

August 30, 2020
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Title: Lovingkindness HOLY SPEECH
Text: Ephesians 4:29



The Hasidic Judaism founder, Baal Shem Tov, taught that each of us is born with a fixed number of words to speak, and when we have spoken the last of them we die. I find this illustration gives us interesting food for thought. Not literal food, but something to chew on nonetheless. What if our life expectancy was tied to our word use? How would your everyday speech change if you believed this? Would you waste a word cursing a slow driver that affects but a few minutes of our day whom you will never see again? Would you waste a word in idle chatter or criticism of another? Would you guard your tongue and invest each word in bringing love and peace and honor and goodness into the world? Yes, I think this thought is worth pondering. It puts value on our words. Our words have life and death value because our words can uplift life as well as bring death to relationships and the soul of others. The words we use can hurt as well as heal. It is no surprise to learn speaking kind words figures prominently in the sacred art of lovingkindness. Creating kindness in this world through our giving and our speech is the 7th attribute of lovingkindness, Rabbi Rami Shapiro presents to us in *The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness*.

Our faith is about living as Jesus taught. That means putting lovingkindness into the world. We begin by learning to see all as image of God and seeing all as connected in oneness. When we see all others as part of the whole that encompasses ourselves, giving generously to care for others comes naturally and speaking kindly to and of all other images of God before us is essential. The idea of holy speech as an essential element is woven throughout our sacred scriptures and the wisdom writings of the world.

Hear these teachings from our text:

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up a..... Ephesians 4:29

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. James 1:26

Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Lev 19:16

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips.

Gossip is listed with the same unrighteousness as murder in Romans 1: 29-32

The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart; whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others. Psalm 15:2-3 |

Matthew 7:1-29 Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged."

Our Judea-Christian teachings are clear. Gossip, harmful speech, judging others is not living lovingkindness.

There is a Jewish folktale:

There was once a man who loved to gossip. He loved the attention it brought him, and could not stop himself from speaking about others, sometimes sharing the good they did, but most often sharing the mistakes they had made. In time, however, he realized the harm his speech was causing and he sought to make amends. He went to his rabbi and explained the situation, and asked how he could make amends.

The rabbi thought for a moment and instructed the man to go to the marketplace and purchase two of the first feather pillows he could find. He should then take his pillows to the top of the mountain overlooking the village, tear them open, and spill the feathers into the wind.

The man was surprised and pleased at the rabbi's advice. He thought repentance would be much harder than this. So he ran to the marketplace, purchased his pillows, and within an hour had scattered their feathers to the wind.

He returned to the rabbi all aglow. He was ready to be forgiven for his gossiping. "Not just yet," the rabbi told him. There was one more thing to do. He had to return to the mountain and repack the pillows with the feathers he had scattered.

"But that's impossible," the man said. "Those feathers have gone everywhere, there is no way I can take them back now."

The rabbi nodded solemnly and said, "what is true of feathers is true of words. Once spoken they can never be retrieved. The harm caused by gossip cannot be undone."

Wonder why there are so many Bible verses against gossip? It's because it can kill and people love to gossip. Why do we gossip so much? Because people are forever comparing themselves to others, sometimes building people up, most often tearing people down.

It is our passion for comparing, competing, that leads us to gossip. Who can we feel better than? Who can we bring down? (therefore building ourselves up) Spreading gossip also feels powerful. The one with the juiciest gossip is elevated in social importance.

St. Benedict was terribly concerned about establishing monastic communities which emulated the blessed life and squelched all that was harmful. A rule of the monasteries became simple. You cannot speak of another if he is not present. That silenced much gossip. Saint Benedict condemned gossip and murmuring for a simple reason. They kill and destroy. Not only do they kill and destroy another person, they attack the very heart of community: charity for one another.

What would it be like for our world to take St Benedict's rule seriously? What would your Facebook thread look like, if every post only spoke kind things to uplift, and spread love? What would your social circle, your work environment, your family gatherings, your church family - what would it look like if no one spoke ill of another, if no one passed along a tidbit of gossip? if not one passed judgment? Perhaps holy silence would fill our spaces.

But, some may ask what about being honest with people? What if someone asks you about another person? What if someone asks your opinion? What if you know something about someone's integrity, shouldn't you warn others? Shouldn't you speak up if you think an injustice has occurred? Those questions are interesting justifications for gossip, to be sure. And perhaps we should note if some exception can be made.

Maybe it is your job to evaluate another: as employer, as teacher, as supervisor, as court juror. Maybe it is your responsibility to make assessments of another. Maybe you must discern advancement in careers, job performance, levels of knowledge, an accused guilt or innocence on jury. So be it if that is a prescribed duty. In fulfilling some roles of assigned responsibility, we may be called to evaluate another. That does not give us license to judge everyone we see. That does not give us permission to share professional evaluations with the world. These judgments are restricted to that which is within professional scope. Physicians don't share patient gossip; teachers do not gossip about students; employers do not gossip about their employees. So, sitting those circumstances aside. What would it look like, if our first and only response to another person was grace not judgement. Love not criticism. Holy Speech not Gossip.

What would it look like if we see another and we start from the assumption : I am seeing an image of God who is doing the best she/he can at the moment. I might think or desire the other person do to differently but who am I to judge? I don't know all that went into the other persons' choice of actions. I don't know all the backstory of what happened. I don't know the other's path that brings them to their actions, so I will not judge, and I will not spread my negative opinions, I will simply offer grace.

I will start with the foundation thought that people are just doing the best they can and leave it at that. That is living in lovingkindness. That is our call to practice the grace towards others that we need in our lives and in our world. Our scriptures, our faith teachings put parameters on what we say about one another. Do not gossip; do not judge is probably the most often violated teaching of our faith. Speaking kindness, building one another up, strengthening loving communities, that is practicing lovingkindness.

Rabbi Rami offers a few guidelines that can guide our speech. First, you have to be sure that what you know is true. Pause and think hard before speaking of another. Do you absolutely know what you are about to say to be true? Do you know from your own firsthand experience or are you passing along someone else's drama? Do you know if from your experience, but your experience is filtered by your narrow mind. We are always seeing a situation from our own narrow mind, our own ego narrates the experience. Do we really know why the other acted as he did? Do we really know all the facts of the situation? Do we know what happened before? Are we only relaying part of the story? one of the perspectives? Then it is gossip, drama, slander. Then it is bringing harm.

Rabbi Rami's second point has us consider our motive for speaking ill of another. You have to be clear in your mind as to WHY you want to pass along the information. The only time to say something is to help another- not further your own ends - not to gain support or popularity, not to harm someone. Stopping with the first question, Is it true? is probably enough to stop, but adding the question, Will it bring help to the situation? Will it only escalate drama, cast feathers into the wind that can never be retrieved? will surely move us to silence.

In the Buddhist tradition, Right Speech is the third of the Noble Eightfold Path. Right Speech is abstaining from lying, abstaining from from divisive speech, refraining from from abusive speech, and from idle chatter. Wisdom traditions know the dangers of gossip can destroy one's honor and divide community. We see how that plays out in every way possible these days.

Guidelines for Right Speech

do not spread a negative image of someone, even if that image is true.

do not share information that can cause physical, financial,
emotional or spiritual harm

do not embarrass people, even in jest.

do not speak against a community, a race, ethnic group, gender,

do not repeat gossip , even when it is generally known, even to your closest connects

do not tell people negative things said about them,

do not listen to gossip. If you don't listen to gossip to begin with, you won't know it
or be tempted to repeat it.

Give everyone the benefit of the doubt. Our words are numbered. Our words are limited by our lifetime. We can spend our lives tearing one another down. We can spend our lives critiquing and judging, or we can bring to life words of love. To nurture our souls and spend our life sharing seeds of lovingkindness, we must pause before we speak. Our practice of lovingkindness is to pause before speaking, THINK:

T- is it true?

H- is it helpful?

I - is it inspiring? (it it inspiring greatness, love, generosity)

N- is it necessary?

K- is it kind?

We can ask ourselves these before we speak. This is the lovingkindness practice offered to you this week. Pause. Think and to step up the practice to the next level. Ask our friends to help us? Name that you are practicing holy speech and ask those around you to help. Agree upon this practice with your social circles, with your family. Invite people to call a conversation to a close or another direction when the words are not uplifting. Change the subject, when the vultures are picking at the flesh of another. Pause and think, speak each word intentionally that the feathers you scatter to the wind are those of love, and grace, and kindness. Holy speech of holy people. Words of life for the world.