



Young Isaac™

## Word of Mouth

Artie Isaac  
Kit Kat Club  
December 16, 2003

First of all, please let me thank you for welcoming me into Kit Kat. In my short time with you, I've heard very interesting papers and learned about topics I had never considered. That's fun. I don't know what your vision of heaven is, but mine includes learning and good food and nice people. Including women. Three out of four ain't bad.

My presentation, "Word of Mouth," is about the sanctity of speech, the power of the spoken word. I will describe a learned teacher of this topic. Then I will describe some of his teaching.

Before that, however, I need to tell you that I have spoken on this topic in other forums: usually in schools, with students, faculty and parents. In those settings, we usually talk about the topic of gossip. We define gossip starkly: words spoken about someone who is not present.

The conversation immediately becomes uncomfortable, because most people will readily agree that gossip is often bad. And most people will agree – a little less readily – that they gossip. That includes me. I'm sure I gossip daily. I point this out, because I'm not suggesting I am holier than thou. Or thou. Or thou.

Pretty quickly, the conversation turns into a defense of gossip. Some defenders of gossip say that it has a redeeming social value. It is, the argument goes, a way of transferring our values and of helping others. To be sure, that can be true.

Others point to anthropology: how we once were monkeys, sitting in a circle and picking the nits out of each other's hair. Through this social behavior, we built community. This nit-picking evolved as we evolved. Eventually, the anthropological defense of gossip goes, we have come to build and maintain our

Word of Mouth, December 16, 2003, page 2

community through gossip. This argument defends gossip as natural- so-it-must-be-OK. That always makes me wonder why we have chosen to break ourselves of other behaviors that are also natural.

After all, we have rules for many natural behaviors.

We curb personal behaviors that are socially unacceptable. We are potty trained. We don't pick our noses in public. Unless we are driving our cars.

We have speed limits. That's because we recognize that, without limits, someone is more likely to get hurt. Still, we choose times to exceed the limit.

We have gun control laws. That's because we recognize that, without limits, someone is more likely to get hurt. There are many who break this law, also.

(I should add at this time that, given the new acceptance of concealed weapons, I am fully armed. Please consider that when you applaud and choose your questions. I don't want to change "Kit Kat" to "Rat-a-tat-tat.")

Whenever we consider limits on speech, we resist the idea. We are so happy to have free speech, the right to criticize our government, that we rankle at the idea of any limits on speech. Words are the very heart of Kit Kat.

This is a topic that stirs the soul. No one discusses this topic dispassionately. It incites defensiveness and, at times, anger. I expect that some of you might disregard my comments as zealotry.

But, be fair; we do accept some limits on speech. They might not be legislated, but the limits of etiquette are as real as a mouth full of soap. (I speak from personal experience.) There are words I know, and I bet you know, that won't be used this evening. Why not? They're not polite. What the heck.

My interest in this topic is not puritanical, but practical. I want to speak about the practical effect of speech, not the intent or morals.

Tonight, we will explore some of the rules of speech. Although they are not well known, good rules exist.

\* \* \* \* \*

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

...the ... of ...

Let us start our study on September 16, 1933, with the following obituary in *The New York Times*.

# **CHOFETZ CHAIM, 105, IS DEAD IN POLAND**

**Venerated by Orthodox Jews  
as One of 36 'Saints Who  
Saved the World.'**

**LIVED LONG IN POVERTY**

**Gave Up Store When Popularity  
in Village 'Deprived Other  
Merchants of a Living.'**

The headline is followed by three subheads. May we all die with three subheads.

WILNO, Poland, Sept. 15 (Jewish Telegraphic Agency). — The famed Chofetz Chaim, venerated by orthodox Jews throughout the world as one of the thirty-six saints because of whose piety the Lord has not destroyed the world, died today in the village of Radin, near here, where he had spent most of the more than 100 years of his life. He had been ill only a short time.

The Chofetz Chaim, whose real name was Rabbi Yisroel Meier Cohen, had been a figure of almost legendary importance for almost half a century. Stories of his piety sprang up in the lore of Eastern Europe and among orthodox Jews all over the world. The village where he had served for a few months as a rabbi was the scene of pilgrimages of thousands of orthodox Jews seeking the blessing of the Chofetz Chaim.

In 1873 Rabbi Cohen published a book in Hebrew, entitled the "Chofetz Chaim," listing all the forms of slander from which a pious Jew must guard himself. It was because of this book that he became known as the Chofetz Chaim.

The obituary continues for several paragraphs and is followed, eight days later, by another article in *The Times* about the memorial service in Brooklyn, where the late Rabbi was eulogized by the greatest rabbis in North America. You should have such a funeral.

Word of Mouth, December 16, 2003, page 4

The second article describes the late Rabbi as "known as the 'Chofetz Chaim' to millions of Jews and revered by them as ... the most beloved and saintly rabbi known to the present generation."

\* \* \* \* \*

Is this too Jewish? When I first heard about Kit Kat, I thought "Kit Kat" was Yiddish for candy bar.

\* \* \* \* \*

Despite his great stature, Rabbi Cohen refused to accept a rabbinical position and supported himself from a small grocery run by his wife. He devoted himself to the study and teaching of Torah.

The rabbi became so famous that, according to his obituary in *The Times*, "because of his popularity all the Jews of the town flocked to his store. The Chofetz Chaim therefore closed the store on the ground he was depriving other...merchants of a living."

This was a man who believed in fair play.

He wrote on many subjects and published more than 20 books.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rabbi Cohen was known as the "Chofetz Chaim," because this is the name of his first best selling book. Published when he was 35 in 1873, *Chofetz Chaim* is a compendium of the laws of "lashon hora." Lashon hora is Hebrew for "bad tongue," like our modern phrase "to bad mouth." It is thought of as forbidden speech. *Chofetz Chaim*, the book, was so powerful and so influential that it eclipsed the author's own identity. The book wasn't known as Rabbi Cohen's book on speech. To the reverse, he became known as the Chofetz Chaim.

We find the words "chofetz chaim," in chapter 34 of the book of Psalms, versus 13 and 14: "(13) *Me ha ish*, who is the man, *he chofetz chaim*, that desireth life." *Chofetz chaim*: to desire life. The verses continue: "Who is the man that desireth life and loveth days, that he may see good therein? (14) Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile."

Word of Mouth, December 16, 2003, page 5

I take this to mean: if you desire life (*chofetz chaim*), a life you love, don't talk trash.

Now, I'm aware that Americans don't like the word, "forbidden," especially when it precedes "speech." And modern self-help psychology suggests that we should not bottle up any thoughts. We should "let it all hang out."

But stay with me here. Let's look at the Chofetz Chaim's work, not as pronouncements of good and evil, but as practical guidelines on speech. His words don't need to be moral injunctions backed up by the fear of God. His words can be good advice on living among humans, even as an atheist among atheists. These are not the rules of censorship. They are the rules of etiquette, imposed by the self and by common courtesy.

\* \* \* \* \*

As we turn to his writing on speech, let me note that the Chofetz Chaim is remembered as a great conversationalist. He was not like the quiet twins in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. In Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer-winning prose: "Speech was for them a debased form of silence." That was not the perspective of the Chofetz Chaim.

The Chofetz Chaim did not want to stop people from talking. Far from it. He taught, as the *Talmud* teaches, we humans are above all other animals, not because we think, but because we have the power of speech. That is what places us in a position of responsibility over the rest of the earth. (Mike Young could probably speak more intelligently about whether we are upholding our responsibility over the earth.)

Rabbi Cohen recognized that there was a book to be written. He worked for two years to codify centuries of thinking, from the *Bible*, from the *Talmud*, on the rules of appropriate speech.

\* \* \* \* \*

Word of Mouth, December 16, 2003, page 6

Looking inside *Chofetz Chaim*, we see the definition of lashon hora in two basic categories:

- the first: derogatory statements
- the second: damaging statements

According to the Chofetz Chaim, a derogatory statement is still forbidden, even if it does no damage.

And, similarly, a damaging statement is forbidden, even if it is not derogatory.

Looking deeper, I'll pull out four examples of speech that are lashon hora:

- The first is the most obvious: *derogatory, false words*. This is slander and we all agree that it is wrong.
- The second type of forbidden speech is usually thought to be more acceptable: *derogatory, but true words*. This is when I tell you that Louie has given \$1,000 to charity (and it's true). It's not derogatory if Louie is a man of modest means. But if Louie is a member of the Columbus Club and therefore has the means to be more generous, this is lashon hora, even if it is true.
- A third type of forbidden speech is often deemed to be involuntary: *the bearing of tales*. This is when you hear a juicy tidbit about Stanley, and you relay that information to Roberto. It doesn't matter much if it is true or not, you're just doing your social duty to keep the story moving. Alas, the Chofetz Chaim says, that's lashon hora.
- The fourth type of forbidden speech is, to me, the most interesting, and the one that gets the most argument: *complimentary, true words*. I know, this sounds counter-intuitive, but hear me out. An example might be if I were to say, "Joey is a great guy. More than that, Joey is a witty, charming and brilliant guy. In fact, Joey is the smartest guy in town and everyone loves him." If I keep going, eventually, at some point, one of you will say – as a public service – "Whoa, Artie. I know Joey. He's not perfect. I once saw him laugh at a beggar." What happens next is predictable. All of the rest of you will turn to the

dissenter and say, "Do tell us more about Joey's misbehavior." Why? Because tales of misbehavior are always more interesting than tales of virtue. For that reason, the Chofetz Chaim places the initial fault on me, for having spread what he calls "the dust of lashon hora." By spreading that dust, I've invited the dissenter to speak up.

As I said, this raises the most arguments. You will wonder: "Am I forbidden from praising someone in front of others?" According to the Chofetz Chaim, yes.

Let me suggest an experiment. In the coming days, listen for compliments. When you hear them, watch to see if eyes roll or a dissenter speaks. Watch what happens. I have found that, in approximately one in five cases, the compliment inspires a derogatory reaction within thirty seconds. It is simply amazing.

\* \* \* \* \*

This just scratches the surface of *Chofetz Chaim*. The guidelines for using speech are comprehensive and complex, forming an entire curriculum.

For those of you who are wondering: "Wait. Does the Chofetz Chaim think that all gossip is bad?" No. There are several times when gossip is permitted. In fact, here are two times when it is obligatory:

- The first: Imagine that Julie is about to marry Red. But you are Red's ex-wife and you know from miserable experience that Red hits his wife. This is a case of domestic abuse. Remember, you know this first-hand; you are his ex-wife. Then, of course, you are obliged to go to Julie and warn her. She is facing a potential future of abuse. You are obliged to gossip about Red. Her safety is more important than your tongue.

What, however, do you do, if you don't know for a fact that Red is an abuser? Let's say you are not his ex-wife. Perhaps you've heard it second-hand. Still, you must go to Julie to warn her. But, in this case, you need to advise her that you heard second-hand that Red was an abuser, that you do not know it first hand, and that she should make sure Red is not an abuser. You need to send her to his former wife for details.



- A second case of obliged gossip: Imagine that we are teachers in the same elementary school. Today we are interviewing a candidate for a teaching job in our school. Of course, we must speak about this candidate behind his or her back. The obligation to our students is greater than our obligation to be kind to the candidate.

This is similar to another case: imagine I have been cheated in business. I hear that you are about to do business with the same cheater. According to the Chofetz Chaim, I am obliged to warn you. Here, my obligation to protect your business from financial ruin supersedes my need to curb my tongue.

When the cheater is a former employee and we receive a reference call, most of us would not deliver the warning. We are afraid of the legal exposure. At times like that, we do not gossip. We fall silent. The Chofetz Chaim would say, speak up. If the dirt is real and is necessary for the caller, you are obliged to speak.

In all these cases, the Chofetz Chaim advises us to test our words against two questions: Are my words true? Must I speak them?

It's helpful, says the Chofetz Chaim to understand that lashon hora has three victims:

- Of course, the *subject*, whether present or absent, is clearly a victim. He's damaged or defamed. He must defend himself.
- The *listener* is a victim, because he must then work to determine whether this information is true and whether it is worth remembering. And, possibly, he is left to misjudge the subject of the gossip.
- The *speaker*, also, is a victim because others look at him as a besmircher. His wife looks at him as a victim at the hands of those he disparages. For example, if I complain each evening at dinner about the scoundrels who have cheated me, my wife will soon wonder why I am so often cheated. For that reason, the listener is advised to judge both the speaker and the subject kindly, even if the words are unkind.

More modern psychology suggests that the speaker suffers in another way. When you describe someone, a theory suggests, the attributes you describe are remembered as if they describe you. For instance, if I tell you that Buddy is a witty, ethical, intelligent man, you are likely to remember those attributes as if they are my attributes. Lucky for you, those are my attributes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Is all this really such a big deal? I think it is. So did Rabbi Andrew Jackson. Actually, he was no rabbi. But his life in politics taught him much about the damage words can do. President Jackson said: "The murderer only takes the life of the parent and leaves his character as a goodly heritage to his children, while the slanderer takes away his goodly reputation and leaves him a living monument to his children's disgrace."

But, again, what's the big deal? If we say something hurtful, can't we just retract our statement?

There is a classic Talmudic parable about a man who walks in his town slandering the rabbi. After doing so, he becomes contrite and goes to the rabbi's home to apologize. The rabbi stops him, saying, "Before I can accept your apology, you must go home, take a feather pillow outside, cut it open and scatter the contents to the winds." The man does so and returns to the rabbi's doorstep to apologize. This time, the rabbi says: "Now go and gather all the feathers." The man exclaims, "But that's impossible." The rabbi says: "Of course it is. And though you may sincerely regret the damage you have done and truly desire to correct it, it is as impossible to repair the damage done by your words as it will be to recover the feathers."

Does this happen? Are people damaged by the words of others, even when others try to retract their unkind words?

Every day.

Just last month, I was fascinated by an obituary in *The New York Times*. It was of an artist. I'll leave his name out, because the report included a damaging, derogatory statement. In the obituary, the dead artist had a twin who had predeceased him. They were very close twins: inseparable in art and life. Even they couldn't tell whose art was whose.

Word of Mouth, December 16, 2003, page 10

So far, so good, all true.

But, according to a correction in a later edition, also carried as a humorous filler in *The New Yorker*, the concluding paragraphs misreported that the dead man had so mourned his brother's earlier death to testicular cancer that he had his own testicles removed. Wow. That's a juicy tidbit. It was so captivating that I brought the obituary to the office to share with colleagues. I even sent it to a friend who has a twin.

The correction made it seem like an old friend had made an off-hand comment, something to the effect of: they were so close that.... And the reporter took it as literal fact. Suddenly, millions of people are introduced to a man who accomplished much in his life, but the thing we most know about him is false and defaming.

Is this a big deal? I'm sure it is devastating to his heirs. Imagine the embarrassment, the need to defend the dead, all at a time of mourning.

I believe it was Rabbi Joseph Telushkin who said: Words are not tennis balls, swatted back and forth. They are bullets, once issued, never retracted.

Moreover, technology is compounding the need for taking care with our speech. Gossip, once limited to the writings on a bathroom wall or gibes at the Algonquin Round Table are now carried much faster and much farther than feathers on the wind. With the touch of a keyboard, our words become instant messages, heard around the globe.

That's why the Chofetz Chaim advised that we should measure our words like pearls. None are cheap. All are valuable. Each one should be dispensed with care.

\* \* \* \* \*

Let me close by translating a well known word: "abracadabra." In Aramaic, abracadabra means: "With these words, I shall create it." That makes sense. It's a perfect expression for the magician pulling a rabbit from his top hat.

The Chofetz Chaim lived in a tradition of belief wherein the world was created in six days. God said, "Let there be light." And there was light. According to Genesis, God did not work with hands. The tools were words.

Word of Mouth, December 16, 2003, page 11

Again and again: He said..., and there was....

Abracadabra. With my words, I do create.

I believe that our lives are shaped more as much by our words as our DNA. Some say: We are what we eat. Maybe so. But after DNA and nutrition, I think we are shaped most by what we say and hear.

- Our words represent us.
- Future generations will look back at our books to judge our civilization.
- We shape our children with our words.
- Our days are shaped by our words.

Abracadabra. With our words, we do create our lives.

Thank you.

\* \* \* \* \*