



TEXT STUDY 2

When Does Speech Become Harmful?

The texts in this section are particularly appropriate as an introduction to the third readiness exercise, in which the state of learning in the congregation is discussed. It sensitizes the learners to the ways in which speech can be harmful, and asks them to come up with appropriate guidelines for discussions that include evaluative components.

Part One: The Value of Guarding One's Tongue

The Jewish tradition contains many texts dealing with the value of *shmirat halashon* (guarding one's tongue). Based on the texts below, why is controlling one's speech considered to be such an important value?

Do not go about as a talebearer among your people.

Leviticus 19:16

Who is the person who is eager for life, who desires years of goodness? Control your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.

Psalms 34:13–14

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21).
A person's tongue is more powerful than his sword. A sword can

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only kill someone who is nearby: a tongue can cause the death of someone who is far away.

Talmud, *Arakhin* 15b

Part Two: Complex Issues Related to Ethical Speech

What do the following texts add to our understanding of the concept of guarding or controlling one's tongue?

Rabah said: "Whatever is said in the presence of the person concerned is not considered *lashon hara* (harmful speech)."

Abaye countered: "All the more so; it is imprudence as well as *lashon hara*."

Rabah replied: "I hold with Rabbi Yosi, who asserted, 'I never said anything about a person that would make me look back to see if that person were standing behind me.'"

Talmud, *Arakhin* 15b–16a

Jewish Law compares spreading humiliating or harmful information to shedding blood. . . . [But] one specific case in which you are permitted to transmit "negative truths" is when you are asked for a business reference. As the Chafetz Chayim (1838–1933), the Eastern European sage who was Judaism's preeminent authority on the laws of permitted and forbidden speech, teaches: "If a person wants to take someone into his affairs—for example, to hire him in his business, or go into partnership with him, . . . it is permitted for him to go around and ask and inquire from others, . . . so as to prevent possible loss to himself. And it is permissible for others to reveal even very derogatory information, since the intent is not to harm the prospective employee, but to tell the truth in order to save one's fellow human being from potential harm." [Chafetz Chayim, *Shmirat Halashon / Guarding One's Tongue* 4:11]

Similarly, Jewish law insists that you speak frankly when someone requests your opinion about a prospective employee whom you know to be honest or incompetent.

Joseph Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, pp. 46–47

Members of boards of directors and school faculties often have to render decisions that will be met with disapproval by those affected. It is forbidden for anyone attending such a meeting to disclose the names of people who spoke or voted against a person's interests. Even without mentioning any names, you are forbidden to say, "I myself was on your side. But what could I do? I was outvoted by the other members." This prohibition against divulging information applies even if the proceedings were not classified as secret.

Zelig Pliskin, *Guard Your Tongue*, p.38

The change process on which we have embarked presents us with an opportunity to take a very close look at who we are and how we do things, hence with an opportunity for "loose speech." These texts challenge us to reflect and evaluate in ways that neither harm nor humiliate others.

Based on your discussion of these texts, and your own personal ethics, what "ethical speech" guidelines should we set for ourselves?

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