

THE POWER OF WORDS: HOW WHAT WE SAY AFFECTS US AND THOSE AROUND US

THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

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THE POWER OF NAMES

Juliet:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other word would smell as sweet.

(Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 2)

THE POWER OF NAMES

2. Genesis 1:3-5

God said, “Let there be light”;
and there was light.

God saw that the light was
good, and God separated the
light from the darkness.

God called the light Day and
called the darkness Night. And
there was evening and there
was morning, a first day.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ-לֹהִים יְהִי אֹר
וַיְהִי-אֹר:

וַיַּרְא אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹר כִּי-טוֹב
וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין
הַחֹשֶׁךְ:

וַיִּקְרָא אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹר יוֹם וְאֶת-הַחֹשֶׁךְ
קִרְא לַיְלָה וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר
יוֹם אֶחָד:

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3. Genesis 2:19, 23

And God יְקוֹק 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...

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.”

וַיִּצְרֵם יְקוֹק אֱ-לֹהִים מִן-הָאֲדָמָה כָּל-חַיֵּי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת כָּל-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיַּבֵּא אֶל-הָאָדָם לִרְאוֹת מֵה-יִקְרָא-לּוֹ וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא-לּוֹ הָאָדָם נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה הוּא שְׁמוֹ:...

וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הִפְעַם עֵצָה מִמֵּעֲצָמִי וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי לְזֹאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לְקַחָהּ-זֹאת:

THE POWER OF NAMES

4. Genesis 27:36

[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!”

וַיֹּאמֶר הַכִּי קָרָא שְׁמוֹ
יַעֲקֹב וַיַּעֲקֹבֵנִי זֶה
פַּעַמַּיִם אֶת־בְּכֹרְתִי
לָקַח וְהִנֵּה עַתָּה לָקַח
בְּרַכְתִּי

THE POWER OF NAMES

5. Genesis 32:29

Said he, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.”

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאָמָר
עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ כִּי
אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׁרִית
עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אָנָּשִׁים
וַתִּוְכַל:

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6. Rosh Hashanah 16b

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...

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).

וְאָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק: אַרְבָּעָה דְבָרִים מְקַרְעִין גְּזַר דֵּינֵנוּ
שֶׁל אָדָם, אֵלֵינוּ הֵן: צְדָקָה, צְעָקָה, שִׁינוּי הַשֵּׁם, וְשִׁינוּי
מַעֲשֵׂה...
שִׁינוּי הַשֵּׁם, דְּכָתִיב: "שָׂרַי אֲשֶׁתְּךָ וְאָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק:
אַרְבָּעָה דְבָרִים מְקַרְעִין גְּזַר דֵּינֵנוּ שֶׁל אָדָם, אֵלֵינוּ הֵן:
צְדָקָה, צְעָקָה, שִׁינוּי הַשֵּׁם, וְשִׁינוּי מַעֲשֵׂה...
שִׁינוּי הַשֵּׁם, דְּכָתִיב: "שָׂרַי אֲשֶׁתְּךָ לֹא תִקְרָא אֶת
שָׂמָה שָׂרַי כִּי שָׂרָה שְׂמָה", וְכָתִיב: "וַיְבָרַכְתִּי אוֹתָהּ
וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לָךְ בֵּן."
לֹא תִקְרָא אֶת שְׂמָה שָׂרַי כִּי שָׂרָה שְׂמָה", וְכָתִיב:
"וַיְבָרַכְתִּי אוֹתָהּ וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לָךְ בֵּן."

THE POWER OF NAMES

7. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance, 2, 4

Among the paths of repentance is for the penitent to

a) constantly call out before God, crying and entreating;

b) to perform charity according to his potential;

c) to separate himself far from the object of his sin;

d) to change his name, as if to say "I am a different person and not the same one who sinned;"

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.

מדרכי התשובה להיות השב צועק תמיד
לפני השם בבכי ובתחנונים ועושה צדקה
כפי כחו ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר שחטא

בו

ומשנה שמו כלומר אני אחר ואיני

אותו האיש שעשה אותן המעשים

ומשנה מעשיו כולן לטובה ולדרך ישרה

וגולה

ממקומו, שגלות מכפרת עון מפני שגורמת

לו להכנע ולהיות עניו ושפל רוח

HOLDING AND LETTING GO OF THE PAST

...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.

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](#)).

Rabbi Dr. Asher Meir

"Forgiving and Forgetting Ourselves," *OU Torah/Jewish Ethicist*

HOLDING AND LETTING GO OF THE PAST

2. Jeremiah 9:3

Each of you, beware of
your friend!
Trust not even your
kinsfolk!
For every sibling takes
advantage,
Every friend goes
about as a talebearer.

אִישׁ מֵרֵעֵהוּ הַשְּׂמֵרוּ
וְעַל-כָּל-אָח אֶל-תִּבְטְחוּ כִּי
כָּל-אָח עֵקוּב יַעֲקֹב
וְכָל-רֵעַ רֵכִיל יִהְיֶה:

HOLDING AND LETTING GO OF THE PAST

☰ **CNN** politics The Biden Presidency Facts First 2022 Midterms

Virginia attorney general admits to wearing blackface at 1980 college party

“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.”

npr WUOT 91.5

NATIONAL

South Carolina Sheriff's Candidate: I Wore Blackface 10 Years Ago

[Craig] 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."

HOLDING AND LETTING GO OF THE PAST

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).

אִישׁ מִרְעֵהוּ הַשְּׂמֵרוּ וְעַל-כָּל-אָח
אֶל-תִּבְטְחוּ כִּי כָל-אָח עֶקְוֹב יַעֲקֹב
וְכָל-רֵעַ רֵכִיל יִהְלֶךְ: מִתְנִי' כִּשֵׁם
שֶׁאֲנֵי בַמִּקַּח וּמִמְכָר כִּי אֲנֵי
בְּדַבְרִים...אִם הִיא בְּעַל תְּשׁוּבָה
לֹא יֵאמָר לוֹ זְכוֹר מַעֲשֶׁיךָ
הַרְאִשׁוֹנִים אִם הוּא בֶן גֵּרִים לֹא
יֵאמָר לוֹ זְכוֹר מַעֲשֵׂה אֲבוֹתֶיךָ
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שְׁמוֹת כב, כ) וְגַר לֹא
תֹנֶה וְלֹא תִלְחָצֶנּוּ:

WHEN IS *LASHON HARA* PERMITTED?

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

Rabbi Israel Kagan,
Hafetz Hayyim, introduction

WHEN IS *LASHON HORA* PERMITTED?

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

WHEN IS *LASHON HARA* PERMITTED?

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.

R. Azriel Ariel, “Lashon Hara in the Context of a Communal Democratic System”

WHY DO WE SPEAK *LASHON HORA*?

Jerusalem Talmud, Hagigah, 2, 1

R. Yose ben Ḥanina 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

WHY DO WE SPEAK *LASHON HORA*

Lashon Hara Doesn't Speak to Me

(לשון הרע לא מדבר אלי)

Omer Adam



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

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