

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

Chapter 64

There is one time the Torah gives us an extra measure of warning about something prohibited. That is in Shemos (23:7), when the Torah instructs us to stay clear of falsehood and says, *midvar sheker tirschak*, "Distance yourself from a false word." The holy Sassover Rebbe once said that the passuk could be interpreted inversely: "If you say a false word you will find yourself distanced and far from Hashem - for Hashem is truth!"

We live in a world that builds its interaction through speech. Humans were given the gift of being able to communicate, and hence every word we use must be filtered and deciphered so that it represents what we really want to relate. So often we carry with us so much baggage, so many bits of anger and self-imposed conflict, that our words become something different than what we would imagine they should be, and certainly a far cry from Hashem's truth.

In parashas Lech Lecha we find Hashem telling Avraham Avinu, "And I will bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you" (Bereishis 12:3). Rashi explains that fathers will tell their sons, "Be like Avraham!"

The Imrei Emes related how as a young child his brother once asked their father, the Sfas Emes, the following question: If all the families of the earth will bless through Avraham, who are the ones who will curse him?' The Sfas Emes replied that a rav often has major problems in his relationship with parts of his community. The people have all sorts of complaints and curse him roundly behind his back. And yet, when they bless their own children they want them to be "like the Rabbi."

Yes, words can be tricky at times, and dangerous missiles as well.

As a communal Rav I am often confronted with what I call "loaded shailos." These usually go something like this: "Rabbi, what do you think should be done if someone...?" In this space you can fill in any nefarious deed you care to imagine. "Shouldn't that person be told not to come to shul, or if he does, shouldn't the gabbai deny him an aliya?"

Such "shailos" are usually asked right after davening, when you are trying to get back home to help put your kids on the school bus. Notice that it is also the time when many baalabatim have already finished their prayers and have had a bit of time to shmooze about the latest events. You come

along, and bang! the shaila is sprung upon you. It always sounds as if it's a klutz kasha, an inconsequential, illogical and absurd question, and it is always quite clear that the answer must be a resounding "NO!"

Beware, nothing is as it seems, and usually the question is just the tip of a huge, ugly, sadly dangerous iceberg. Rabbanim all know this and have learned through experience never to take things as presented. But it's hard to always be on your toes one hundred percent of the time. One slight nudge of the rabbi's head, or a kvetch with his eyebrow, and the questioner will have some more ammunition to pass along the road he wends toward discord and machlokes.

People are so complicated; we are all made up of many different facets. It's really just impossible to assume that you know exactly what someone is thinking when he asks or says something. Whole worlds can be destroyed by the slanted viewpoints that are often posing the questions or writing the words. In truth, we each must pray to Hashem that we shouldn't become victims of such actions. Even more, we should ask Hashem to guide us and help us in not saying or forming opinions based on our own skewered agendas. The psalmist, who saw through his divine gift of foresight just how muddled the human condition could be, created just such a prayer. Follow the words of this kapitel and see just how much David understood us.

Shema Elokim koli besichi..., "Hear, Hashem, my voice in fervent prayer, from the terror of the enemy preserve my life." Chazal tell us that this psalm was originally created for David's descendant Daniel, who was thrown into the lion's den. Today we don't have that many lions about; however, the jungle we live in has its own dangers. We see so many forces that surround us with threatening actions - not only as a people, but as individuals as well. When one is living in emotional anguish, his life is in fact in danger. The mental scars caused by others' words can rip us into ribbons that sever our life, just as the lions that paced around Daniel could have. We too ask for our very lives to be preserved, for without a sense of self-confidence we are lost.

Tastireini misod merei'im..., "Shelter me from the council of evildoers, from the gathering of workers of iniquity." We all need a place of safety, a shelter that will keep us from those who gather people together to do evil. Unfortunately, in communal life there are some who, because of their own problems, will jump onto any bandwagon that seems to be popular. We should find the strength to beware of such gangs even when they wear the garb of doing good. In every instance we should ask Hashem for the wisdom to discern which issues are real and which are being driven by mean-spirited motivations.

Asher shanenu kacherev leshonam..., "Who have whet their tongues like a sword, and have aimed their arrows, a bitter word." There is nothing more piercing than a bitter word aimed at the heart of a vulnerable soul. This is bullying, and its results are devastating.

Liros bamistarim tam..., "To shoot in secret at the innocent, suddenly they shoot and are not afraid." When we are in the grip of self-righteous indignation, all sense of right and wrong can flee before

us. We cannot see that we are acting in an ugly fashion, nor that what we are doing will destroy innocent souls. Perpetrators have no fear, for all their sensitivities are overridden by the adrenalin of their own ego.

Yechazeku lamo davar ra..., "They encourage each other to do evil matters, they tell of laying hidden snares, they say, Who will see them?" "Such matters have a way of snowballing; things gather up quicker and quicker, the good with the bad, the clean and the dirty. Those involved become more and more emboldened. Even the most casual student of communal events will have seen examples of this. People scurry about, leaving evil reports here, derogatory stories there, building a web that they feel will support their own weaknesses.

Yachpesu olos..., "They devise false iniquities, they have completed a diligent search; hiding their falsehood within themselves and in the depth of the heart." The greatest weakness of man is his ability to talk himself into anything. No matter what we do, we can and do justify our acts to ourselves. This is what in Kotzk was called zech opnaren, fooling oneself, and it is the root of much pain. The simple truth is that without self-justification we would never act badly. So the yetzer hara gives us a thousand reasons to do bad, and allows us to embed this so deep in our hearts that we actually no longer see things for what they are.

Vayorem Elokim cheitz pisom..., "Then Hashem shot them with an arrow, suddenly they were wounded. And they were made to stumble by their own tongues; all who see them shake their heads." But you know something - it's all just smoke and vapor. In one swift stroke all can change. Hashem changes the script we call life, and those who sought to do evil are ultimately found to stumble on their own words. Things have a way of unraveling, and the truth does surface, for Hashem is truth. Yes, the holy Sassover was right - Hashem and lies can't live together. We need just keep our focus and never lose our own way.

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