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# BRIDGES FOR PEACE

## Israel Teaching Letter

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# GUARD YOUR TONGUE

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# GUARD YOUR TONGUE

**“STICKS AND STONES MAY BREAK YOUR BONES,** but words will never hurt you.” Have you ever heard this seemingly innocent childhood taunt? Perhaps you’ve even used it yourself in response to some unkind phrase or words. Most of us, at some point in our lives, have both said something bad about another person and have had another person say something bad about us. We tend to think that what we said really didn’t hurt the other person, but we also tend to long remember the hurt that another person’s words have caused us. It seems a general truth that we judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their actions.

In light of this, perhaps we should consider asking the following questions: How does God judge us concerning our tongue, and what does Scripture have to say on the subject? Since Bridges for Peace is a ministry that focuses on restoring relationships with the Jewish people and learning from one another, are there things we can learn from each other on this topic? Perhaps this topic about the tongue is particularly relevant to our mission, as Christians and Jews have often said unkind, and sometimes untrue, things about one another. I want to start our consideration of this topic by reviewing Jewish teaching on the topic, and then adding a few thoughts from a Christian perspective. I’m doing this for a couple of reasons.

First, in the history of Jewish–Christian relations, it is Christians who have generally been the ones saying bad, and often untrue, things about the Jews. This is particularly true of the past 1,800 years, since Hadrian destroyed Jerusalem following the second great rebellion in AD 135. It is not the topic of this teaching letter, but this evil rhetoric from many of Christianity’s otherwise bright stars provided the groundwork for countless horrors, including the Inquisition and even the Holocaust. (These teaching letters are posted on our Web site: “The Source of Anti-Judaism, Anti-Semitism, and Anti-Zionism” and “Hurts, Heresies, and Holocaust.”)

A second, and more encouraging reason to begin looking at the Jewish teaching on this subject, is that I think you’ll find it better and deeper than most Christian teaching on the subject. So, let’s begin, as many Jewish teachings do, with a story. The sages tell the following story. I’ve read it in several places, so I’m not sure who is properly credited with the first telling, but it is a wonderful story.

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## *Like Feathers in the Wind*

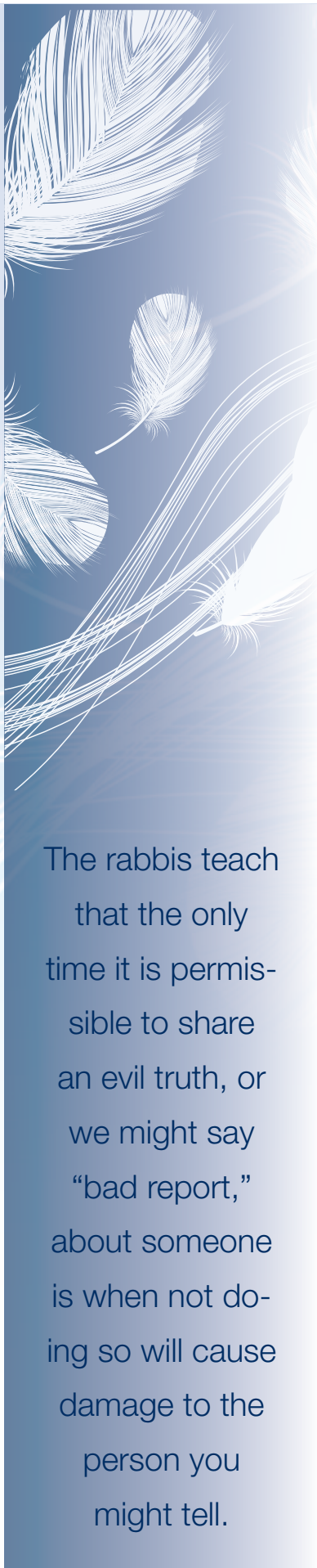
In a small Jewish village in the Ukraine, a young man became angry with the rabbi. In his anger, he shared a lie with one friend, speaking evil of the rabbi. As is typical, particularly in a small town, the one man told another, who told his wife, who told her sister, and eventually the rabbi himself heard the story. The rabbi was deeply hurt by the lies being told; but could do nothing to counter the now widespread story.

After a few weeks, the young man realized he had been wrong to be angry at the rabbi, and even more wrong to have told the story about the rabbi. With a truly repentant heart, he went to the rabbi and confessed both his anger and the lie he had told. He offered to do anything to repair the damage he had done. The rabbi offered the young man one simple task. The young man was overjoyed and gladly asked what he must do. The rabbi told him to go home and get a feather pillow, take it to the center of town on a windy day, and cut it open. Once all the feathers had been scattered by the wind, he told the young man to simply walk around and gather up each and every feather and return it to the pillow case.

The young man's countenance dropped, and he told the rabbi that such an assignment was impossible. The rabbi shook his head and told the young man that just as it was impossible to regather the feathers, so it was impossible to regather the lie he had spread. The Rabbi could and would forgive the young man, but the damage could never be completely undone.

In Hebrew there is a phrase, *lashon hara*, which means "speaking evil." The term is not limited to lies, but includes telling an evil truth about someone. The rabbis teach that the only time it is permissible to share an evil truth, or we might say "bad report," about someone is when not doing so will cause damage to the person you might tell. In other words, if I tell you that Johnny stole candy from the store, but you don't own the store, I am simply speaking evil, even if it is true. I could only share about Johnny's thievery if you will personally suffer from it if I don't tell you.

Further, the rabbis teach that whenever you speak evil of another, three people are hurt. First, and most obviously, the person you are speaking about is hurt. The idea that I hurt you, if I speak evil about you, is pretty straightforward and common sense. More subtle, but I believe equally true, you hurt yourself when you speak evil about another. The teaching here is that you both pollute your own thoughts by focusing on the evil, and you also tarnish your image, as people come to know you as one who spreads a bad report—a gossip. Finally, you hurt the person you tell. You pollute their mind and their image of the other person, and you tempt them to continue the gossip train and share this same evil report with others. Remember, all three people are damaged, even if the evil report is true!



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## Absalom's Rebellion

Is there any Scripture to back this up? First let's consider the story of Absalom in 2 Samuel, chapters 15–18. Absalom's rebellion begins by sharing subtle implied evil about his father King David. "Now Absalom would rise early and stand beside the way to the gate. So it was, whenever anyone who had a lawsuit came to the king for a decision, that Absalom would call to him and say, 'What city are you from?' And he would say, 'Your servant is from such and such a tribe of Israel.' Then Absalom would say to him, 'Look, your case is good and right; but there is no deputy of the king to hear you.' Moreover Absalom would say, 'Oh, that I were made judge in the land, and everyone who has any suit or cause would come to me; then I would give him justice.' And so it was, whenever anyone came near to bow down to him, that he would put out his hand and take him and kiss him. In this manner Absalom acted toward all Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel (15:2–6).

Essentially Absalom was saying that David was not fairly dispensing justice, and that he would do much better job than his father. Was this true? We aren't told. It is possible that David did not have a well organized system in place for hearing complaints. It is even possible that Absalom would have done better. But, what is clear is that Absalom was spreading an evil report about his father, making those who had no such thoughts think poorly of David and reinforcing the complaints others already had. So where did this example of *lashon hara* end?

The people who heard the evil speech were hurt—20,000 died in a needless battle: "So the people went out into the field of battle against Israel. And the battle was in the woods of Ephraim. The people of Israel were overthrown there before the servants of David, and a great slaughter of twenty thousand took place there that day" (2 Sam. 18:6–7). The evil speaker was killed: "Then Joab said, 'I cannot linger with you.' And he took three spears in his hand and thrust them through Absalom's heart, while he was still alive in the midst of the terebinth tree. And ten young men who bore Joab's armor surrounded Absalom, and struck and killed him" (vv.14–15).

And the one spoken of was also deeply hurt: "And Joab was told, 'Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom.' So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people. For the people heard it said that day, 'The king is grieved for his son.' And the people stole back into the city that day, as people who are ashamed steal away when they flee in battle. But the king covered his face, and the king cried out with a loud voice, 'O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!'" (19:1–4).

## Aaron and Miriam against Moses

Scripturally, the rabbis and sages base much of their teaching on this subject on Numbers 12. Let's look at the first ten verses of this chapter: "Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an

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Ethiopian woman. So they said, 'Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?' And the LORD heard it. (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.) Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, 'Come out, you three, to the tabernacle of meeting!' So the three came out. Then the LORD came down in the pillar of cloud and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both went forward. Then He said, 'Hear now My words: if there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is faithful in all My house. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; and he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?' So the anger of the LORD was aroused against them, and He departed. And when the cloud departed from above the tabernacle, suddenly Miriam became leprous, as white as snow. Then Aaron turned toward Miriam, and there she was, a leper."

This complaining against Moses by Miriam and Aaron is considered *lashon hara*, or evil speaking. Not only do the rabbis draw the teachings already summarized above primarily from discussion about this passage, but they make another connection. What is Miriam's punishment for *lashon hara*? She is punished with leprosy. Accordingly, the rabbis see a connection between evil speaking and serious skin diseases. There are two other passages which teach about leprosy: Leviticus 12:1–13:59 and Leviticus 14:1–15:33. Much of the rabbinic commentary on leprosy in these readings is related back to the incident of complaint by Miriam. The rabbis, therefore, see this sin of evil speaking as very serious, with dire consequences.

## Christian Teaching

Christian teaching generally is not as strong on the prohibition of evil speaking, although modern Christian pastors and teachers, as well as the Christian Scriptures, clearly teach against gossip or slander. For example, In Ephesians 4:31, Paul warns, "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and **evil speaking** be put away from you, with all malice." And in 1 Peter 2:1, Peter directs, "Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all **evil speaking**."

In Ephesians, Paul uses the Greek word βλασφημία (*blasphemia*), from which we get our modern English word "blasphemy." At its root, blasphemy in our modern usage is "evil speaking" against God. How much more care might we use in choosing our words, if we thought that each evil word, bit of gossip, or bad report we share was a form of blasphemy? In 1 Peter, Peter uses the Greek word καταλαλία (*katalalia*), which is the direct Greek for evil speaking. In both cases, I believe that both Peter and Paul had in mind their Jewish training and the prohibition about *lashon hara*.

Paul himself uses this exact same Greek word καταλαλία in 2 Corinthians 12:19–20. In the New King James translation, this word is translated as "backbitings." "Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But we do all things,



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*beloved, for your edification. For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, **backbitings**, whisperings, conceits, tumults."*

In modern Christian teaching, there is still emphasis on the importance of guarding our words, but recent Christian teaching takes an approach more focused at guarding both the words we think and the words that we speak. There is a powerful book by John Bevere, entitled *The Bait of Satan*, in which he makes the case that we destroy ourselves when we focus our time and thoughts thinking (or saying) evil about another person. His real emphasis is on how bitterness against another—again whether objectively justified or not—damages and destroys the person holding onto these feelings. In this regard, his teaching is very parallel to rabbinic teaching on *lashon hara*, which teaches that not only the object of evil speech, but the speaker of evil speech is damaged in the process.

The whole concept of "positive confession" or of speaking what we want, not what we have, is somewhat controversial in the modern Church. Some fear this teaching goes too far into the realm criticized as "name it and claim it." While I believe that wisdom and balance need to be applied here, with all teaching tested against Scripture, it is hard to deny either the biblical or experiential truth that what we think and say has a significant impact on what we experience.

Even modern business studies support this, with secular businesses and sport establishments spending millions of dollars each year on motivational training and consultants. Of much greater importance, there is little room to argue, other than that the Christian Scriptures teach a high importance on guarding our tongue: *"If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless"* (James 1:26).

Yeshua (Jesus) Himself speaks of both the importance of choosing what we say; and the source of what we say. *"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good*

We destroy ourselves when we focus our time and thoughts thinking (or saying) evil about another person.

man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt. 12:34b–37).

## *Judaism & Christianity—A Comparison*

In rabbinic teaching, we find a great depth of instruction on the importance of what we do—in this case, on the importance of how we speak. In at least modern Western Christianity, we find the emphasis placed on what we think or believe. Sadly, sometimes this difference has been exaggerated and portrayed as Jewish people only caring about “deeds” and being bound to legalism. A more accurate criticism is sometimes leveled against modern Western Christianity: that we only care and teach about what we think or believe and not about what we do. Neither of these extremes is a fair portrayal of either rabbinic Judaism, nor of biblical Christianity.

Judaism teaches that we do what we do—including following the *halakah* (or rabbinic understanding of 613 commandments)—because we love God with our heart. The most basic statement of Judaism is the *Shema*, a statement of both belief and practice beginning in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” Further evidence for the importance Jewish people place on belief as well as action can be found in the 13 Principles of Faith by Maimonides (a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish philosopher), each of which is a statement of belief. True biblical Christianity shares this balance of belief and action. For example, in James we read, “But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (2:18).



“Hear,  
O Israel:  
The LORD  
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“A good man  
out of the good  
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brings forth evil.  
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Perhaps even more incontrovertible within Christianity; Yeshua said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). As is so often true, I find this statement of Yeshua bridging and combining the best of Christian and Jewish teaching on this subject. In this passage, Yeshua speaks love, which comes from our heart and mind. This same short passage in John also speaks about deeds, in this case, keeping commandments. Yeshua consistently teaches about both our thoughts and our deeds.

This one verse is not an isolated incident in Yeshua’s teaching. For example, Yeshua regularly teaches about our thoughts: “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matt. 15:19). “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). And, in a similar manner, He consistently teaches about the importance of our actions: “And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward” (Matt. 10:42). “Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back. And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise” (Luke 6:30–31).

## *A Renewed Commitment*

Both biblical Christianity and Judaism teach an importance of what we say and what we do. Since the words that come from our mouth are the first and quickest connection between thought and deed, it is a great place to look at the importance of both thought and deed. Here, too, we see the complementing perspective we can gain from both the Jewish and Christian teachings on guarding our tongue.

Since one of the key areas where God has called Bridges for Peace to operate is in tearing down the walls of separation between Christians and Jews—and if you will, replacing walls with bridges—there is perhaps no better or more important place to start than to look at what we say, especially about one another. Will you join me in a renewed commitment to guard your tongue, to either say something good or to say nothing at all, and, in the particular area of dialogue between Christians and Jews, to seek to speak well of one another?

By Jim Solberg, USA National Director

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

**M**any pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding “yes”! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3).

