashon hara*?

1. Jerusalem Talmud, Hagigah, 2, 1

R. Yose ben Hanina said, one who aggrandizes himself by the disgrace of another person has no part in the Future World.

א"ר יוסי בן חנינה המתכבד בקלון חבירו אין לו חלק לעולם הבא

2. [Lashon Hara Doesn't Speak to Me](#)
Song by Omer Adam

לשון הרע לא מדבר אלי

Could you stop? How come they're never sick of opening drawers?...

לשון הרע doesn't speak to me
Be simple, can't you just be happy?
Forget all the nonsense, just love yourself always
And even if it's hard, and sometimes slips away
Keep meaning it, in the end you will win
Don't worry, hear me out, don't worry, man