

4-26-25 Message to Roeh Israel Abilene - *Sh'mini* (eighth)
Torah Portion: Leviticus 9:1 – 11:47
Haftarah: 2 Samuel 6:1 – 7:17
Suggested Acheron K'tuvim: Eph 4:29–31

Biblical Dispute Resolution 5 – Gossip and Slander

Central question: What is gossip and how are we to avoid it?

Today we are in parasha *Sh'mini*, which means “eighth.” It takes its name from the seventh word of the passage in English, and the third word in the original Hebrew.

Lev 9:1-4

9 Now it came about on the eighth day that Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel; 2 and he said to Aaron, "Take for yourself a calf, a bull, for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering, both without defect, and offer them before the Lord. 3 Then to the sons of Israel you shall speak, saying, 'Take a male goat for a sin offering, and a calf and a lamb, both one year old, without defect, for a burnt offering,

וּלְבָנָיו	לְאַהֲרֹן	מֹשֶׁה	כִּרְאָה	הַשְּׁמִינִי	בַּיּוֹם	וַיְהִי	9:1
and his sons,	Aaron	Moses	that	called	on day,	And it came to pass	
<u>1121</u>	<u>175</u>	<u>4872</u>	<u>9999</u>	<u>7121</u>	<u>3117</u>	<u>1961</u>	
					יִשְׂרָאֵל:	וְלִזְקֵנָי	
					Israel;	and the elders of	
					<u>3478</u>	<u>2205</u>	
							2
לְחַטָּאת	בֶּן־בָּקָר	עֵגֶל	לָךְ	קַח־	אַהֲרֹן	אֶל־	
for a sin offering,	young	a calf	thee	Take	Aaron,	unto	And he said
<u>2403</u>	<u>1241</u> <u>1121</u>	<u>5695</u>	<u>3807a</u>	<u>3947</u>	<u>175</u>	<u>413</u>	<u>559</u>
יְהוָה:	לִפְנֵי	וַהֲקִרְבָּה	הַמִּימָם	לְעֹלָה	וְאַיִל		
the Lord.	before	them	and offer	without blemish,	for a burnt offering,	and a ram	
<u>3068</u>	<u>6440</u>	<u>9999</u>	<u>7126</u>	<u>8549</u>	<u>5930</u>	<u>352</u>	
							3
שְׁעִיר־	קָחוּ	לְאַמֵּר	תְּדַבֵּר	יִשְׂרָאֵל	בְּנֵי	וְאֶל־	
a kid of	Take ye	saying,	thou shalt speak,	Israel	the children of	And unto	
<u>8163</u>	<u>3947</u>	<u>559</u>	<u>1696</u>	<u>3478</u>	<u>1121</u>	<u>413</u>	
שָׁנָה	בְּנִי־		וְכֶבֶשׂ	וְעֵגֶל	לְחַטָּאת	עֲזִים	
year,	first	both of the	and a lamb,	and a calf	for a sin offering;	the goats	
<u>8141</u>	<u>1121</u>	<u>9999</u>	<u>3532</u>	<u>5695</u>	<u>2403</u>	<u>5795</u>	
					לְעֹלָה:	הַמִּימָם	
					for a burnt offering;	without blemish,	
					<u>5930</u>	<u>8549</u>	

Today we are continuing with our series on Biblical Dispute Resolution. We have discussed the overarching concept of *loshan hara* – evil speech – and now I wish to discuss some of the specific categories of evil speech which are prohibited by Scripture.

I will begin with gossip and slander. Today's message will be considerably shorter, because we have a special guest and I wish for him to have adequate time to speak as well.

The Hebrew word for gossip is *rekhlut*, which literally means "peddling" as if one is selling a bill of goods. This idea is most often rendered in English as "gossip." It has also been called, "maligning."

In the Jewish way of thinking about *rekhlut*, speaking falsehoods, even flattering ones, are prohibited.

Gossip is evil speech, because it tends to diminish a third party in the eyes of the hearer, and even serves to injure the reputation of the speaker at the same time.

Gossip seems to be saturating our society today. Earl Wilson has said, "Gossip is when you hear something you like, about someone you don't."

One of America's great humorists, Will Rogers, once said, "The only time people dislike gossip is when you gossip about them."

The popular author of so many pithy bromides, Erma Bombeck, once said:

Some say our national pastime is baseball. Not me.
It's gossip.

There was a popular comedy show featuring a simple country life, which had a recurring song which went:

We're not ones to go round spreading rumors,
Why really, we're just not the gossiping kind.
No you'll never hear one of us repeating gossip;
So you better be sure and listen close the first time!

You can see it here: <https://youtu.be/q-6HjI7Fv1k>

That sketch got a lot of laughs, but gossip is no laughing matter. The command of prohibition is brief, but clear:

Lev 19:16

16 'You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people,
and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am
the Lord.

לֹא	בְּעַמֶּיךָ	רִכִּיל	תֵּלֵךְ	לֹא- ¹⁶
neither	among thy people:	a talebearer	up and down as	Thou shalt go not
<u>3808</u>	<u>5971</u>	<u>7400</u>	<u>9999</u>	<u>3212</u> <u>3808</u>
יְהוָה:	אֲנִי	רַעְךָ	דָּם	עַל-
the Lord.	am I	thy neighbour:	the blood of	against shalt thou stand
<u>3068</u>	<u>9999</u> <u>589</u>	<u>7453</u>	<u>1818</u>	<u>5921</u> <u>5975</u>

I think maybe a more clear translation of this passage might be:

“You are not to walk [live your life] as a merchant (peddler) of gossip within your people, and you are not to stand by the blood of [one who is a member of your group as if as a flock], for I am the LORD.”

Our sages have said that a gossip is like a merchant, who gathers goods from one person, and then delivers them to another person. This analogy is accurate.

The presumption contained in this verse makes it clear that the “tale” being “borne” among the people is not a tale calculated to increase the honor of the one being spoken of.

In this passage, the L-rd had a reason for combining two grievous sins into a single statement. It seems to me that He considers them equivalent in their effect.

Being a gossip (talebearer) is as harmful as standing idly by while your neighbor is being grievously wounded or murdered.

I would suggest that the association between these sinful acts might be even stronger than that.

Gossiping about your neighbor is itself a grievous wounding or murder of that neighbor's dignity, and standing in the community. And those who stand idly by as that violence is being done to another also bear guilt.

Hezekiah ben Manoah was a French rabbi and Bible commentator of the 13th century. He is generally known by the title of his commentary, Chizkuni. He has an interesting comment on this passage:

Talebearing and standing by idly while your fellow Jew's blood is being shed are part of the same sin. The Torah warns against talebearing as the next step would result in standing by idly while another Jew's innocent blood is being shed. What started out as being "only" words, is liable to wind up as complicity in murder. The prophet Ezekiel 22,9 writing: אנשי רכיל היו בקרב, "there were talebearers amongst you, continues that

verse by writing: “for the sake of bloodshed.” In other words: talebearing is no better than bloodshed.

Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (c. 1269 - c. 1343) wrote regarding this passage in his commentary entitled *Tur HaArokh*:

לא תעמוד על דם רעך, “do not stand idly by when the blood of your fellow is being shed.” Seeing that the Torah does not link these two injunctions by the letter ו, i.e. 'ולא תעמוד וגו', some commentators believe that the entire verse contains one single prohibition, the latter half of the verse being the interpretation of the first half. The meaning would then be: do not carry tales in order that in the end you will not stand by idly when your fellow's blood will be spilled. It is assumed that he who accepts slander against his fellow, i.e. believes the accusation, will out of anger take physical action against the person whom he perceives to have been guilty of what the slanderer accused him of. This is why our sages said that לשון הרע, “slander eventually kills three people.”

There is a volume written by an anonymous Jew called *Orchot Tzadikim*, which is a book of Jewish ethical teachings. It was written in Germany in

the middle ages (c.1400 - c.1500 CE). In chapter 25, we find the following comments.

And our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Gossip slays three people — the one who speaks gossip, the one who listens to it and the one about whom the gossip is said" (Arakin 15b, and see T.P. Peah 1:1). And he who listens to the gossip is guiltier than he who speaks it. It is forbidden to dwell in the neighborhood of gossips, all the more so is it forbidden to sit with them and listen to their words.

A gossip always seeks out the faults of people; he is like the flies who always rest on the dirty spot. If a man has boils, the flies will let the rest of the body go and sit on the boil. And thus it is with a gossip. He overlooks all the good in a man and speaks only of the evil.

Solomon recognized the importance of refraining from gossip and slander, and gave us warning about even being around such a person.

Prov 20:19

19 He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets,
Therefore do not associate with a gossip.

It is important to recognize the social pressures which often lead to gossip. The one who associates with gossips has a tendency to behave in the same sinful manner as they.

It has been said,

“Do not delight in telling stories of others, lest others worry
in secret what your report of them shall be.”

“The ear of a gossip hears only gossip, and to him few then
reveal the truth.”

Scripture shows us that gossip can have far-reaching consequences.

Num 14:36-38

36 As for the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land and
who returned and made all the congregation grumble against
him by bringing out a bad report concerning the land, 37
even those men who brought out the very bad report of the

land died by a plague before the Lord. 38 But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh remained alive out of those men who went to spy out the land.

The "very bad report" given to the people began a tsunami of gossip, which was such a demoralizing influence on the people, that they turned their backs on the deliverance of G-d, and wallowed in their fear.

Thus, gossip cost our people another 40 years of wondering in the wilderness, and delayed our entry to the Land.

There is no permitted level of gossip or slander, and we as believers in the One true G-d must work to refrain from this sinful speech.