

3-22-25 Message to Roeh Israel Abilene - *VaYakhel* (and [Moses] assembled)
Torah Portion: Exodus 35:1 – 38:20
Haftarah: 1 Kings 7:13-26, 40-50
Suggested Acheron K'tuvim: Eph 4:29–31

Biblical Dispute Resolution 4 – Evil Speech 2

Central question: What is generally permitted and prohibited speech?

Today we are in parasha *VaYakhel*, which means “and he assembled.” It takes its name from the first four words of the passage in English, and the second word in the original Hebrew.

Ex 35:1-3

35 Then Moses assembled all the congregation of the sons of Israel, and said to them, "These are the things that the Lord has commanded you to do. 2 For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy day, a sabbath of complete rest to the Lord; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. 3 You shall not kindle a fire in any of your dwellings on the sabbath day."

וַיִּקְהַל	מֹשֶׁה	אֶת־	כָּל־	עֵדָת	
And gathered together,	Moses		all	the congregation of	
<u>6950</u>	<u>4872</u>	<u>853</u>	<u>3605</u>	<u>5712</u>	
בְּנֵי	יִשְׂרָאֵל	וַיֹּאמֶר	אֲלֵהֶם	אֵלֶּה	הַדְּבָרִים
the children of	Israel	and said	unto them,	These	are the words
<u>1121</u>	<u>3478</u>	<u>559</u>	<u>413</u>	<u>428</u>	<u>1697</u>
אֲשֶׁר־	צִוָּה	יְהוָה	לַעֲשׂוֹת	אֲתָם:	
which	hath commanded,	the Lord	that ye should do	them.	
<u>834</u>	<u>6680</u>	<u>3068</u>	<u>6213</u>	<u>853</u>	
שֵׁשֶׁת	יָמִים	תַּעֲשֶׂה	מְלָאכָה	וּבַיּוֹם	הַשְּׁבִיעִי
Six	days	shall be done,	work	but on day	the seventh
<u>8337</u>	<u>3117</u>	<u>6213</u>	<u>4399</u>	<u>3117</u>	<u>7637</u>
יְהִיָּה	לָכֶם	קֹדֶשׁ	שַׁבָּת	שַׁבְּתוֹן	לַיהוָה
there shall be	to you	an holy day,	a sabbath of	rest	to the Lord:
<u>1961</u>	<u>3807a</u>	<u>6944</u>	<u>7676</u>	<u>7677</u>	<u>3068</u>
כָּל־	הַעֹשֶׂה	בּוֹ	מְלָאכָה	יוֹמָת:	
whosoever	doeth	therein	work	shall be put to death.	
<u>3605</u>	<u>6213</u>	<u>871a</u>	<u>4399</u>	<u>4191</u>	
לֹא־	תִּבְעְרוּ	אֵשׁ	בְּכָל	מִשְׁכְּתֵיכֶם	בַּיּוֹם
no	Ye shall kindle	fire	throughout	your habitations	upon day.
<u>3808</u>	<u>1197</u>	<u>784</u>	<u>3605</u>	<u>4186</u>	<u>3117</u>
הַשַּׁבָּת: פ					
the sabbath					
<u>7676</u>					

Before we examine the next area of evil speech, I wish to briefly address an important question: When is the Sabbath day, really?

I have heard innumerable times the statement from our precious normative Christian brothers and sisters that “the Sabbath is Sunday.” But is that actually so?

We know that the Sabbath was ordained by G-d Himself as a memorial, from the time of creation.

Gen 2:2-3

G-d completed His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. 3 Then G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which G-d had created and made.

The author of the book to the Hebrews cited this passage of Torah, and spoke extensively regarding this day of rest, which believers in G-d are called to observe, recognizing that some will not enter into it. He compares the weekly day of rest with the ultimate rest which will come to each of those who believe (and act in accordance with that belief) which is the

Kingdom of Heaven. The author reminds us that the Word directs us to observe the weekly Sabbath, as a precursor to the ultimate Sabbath which lies in the future.

Heb 4:1-13

4 Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it. **2 For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.**¹ 3 For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said,

"As I swore in My wrath,
They shall not enter My rest,"

although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. 4 For He has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day, "And G-d rested on the seventh day from all His works"; 5 and again in this passage, "They shall not enter My rest." 6 Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and

¹ Hearing the Word of G-d is insufficient. One must allow that Word to change your life and make it more holy. And that Word-induced change is the essence of true faith. See Mat 13:3-9; James 2:14-26.

those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience, **7 He again fixes a certain day,**² "Today," saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before,

"Today if you hear His voice,
Do not harden your hearts."

8 For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. **9 There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of G-d. 10 For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as G-d did from His.**³ **11 Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience.** 12 For the word of G-d is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

² G-d has established a certain day. Men's decrees cannot overrule those of G-d.

³ Here the author equates the weekly Sabbath with the ultimate Sabbath, and encourages us to observe the weekly one as evidence of the promise of the future, greater, one.

It is clear that Yeshua kept the Sabbath, and taught regarding what is – and is not – lawful to do on the Sabbath.⁴

The book of Acts records 84 times that Yeshua’s followers observed the Sabbath, and each account was documented well after Yeshua’s resurrection.⁵

There is no hint at all in all of what is today called the “New Testament” that Yeshua changed the Sabbath to Sunday. In fact, Yeshua stated clearly that until heaven and earth pass away, not one stroke or mark would pass away from the Torah until all is accomplished.⁶

However, there is ample evidence that the normative Church was the entity which made that change. A series of articles written by James Cardinal Gibbons, the Archbishop of Baltimore, Maryland, and published in the *Catholic Mirror* in 1893, makes it clear. In those articles, he details – and then refutes – every possible instance of Scripture which has been used to argue a change from Sabbath to Sunday, and finally shows that it was the Catholic Church who made that change on its own volition, by virtue of what he calls “her divine mission.” The conclusion of the articles is clear:

⁴ See Mat 12, Mark 2-3, Luke 4-6, 13-14; Jn 5-9

⁵ 2 Sabbaths at Antioch - (Acts 13:14, 42, 44), 1 Sabbath at Philippi - (Acts 16:12, 13), 3 Sabbaths at Thessalonica - (Acts 17:1, 2), 78 Sabbaths at Corinth - (Acts 18:1, 4, 11)

⁶ Mat 5:17-21

“The Catholic Church for over one thousand years before the existence of a Protestant, by virtue of her divine mission, changed the day from Saturday to Sunday. We say by virtue of her divine mission, because He who called Himself the "Lord of the Sabbath," endowed her with His own power to teach, "he that heareth you, heareth Me;" commanded all who believe in Him to hear her, under penalty of being placed with "heathen and publican;" and promised to be with her to the end of the world. She holds her charter as teacher from Him — a charter as infallible as perpetual. The Protestant world at its birth found the Christian Sabbath too strongly entrenched to run counter to its existence; it was therefore placed under the necessity of acquiescing in the arrangement, thus implying the Church's right to change the day, for over three hundred years. The Christian Sabbath is therefore to this day, the acknowledged offspring of the Catholic Church as spouse of the Holy Ghost, without a word of remonstrance from the Protestant world.” [emphasis added].”

And this change of the Sabbath day is further detailed with abundant footnoted support in a book entitled *From Sabbath to Sunday*, written by

Samuele Bacchiocchi, and published by the Vatican press in 1977. It is available to be downloaded online as a PDF.⁷

With this brief excursion into the concept of the Sabbath, let us continue in our series regarding Biblical Dispute resolution, and particularly, in beginning to determine the contours of what is, and what is not, evil speech.

The Power of Speech

The concept of proper speech by necessity includes the realization that there is improper speech. Many disputes arise and flourish in the realm of unholy, hurtful speech.

If we use our powers of speech in a sinful way, we cannot achieve righteousness. Thus, the proper use of speech is foundational not only to the health of any body of faith, but also essential to the dispute-resolution process when conflicts arise.

So, we will begin with a select few of the admonitions of Scripture regarding our speech:⁸

⁷https://www.friendsofsabbath.org/Further_Research/Bacchiocchis%20Research/From%20Sabbath%20to%20Sunday.pdf

⁸ There are a large number of Scripture verses which address the topic of proper speech, and improper speech. All of those passages are worthy of deep study, but in the interest of space, those others won't be listed here.

Ps 34:13

Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.

Ps 64:2–4

Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked, from the throng of evildoers, who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows, shooting from ambush at the blameless, shooting at him suddenly and without fear.

Pr 18:21

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

Pr 21:23.

Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble.

Pr 26:28

A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

Mt 12:36–37

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

James 3:2–10.

And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind

of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of G-d. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

Eph 4:29–31.

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of G-d, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

The importance of governing our speech cannot be overstated. Speech that is not brought under the disciplines of the governing principles of Scripture will, to a greater or lesser degree, become a constant source of injury, strife, and division within any faith-based organization.

A person producing unrestrained hurtful speech will pour spiritual poison into any group, and urgent action is often required by leadership to preserve the group's integrity.⁹

And once a dispute or offense exists between people, if one or both of them cannot successfully govern their speech, the necessary steps of biblical dispute resolution become unattainable. The process is thus doomed to failure at the outset.

Both parties must desire to achieve resolution through the process, which leads to reconciliation. Both parties must engage in effective communication, with the proper heart, as well. Any one of the parties can scuttle the entire process, regardless of the desires of the other.¹⁰

Harmful Speech, Generally

Even without the benefit of Scriptural guidance, most people intuitively know that some instances of harmful speech are worse than others. This rough categorization seems to be part of the basic human intellect. Even children attempt to avoid responsibility for falsehood by declaring it to be a “white lie.”

⁹ Titus 3:10

¹⁰ Romans 12:18

G-d codified within Scripture His instructions regarding improper speech, and through a large number of specific proclamations, gave us the tools to understand the various categories of improper speech.

The standards for our speech set forth by G-d must be those which will control, and not those which are in accordance with our own personal standards, or even societal standards. G-d's standards are universal, while personal standards vary from person to person, and the application of differing (and even conflicting) standards will lead to inconsistency and chaos.

Hebrew scholars over the last several millennia have been quite deliberate in analyzing Scripture for purposes of living-out its precepts. Christian authors have only recently begun to explore this topic, and their works are considerably less exhaustive or helpful, in my opinion.

Hebrew scholars took pains to find, understand, and apply the concepts of proper, and improper, speech. From their detailed analysis, various categories of improper speech were recognized, and each became identified by a specific descriptive term.¹¹

¹¹ In order to maintain consistency with ancient sources, and to facilitate further research by the reader, the Hebrew terms for these three levels of improper speech will also be used herein.

For purposes of consistency, those categories and definitions bearing the Hebrew identifiers established long ago, will be how I will identify them.

Evil Speech - *Loshan Hara*

Improper speech, as a general over-arching descriptor, is best known by its Hebrew name, *loshan hara*. It literally means “evil tongue.” In today’s English it might be best called “evil speech.”¹²

Generally, evil speech is speech about a person or persons that is negative or harmful to them. Even a true report can be evil speech, for it also can be harmful to another.

The damage caused by evil speech can be emotional or financial, or merely a lowering of others’ respect for the victim. There are exceptions to this general rule, which I will also discuss in greater detail later.

Evil speech is directly connected to the Scriptural malady of *tzarat*. This association is based upon the event where Miriam is speaking ill of Moses, questioning his qualifications to lead the people. She is immediately stricken with *tzarat*, and is banned from the camp for a week.¹³

¹² This term finds parallel rendering in other cultures, such as the Latin *mala lingua*, the French *mauvaise langue*, and the Spanish *mala lengua*. See, Wikipedia, Lashon Hara, footnotes 10 through 14.

¹³ Numbers 12:1-16

Although the descriptive Hebrew term *loshan hara* is not specifically found in Tanach, it is spoken of clearly in Psalm 34:13, which distils the many Scriptural prohibitions regarding evil speech found to a single summary statement, “Keep your tongue from evil.” And governing the tongue is a main theme of the teachings found in the book of James.

The scriptural curse upon one who “strikes down his neighbor in secret”¹⁴ has been interpreted to specifically refer to evil speech, because it does grievous harm to the neighbor without his knowledge.

Practical Considerations Regarding Evil Speech.

Evil speech can be committed by *any* mode of communication, such as writing (traditionally with pen and paper, or even by electronic means). Facial expressions, such as the rolling of the eyes or other non-verbal communications showing disdain for another are a subtle form of “speech.” And there are many other examples as well.

Further, there are instances when it is incumbent, and even Scripturally required, for a person to give *a true report* regarding another person, which report is quite unflattering, and lowers his respect in the eyes of others.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 27:24

The prophets, Yeshua, and the Apostles all delivered stinging rebukes in their day in an attempt to turn those in sin back to holiness. This is a prime example of righteous speech, and certainly not *loshan hara*. Those who heard were most certainly harmed, and offended. But the intention was not to degrade them without cause, but rather to urge them publicly to return to holiness.

By definition then, a required, or even permitted, statement by a person which still has a harmful nature is not “evil speech.” In fact, such speech might be classed as righteous speech. It is important to know where those boundaries lie, so as to remain within them as we live our lives.

Jewish scholars and teachers have spent millennia working out the practical nature of these Scriptural boundaries of what is permissible speech, and what is prohibited.¹⁵

So, what precisely is *loshan hara*, and how can we avoid it?

Generally Prohibited Speech

¹⁵ The best compilation of Jewish scholarship on governing one’s speech is found in the book, *Chofetz Chaim A Lesson a Day*, by Rabbis Finkelman and Berkowitz published by Mesorah Publications, 2018.

Outside of a limited number of exceptional circumstances, including proper judicial proceedings (where it is quite limited in scope), it is prohibited to tell others that another person has not been following well the standards of living according to the Scriptures, or the directions of the leader of the faith community or the congregation. This prohibition is even stronger when one seeks to report that a spiritual leader of the congregation is not living up to Scriptural standards.¹⁶

It is not permitted to improperly share negative information about others to your spouse, friends, or family. The closeness of the relationship is not a factor in whether speech constitutes evil speech. There are notable exceptions to this guidance, however, which I will also discuss.

It is prohibited to say anything about a person outside his presence which would embarrass him if it were spoken in his presence.¹⁷ This is because your words, once spoken, no longer are under your control. They are now in the hearts of others, who might repeat them to others.

¹⁶ This is the sin of Korach found in Numbers 16. Generally, it is called “murmuring.” See Philippians 2:14-16, “14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.” We are to drive out the one who spreads discord. Proverbs 22:10, “Drive out the scoffer, and contention will go out, even strife and dishonor will cease.” 26:20-22, “For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down. Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife. The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body.”

¹⁷ Eph 4:29–31.

It is not uncommon for someone to approach the person who has been spoken about by another, saying, “Do you know what [insert name] is saying about you?” Even if they report the words correctly (somewhat unlikely), those words should not be such as to cause that person embarrassment. But words of edification and praise can be passed on as appropriate language.

Oddly, one can actually engage in evil speech by telling someone that you are *avoiding* evil speech. An example: during a discussion regarding someone in the congregation, you report that you have something to add, but you cannot do so because it would be evil speech. Clearly, you have telegraphed to the listeners that you have derogatory¹⁸ information about that person, which is likely true, but you can’t disclose it without sin.

So, the end result is that you have placed in the mind of the hearers a harmful thought. Ironically, what the hearers might imagine to be the failing of that person might be far greater than the actual failing to which you were alluding. So, you end up causing harm, nonetheless.

Generally Permitted Speech

¹⁸ “Derogatory” speech is that which focuses on the failures or flaws in another person’s character or behavior.

It is permitted to make a statement about one's own personal preferences, such as "I do not drink any kind of wine." This is a neutral statement which neither approves or disapproves of the preferences of another.

But if the intention of this comment is to set one's own preferences up as a more holy standard, and the comment is offered to belittle another who does drink wine (implying that his practice is wrong), then this statement loses its neutrality, and it becomes prohibited. It's all about the heart.

It is permitted to report that a person has repented of sin, and has returned to a righteous standing. One who has repented of sin, and returned to the correct path of righteousness, has a greater standing before G-d than one who never sinned.¹⁹ However, this report should be crafted in such a way as to prevent others from looking down upon the repentant and restored one on account of his previous sin.²⁰

It is permitted to speak of the shortcomings of a wicked person, who is intentionally sinning without remorse, if the intention is to provide an example of how we should not behave.

¹⁹ Luke 15:8-10, Ezekiel 18:27; "27 Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life." Luke 15:3-7; '3 So he told them this parable: 4 "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? 5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

²⁰ Ephesians 4:29 "29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear."

If someone sins out of ignorance or because of temptation, it is permitted to speak ill of him for purposes of assisting him to repent.²¹

If someone has publicly spoken about his own failures, then it is permissible to speak of that failure as well. Likewise, if a person has otherwise given permission for others to speak of his failure, it is permitted to do so, but care must be exercised to be certain that the report to others is not given with malice or with intent to injure.

If a person has a failure that is a matter of general knowledge in the community, it is permitted to repeat it to those who already have that knowledge. The rationale behind this permission is that no harm can come from the speech. But the danger in this is that it is easy to engage in gossip by repetition.

The important consideration is whether the statement is being made to lower the respect in the eyes of others, or for a holy purpose, such as a warning to others of the consequences of poor behavior.

²¹ Isa 1:17; Mat 18:15; 2Ti 4:2; Tit 2:15

We should all be very careful when offering a prayer request in a group of believers. I have regularly seen a version of *loshan hara* cloaked in the camouflage of a “prayer request.”

There are situations during which you *should provide* harmful information regarding someone, *so as to prevent harm* to another. Scripture does not permit us to stand idly by as others are injured.²² If you have the power to prevent an injury to another by making a report that would otherwise be classed as evil speech, you must give it.

If one is a witness to an event, and testimony regarding that event is relevant before a court of justice, Scripture compels the witness to appear and to testify truthfully. A refusal to offer truthful testimony, regardless of its harmful effect, is a sin.²³

If one is seeking advice on how to proceed in a difficult matter of speech or of behavior regarding the actions of another, it is permissible to seek the advice of a spiritual leader *privately* so as to find the proper way to go forward. But if one goes to another congregation member with the same information (especially if it identifies the one who is potentially the offender), it would most likely be *loshan hara*.

²² Eph 5:11; Rom 12:21; Isa 1:17; Ps. 82:3-4

²³ Leviticus 5:1

Remedial Actions for Evil Speech

When one engages in evil speech, by that sin he degrades his own spiritual image, created in the image of G-d. That image should be restored by what in Hebrew is called *shuvah*, which in English means “to turn back.”

The concept of *shuvah* seems to be only partially recognized and applied by mainstream Christianity, which calls the process “repentance.”²⁴ Mainstream Christianity seems to have limited this process to merely expressing regret for the offense or sin.

In Jewish culture, the process is more involved, and can be summed-up as: “Recognize your sin. Stop walking away from G-d. Turn around. Start walking toward G-d by putting away that sin and living a more holy life.”

Remedial actions also must include restoring that which was damaged or lost due to the evil speech, and I will discuss that in future teachings.

Part of the remedial actions following evil speech might include the speaker going to the one who was the victim to reveal his sin. If actual

²⁴ In Jewish theology, based upon Scripture, *teshuvah* involves several steps. They are: recognizing the sin; confessing the sin; stopping any further sinning in this area; and living a life which replaces sin with righteousness. It seems that Christian theology today has reduced the concept of *teshuvah* to a mere shell of its former glory. Most Christians seem to consider the public, or private, speaking of (or even merely thinking of) the phrase “I’m sorry” as the entire process. The artificial Christian truncation of the process of *teshuvah* falls short of the intention of G-d for the designed end-result, which is a changed heart and restored relationship with the others in the community of faith, as well as with G-d Himself.

harm was done, then the offending speaker should go to the victim and seek his forgiveness as well. If no actual harm ensued from the evil speech, then it might be wise to simply repent (make *teshuvah*) before G-d.

However, the one who has spoken evil words still has the responsibility to try to prevent any harm. This can be accomplished by going to persons who are known to have heard the evil speech, the speaker telling them it was wrong to say it, and asking these hearers to disregard the words entirely. This is akin to the modest effort required to extinguish a forest fire before it has had time to spread.²⁵

If the victim is ignorant of the evil words, the speaker should consider whether more injury to the victim would result if he is informed of those words. Such a revelatory confession might do significantly more damage to the relationship than would silence.

It is best to spend time in prayer to seek the guidance of G-d, and to seek counsel from wise spiritual leaders in this matter before choosing a remedial action.

²⁵ James 3:5–6, “5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.”

Now that we have begun to explore the concept of evil speech, or *loshan hara*, we will continue next time with a discussion of the particular categories of evil speech.