



The Chofetz Chaim: Time For Business School

Even the most cursory look at Jewish ethics will reveal a vehement — at times almost obsessive — concern with preventing gossip. Even little kids grow up being warned against לִשְׁוֹן רָעָה (“Lashon Hara”), literally the “evil tongue” — a horrific sin in traditional Jewish ethics. The great rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838-1933, and [no relation as far as I know although it would be cool](#)) wrote an entire book about it, the *Chofetz Chaim*, which is still studied today by Jews of all persuasions, and is usually referred to as the *Chofetz Chaim* despite all of his other works. What’s more, think of the name of that book: it literally means “desire for life,” as if life and the prevention of gossip were the same. Many rabbis have ruled that even embellishing a story only to entertain and even hurting no one is strictly forbidden.

Okay. But where does such an emphasis come from? And what does it have to do with the environment?

Patience, grasshopper. The injunction originally stems from Leviticus 19:16, which reads in Hebrew, לֹא תֵצֵא כְּמִשְׁנֵי רֵעִי בְּדַמִּי וְלֹא תִשָּׁבֵעַ בְּדַם רֵעִי וְלֹא תִשָּׁבֵעַ בְּדַם רֵעִי וְלֹא תִשָּׁבֵעַ בְּדַם רֵעִי. This is usually translated something like, “Do not go out as a talebearer among your people; neither shall you stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor; I am the LORD.” Just about every translation I have seen renders it this way.

But recently, I was reading [Allan L. Mittleman’s](#) wonderful book, *A Short History of Jewish Ethics*, and in passing he mentions something with potentially profound implications. The

key word here is רַחִיל, transliterated *Rachil*, which usually goes by “talebearer.” Mittleman points out that while that is true, the word derives from the root מ-כ-ל, which means “merchant.” Could that be true? I checked my copy of the Brown-Driver-Briggs concordance, and it seems to be: some references use it as referring to gossip, and others use it as referring to trade and the merchant class.

**Whoa.** To the extent that the לֹא תֵלֵךְ כְּסוֹמֵךְ injunction is about merchants, it opens up huge vistas to think about environmental ethics. It most assuredly is **not** saying that being a merchant is bad; there are literally hundreds of laws, decisions, and ethical commands on the proper conduct of private business. But instead, what it suggests is that one should not “walk around” or “go out” as a merchant; in other words, one should not apply the rules of private business to spheres where it does not apply.

It's not hard to see where this is going. Interpreting the injunction in this way would yield an approach to environmental policymaking that is cautious and conservative in allowing purely economic considerations to dominate the preference for rules. It's not *bad* to act like a merchant, but you shouldn't *walk around* doing it. There are a host of other ways to think about problems: justice, fairness, tradition, equality (not to mention humanity's relationship with God). Jamming everything into economic models or cost-benefit calculations violates the injunction. Note, by the way, how much better the “merchant” interpretation goes with the immediate context: you don't go about as a merchant because then you consider everyone as things to be added into a calculation, in other words, you would stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.

As I have argued before, this conclusion should not come as a surprise, because [religion is not economics](#). But given how overwhelmingly important the לֹא תֵלֵךְ כְּסוֹמֵךְ injunction has been in the history of Jewish ethics and spirituality, it also shows that skepticism about utilitarian economic thought lies in the same place. The Chofetz Chaim (as well as other great Jewish philosophers) could take that one injunction and spin it out into volumes of brilliant ethical thought concerning the nature of good speech. Since [the Torah has 70 faces](#), one need not denigrate that tradition in the least. But maybe it is time to examine this other profound — and very hidden — face.