

Words Can Kill: Speech That Incites Violence

The rabbinic category of lashon hara, literally “evil speech,” encompasses a broad range of harmful speech habits, including saying truthful and even complimentary things about a person behind their back. Jewish literature is unanimous in condemning lashon hara. In this text study, we look specifically at why and how such speech can be physically dangerous to individuals and communities, not simply emotionally or spiritually.

Thanks to Rabbi David Jaffe for help assembling some of these texts.

1. WHY IS LASHON HARA DANGEROUS?

A. *Vayikra Rabbah* 33:1

“Death and life are in the power [*literally*, hand] of the tongue.” (Proverbs 18:21) Onqelos translated this: You recognize it by its [two] sides—death here, life there. Bar Sira says: If there is a glowing coal before you and you blow on it, it ignites; if you spit on it, it goes out.

מות וחיים ביד לשון (משלי יח, כא), תירגם עקילס מיסטרו מכירין, מות מיכן וחיים מיכן. בר סירא אמ' היתה לפניו גחלת נפה בה בערה, רקק בה כבת.

B. *Zohar Pekudei* 264b

There is a certain spirit appointed over all these speakers of *lashon hara*, which, when men are aroused to *lashon hara*, there is likewise aroused that malevolent, unclean spirit above, which is called Contention. Presiding over that arousal of *lashon hara* initiated by men, it rises on high and causes — by that arousal of *lashon hara* — death, sword, and slaughter in the world. Woe unto those who arouse this malevolent force by not guarding their mouth and their tongue, giving no thought to it.

אֵית רוּחָא חֲדָא, דְּקִימָא עַל כָּל אַנּוּן מְאִרֵי דְלִישְׁנָא בִישָׂא, דְּכַד מְתַעְרֵי בְּנִי נִשְׂא בְּלִישְׁנָא בִישָׂא, אוּ הֵהוּא בַר נֶשׁ דְּמְתַעְרֵי בְּלִישְׁנָא בִישָׂא, כְּדִין אֲתַעַר הֵהוּא רוּחָא בִישָׂא מְסֻאָבָא דְלַעִילָא, דְּאֲקֵרֵי סְכֻסְכָּא, וְאִיהוּ שְׂאֲרֵי עַל הֵהוּא אֲתַעְרוּתָא דְלִישְׁנָא בִישָׂא, דְּשָׂארוּ בֵּה בְּנֵי נִשְׂא, וְאִיהוּ עַל לַעִילָא וְגַרִים כְּהֵהוּא אֲתַעְרוּ דְלִישְׁנָא בִישָׂא מוּתָא וְחֲרָבָא וְקַטְלָא בְּעֻלְמָא, וַיִּלְאֲנוּן דְּמְתַעְרֵי לְהֵאִי סְטְרָא בִישָׂא וְלֹא נְטָרֵי פּוּמְיָהוּ וְלִשְׁנִיהוּן וְלֹא חֲשִׁשוּ עַל דָּא

- If you translate the Zohra's mystical language about what happens in the divine realm into a symbolic language about what happens among human beings, what is it saying?
- What themes do you see these two texts having in common? Why, according to these texts, is evil speech dangerous?

II. A CASE STUDY

The biblical book of 1 Samuel recounts how, after God rejected King Saul and anointed David in his place, Saul's initial love for David turned to jealousy, resentment, paranoia, and eventually vengeful, murderous wrath (see chapters 15-22). During one of David's escapes, the priest Ahimelech helped him. Saul's enforcer Doeg observed the interaction and informed the king, who commanded his guards to kill Ahimelech. When they refused, Doeg stepped in and obliterated the entire priestly town of Nob. In midrash, Doeg becomes a more complex figure, but one dominant trope about him is how destructive his lashon hara was. Psalm 52 also discusses the figure of Doeg and is a source for much of this midrash.

A. Talmud Sanhedrin 93b

“One of the attendants spoke up, ‘I have observed a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skilled in music; he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, sensible in speech, and handsome in appearance, and the LORD is with him.’” (1 Sam. 16:18)

Rashi on 1 Sam. 16:18

“One of the attendants”—this was Doeg the Edomite, the chief attendant.

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: Doeg spoke this verse only in the name of evil speech...

Regarding each phrase, [Saul] said to him, ‘Jonathan my son is like him [in this regard].’ When he got to, ‘And God is with him’—something that was not also true of [Jonathan], Saul’s mind was weakened/troubled and he was jealous of [David].

Rashi

“Only in the name of evil speech”—he sang David’s praises in order that Saul would become jealous of him and kill him.

B. Midrash Tehillim (Buber) Psalm 52

Another interpretation: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” (Proverbs 18:21) Evil speech is more grievous than spilling blood, for one who kills only kills one soul, and the one who speaks lashon hara kills three: the speaker, the hearer, and the target [of the speech].

From whence do we learn this? From Doeg, who spoke evil speech about Ahimelech before Saul, and all three of them were killed: Saul, Ahimelech, and Doeg....

Doeg was expelled from the world, as it says, “So God will break you forever.” (Ps. 52:7)—from the world to come. And what caused this? Evil speech, as it says, “when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul...” [the introduction to the same psalm].

(שמואל א טז, יח) ויען אחד מהנערים
ויאמר הנה ראיתי בן לישי בית הלחמי
יודע נגן וגבור חיל ואיש מלחמה ונבון
דבר ואיש תואר וה' עמו.

רש"י

אחד מהנערים

מיוחד שבהם דואג האדומי

ואמר רב יהודה אמר רב כל הפסוק הזה
לא אמרו דואג אלא בלשון הרע...

בכולהו אמר להו "יהונתן בני כמוהו" כיון
דאמר ליה [וה' עמו] מילתא דבדידיה נמי
לא הוה ביה חלש דעתיה ואיקניא ביה

רש"י

אלא בלשון הרע שהיה מספר
בשבחו של דוד כדי שיקנא בו
שאול ויהרגהו:

דבר אחר מות וחיים ביד לשון. קשה לשון
הרע משפיות דמים, לפי שההורג את
הנפש אינו הורג אלא אחת, והאומר לשון
הרע הוא הורג שלשה, המספרו והמקבלו
ומי שנאמר עליו,

ומניין אתה למד, מדואג שאמר לשון הרע
אל אחימלך לפני שאול, ונהרגו שלשתו,
שאול ואחימלך ודואג....

ודואג שנטרד מן העולם, שנאמר גם אל
יתצד לנצח (תהלים נ"ב/ב/ פסוק ז) מן עולם
הבא, ומי גרם לו, לשון הרע, שנאמר בבוא
דואג האדומי ויגד לשאול

- How does *lashon hara* manifest in this story? What are its consequences?
- Why do you suppose Doeg behaved as he did—what was his motivation?
- What do these texts say about loyalty? About government?
- It's easier to see how evil speech might literally cause the death of its target. How might we understand it killing its speaker and its hearer?