

LASHON HORA

Questions discussed:

- Does the value of tikkun olam “trump” other concerns from a Jewish perspective? If so, when?
- Can the rules of lashon hora guide you in your journalistic efforts?
- How do Jewish values guide the classic journalism value of “minimizing harm” - treating sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect?

The laws of *lashon hara* at face value leave no room for the journalist. The Torah is clear in both its prohibition and punishment for speaking *lashon hara*. In Numbers Ch. 12, Miriam, is punished with leprosy for speaking *lashon hara* about her brother, Moses. So too, various biblical verses describe the severity of "bringing [one] an evil name."ⁱ Rabbis go so far as to tell us that *lashon hara* extends past defamingⁱⁱ to even praising his fellow.ⁱⁱⁱ

If the Torah and rabbis have left this prohibition unambiguous and severe, what is left for the journalist to write about?

Jewish texts show us that Judaism is not dichotomous and absolute. Indeed we have right and wrong, but we also have law and de-facto practice, ideal circumstance and reality. In several cases loopholes make seemingly impossible stringent laws of the Torah more bearable. The Torah tells us that on Passover we should have no *hametz* in our homes,^{iv} yet the rabbis propose a loophole allowing us to *sell* our *hametz*. Keeping the *hametz* in our homes becomes a non-issue, because it is technically no longer *ours*. Other cases distinguish one value as more important than another, thereby helping select between competing values.

So, the journalist who doesn't want to discard traditional values and is committed to weighing conflicting values may find that some carry more weight in a particular situation or scenario that may be used to limit the prohibition against *lashon hara*?

Standing at the foundation of journalism, both secular and Jewish, lies the value of *tikkun olam*, or repairing the world. The journalist's goals are not self-serving. His or her reports are not for personal pleasure and benefit, but rather for the public's knowledge, interest, and advantage. The journalist brings people to an awareness of the world they live in, to which they would otherwise have no access. Through the information they provide, journalists draw attention to issues, which may lead to positive changes, social reform, and new public policies.

Albeit the journalist's report is ostensibly *lashon hara*, perhaps tikkun olam may be judged as a value of more importance. The Torah commands us not to kill, but if someone is about to attack us first, we are absolutely allowed to defend ourselves, even at the expense of our attackers' lives. The Torah commands us to keep kosher, but if stuck on a desert island rabbis would allow us to eat non-kosher food. In the times of the Temple, one was obligated to give a Pesach offering, yet Pesach Sheni a month later, was instilled for those who were impure at the original time of the offering. Judaism has law, but it also has a hierarchy of which values comes first.

If we struggle with the desire for *tikkun olam* yet also want to honor *lashon hara*, are there any limits? What is considered within the scope of tikkun olam?

Lashon hara and tikkun olam must be thought of not as competing values, but rather as complementary values. Tikkun olam should not leave the door open and allow journalists to include anything in their reports. So too, lashon hara should not close the door to the journalist by forbidding him or her from reporting anything that is arguably lashon hara. Instead, the journalist must use critical thought to decide to filter what goes in from what goes out. With every piece of information the journalist must ask: *What is the benefit for the community knowing this? Is there a point? Will it lead to tikkun olam?*

If community knowledge on a subject may lead to favorable change, although we realize the pain lashon hara might inflict in this case, we realize that the greater good here is tikkun olam. No one will be happy with causing pain, but we accept that this is the necessary course of action. Yet if the community will not be affected by the information, either materially or emotionally, the journalist should think twice before opening the door and claiming the information as tikkun olam.

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ⁱ Numbers 23:14, Numbers 23:19

ⁱⁱ BT Arachin 15a

ⁱⁱⁱ BT Arachin 16a, R. Dimi says that one may not even praise a person lest he come to denigrate the person instead.

^{iv} (Exodus 13:7): מִצּוֹת יֹאכֵל אֶת שִׁבְעַת הַיָּמִים, 'וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה לָּךְ חֶמְצָא וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה לָּךְ שָׂאֵר בְּכֵל גְּבֻלָּךְ

(Exodus 12:19): שִׁבְעַת יָמִים שָׂאֵר לֹא יִמָּצֵא בְּבֵתֵיכֶם"