

THE POWER OF SPEECH

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. Understanding the Power of Speech

The Torah states, "If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate (chillul) his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do." The Torah teaches us that one's word is sacred and that if one makes a vow or an oath the ramifications of breaking it are severe. If one violates his oath, he is subject to the court-imposed penalty of lashes. We see from this that our speech is powerful and binding.

There are many mitzvahs, which require verbalization. For example the mitzvot of the recitation of the Shema, daily Tefillah, (prayer -Amidah), Berchas HaMazon (Grace after meals), etc. all require one to verbalize them in order to fulfill one's obligation. If one only mediated the Shema or did not verbalize the Amidah one does not fulfill his obligation. If one wants to make a vow or an oath one also needs to articulate it in order for it to take affect. Thinking a vow or an oath without verbalization has no value whatsoever and therefore is not binding.

Regarding, Lashon Hara (Evil Speech) and Rechilus (Tale Bearing) one usually violates it when he verbalizes his criticisms of others when they have no constructive value. The Gemara in Tractate Arachin states, "The magnitude of the sin of one who speaks lashon hara is more serious than one who violates three cardinal sins." Meaning that there is a certain aspect of evil, which lies within Lashon Hara, which is more serious. The Gemara in Tractate Shevuot tells that if one violates his vows, one of the possible ramifications of this transgression is that his wife and children could pass away. We see from this passage of the Gemara that if one violates his speech in these contexts the consequences could be tragic (G-d forbid). What lies in the power of speech that makes it so potent?

The only species that has the ability to speak and express their intellect is the human being. The Torah tells us that G-d said to His heavenly retinue, "Let us create Man in our image and form." The Torah continues and says "G-d blew into Man's nostrils a Soul of life, thus becoming a living creature." Targum Unkolus (Aramaic translation of Unkolus) explains the meaning of "living creature" means "a speaking spirit". We see from the Torah that Man's ability to express himself through speech is only as a result of the infusion of a soul. Therefore speech is an expression of our spirituality. The essence of the human being is a spiritual species contained within a physical body.

Regarding vows, the Torah states, "he shall not desecrate (chillul) his word". Evidently, the inference

of the word "desecrate" indicates that there is an aspect of sacredness to one's speech. Therefore violating one's word is considered a desecration. Now we can understand that if one expends the power of speech inappropriately such as Lashan Hara and Rechilus or if one violates his vow or oath the consequences are dire.

If the power of speech is an outgrowth of our spirituality it is clear and understood that it must be invested in areas of our spirituality. Therefore in order to fulfill our obligation of the Shema it is not sufficient to mediate it but rather it must be declared verbally. In terms of affecting our spirituality and the spirituality of the world, verbal expression is needed. As the Torah tells us, G-d created existence through verbal expression. The Torah states, "G-d said, 'Let there be light'" etc. As the Mishna in Pirke Avos tells us, existence came about through the "Ten Utterances" of G-d". Just as existence manifested itself only through the power of G-d's speech, so too to be effective as spiritual beings we must express our obligations through the articulation of our speech.

Reb. Chaim of Volozin z'tl in the Nefesh HaChaim explains that the word Chillul comes from the word Challal that means "void or vacuum". He explains that a Chillul Hashem is when we behave as if Hashem is absent from this existence. When one publicly violates Hashem's Will it is considered a Chillul Hashem because the person is conducting himself as if Hashem did not exist (G-d forbid). We see that the Torah uses the word Chillul regarding violating one's vow - "he shall not desecrate (chillul) his word". It is possible that the Torah means that when one violates his vow it is also as if G-d does not exist for that person because violating his word is not recognizing that his power of speech emanates from his spirituality. If a person would only understand the value of speech he would be more cognizant regarding its expenditure. One would pray differently and express himself in a more responsible manner.

2. By what Standard are We Judged?

The Torah states, "Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered unto your people (Moshe will pass away).'" Rashi cites the Chazal (Sifre) which states that despite the fact that Moshe understood that he was going to pass away after fulfilling the commandment of destroying the Midianites, "he nevertheless performed the Mitzvah with joy and he did not delay." If Moshe had decided not to act immediately upon the dictate of Hashem, he would have extended his life.

The Midrash extols Moshe by stating, "we see the praiseworthiness of Moshe that his response was without delay." The inference of the Midrash is that this level of clarity, which Moshe achieved, was even praiseworthy for a person at his level. Moshe's level of prophecy was one of a kind, as the Torah tells us "He prophesized in an awake-state and not in a sleep-state as other prophets" and G-d's communication with him was face to face (as one speaks to a peer). Despite this exceptional level of clarity and understanding Moshe could have chosen to delay the battle to extend his own life. If this was Moshe's level of understanding, why do the Chazal tell us that his choice to go to

battle is considered praiseworthy - it should have been obvious to Moshe?

The Torah states in the Portion of Shelach, "Send for yourself men (spies)." The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains the meaning of the words "for yourself" means that it is in the best interest of Moshe to send the spies because if the Jewish people would enter into the Land immediately, Moshe would have to pass away. However, if the Jews, because of their lack of faith as a result of believing the reports of the spies, Moshe's life was extended an additional thirty-nine years. During this period of time the Jews benefited greatly from Moshe's presence, influence and continuous transmission of Torah. The Jewish people were brought to another level because of Moshe's presence.

It is stated in the Book of Devarim that the Jews will not engaged in idolatry until after the passing of Moshe. Rashi in his commentary cites the Midrash, which asks that the Jews only became idolaters after the passing of Yehoshua Bin Nun, the student of Moshe, and not immediately after the passing of Moshe. The Midrash answers that we learn from this that as long as Moshe's disciple Yehoshuah Bin Nun was alive it was as if Moshe's own influence was still present. The Talmud tells us that the face of Moshe is compared to the sun and the face of Yehoshuah is compared to the moon. Meaning that although Yehoshuah was qualified to be the successor of Moshe to lead the Jews into the Promised Land, he was nevertheless only a reflection of his rebbe (as the moon reflects the light of the sun). Therefore Moshe's conflict could have been- that since his continued presence would have enhanced the spirituality of the Jewish people to a greater degree, he could have justified delaying the war with the Midianites. Nevertheless he chose not to delay and he is therefore extolled for his decision.

Yehoshua Bin Nun, the successor of Moshe Rabbeinu, led the Jewish people into the Land of Israel. Hashem commanded him upon entry to conquer the land and divide it among the tribes. Yehoshua believed that after the land was divided and the Jews were settled in Israel that he would pass away. He therefore delayed dividing the land in order to extend his life. Because he understood that as long as he would be alive the Jews would not engage in idol worship. The Midrash tells us that initially he was meant to live 120 years like his Rebbe Moshe; however, because of his delay, Hashem shortened his life by ten years. It is understood that Yehoshuah's delay was purely for the sake of Hashem because he knew that as long as he was alive the Jews would not engage in idol worship. Nevertheless because of this delay, he had ten years taken from his life.

The difficulty is if Chazal tell us that even for a person as great as Moshe Rabbeinu that his decision (not to delay) would have not been a claim against him - why was Yehoshuah punished for his decision to delay? Why is he culpable for a decision that was considered "praiseworthy" even for Moshe Rabbeinu? How do we understand this?

The answer is that there was no one with the clarity and understanding of Moshe Rabbeinu. Although the decision not to delay is considered "praiseworthy" (even for a person as great as

Moshe); nevertheless, once Moshe established the proper behavior and protocol in this given circumstance, he established a precedent to be followed without deviation. When Moshe went to war against the Midianites, he established that one should not take into account what he personally considers as being in the best interest of the Jewish people, but rather one must follow the Will of Hashem. When Hashem gives a Commandment, it should be fulfilled without delay despite the consequences that we may believe will follow. Yehoshua should have followed Moshe Rabbeinu's precedent that had been established as proper protocol. He should have not delayed regardless of how pure his intent may have been. Because of this failing, Hashem shortened his life.

There are many instances where we want to establish what is "right" or "wrong" vis-à-vis our own lives. We are very often conflicted and even convoluted to the point to have any semblance of clarity. Regardless of our mindset, the Halachic standard (Law) has been set through precedents in virtually any situation. We must follow the Law regardless of what we think it should be. Although our intent may be pure and altruistic there is no room to compromise on the Torah Law. This is why the Mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) teaches us, "Make for yourself a Rav.. (Mentor)." A Rav is a Torah personality who has a level of clarity because of his proficiency in Torah Law and is therefore able to advise people in their lives in proper manner. If we follow this prescription of life, despite our limitation, we will be directed along the proper path.

3. We All Have a Responsibility to One Another

The Torah in the Portion of Maasei presents us the laws regarding the person who kills inadvertently. If a person inadvertently kills another individual and the Sanhedrin (the Court of Israel) rules that the killing came about as a result of negligence, the murderer must flee to a City of Refuge. If he should leave the City of Refuge he can be killed by the closest relatives of the murder victim avenging the blood of the deceased. He must remain in the City of Refuge until the passing of the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). Once the High Priest passes away, the inadvertent murderer no longer needs the protection of the City of Refuge and he is considered fully atoned for the murder.

The Gemara in Tractate Makkos asks - "Why is it only after the passing of the Kohen Gadol that the murder is released from his captivity? What is the connection between the Kohen Gadol and the inadvertent murderer?" The examples given in the Torah of the accidental killings are -if a one throws a stone into a forest and it accidentally kills someone or if while chopping wood either a splinter shoots out and kills a person in the proximity of the wood chopper or if the ax flies off of its handle and kills a person within its proximity - the individuals who are the cause of these accidents must flee to the City of Refuge. The Talmud asks in all of these tragic situations what is the culpability of the Kohen Gadol? The Gemara answers that if the Kohen Gadol would have prayed sufficiently on behalf of the Jewish people such a tragedy would not have occurred. The Mercy of Hashem would have caused the woodchopper or the stone-thrower to be more cognizant of his actions and thus would avert this tragedy. Another way the Mercy of Hashem would have averted the tragedy is if the person (who fell victim to these irresponsible actions) would not have been in

the proximity of the wood being chopped or the stone being thrown. It was only because the Kohen Gadol did not fulfill his obligation to pray for Mercy for his generation sufficiently that he is held culpable.

The Gemara presents a situation in which a person inadvertently killed prior to the appointment of the Kohen Gadol and the Sanhedrin judges the murderer guilty only after the Kohen Gadol was appointed. Despite the fact that tragedy had already taken place before the Kohen Gadol was appointed, the halacha (law) is that the inadvertent murderer must remain in the City of Refuge until the passing of the Kohen Gadol. The Gemara asks - "Why is the Kohen Gadol culpable to any degree in this situation if the tragedy had already taken place?" The Gemara answers that although the murder had already taken place, the ruling of the Sanhedrin could have been that the murderer is found "innocent" rather than "guilty". Since the Court found the inadvertent murderer guilty (who had to flee to the City of Refuge), there is culpability to the Kohen Gadol because he should have prayed sufficiently that there should have been such an abundance of Mercy that the Court would have seen this individual "innocent" despite the incriminating evidence. The pain and tragedy brought upon this person would have been averted.

The lesson that we are able to draw to ourselves from the fate of the Kohen Gadol is that whenever a person has the ability to help another individual through prayer (tefillah) to evoke Rachamim (Hashem's Mercy) or through action and he does not, there is a degree of culpability to that individual. If we are able to pray to Hashem to sensitize the hearts of the Jews who have been alienated to Judaism and we do not, what is our level of culpability? Each of our tefillos could have a profound impact on all existence. Of course the Kohen Gadol is the most qualified individual to evoke the Mercy and Kindness of Hashem; however, we all as Jews (who are all interconnected with one another) have the ability to affect one another in a very positive way. The fact that we see that the needs of the Klal Yisroel are so great in many areas of our Jewish existence is an indication that we must all pray more, study more Torah, and do more acts of kindness.

4. Seeing it clearly (FROM PARSHAS PINCHAS)

We find that the characteristic of zealotry always identifies with the tribe of Levi. At Sinai when Moshe wanted to purge the Jewish people of those who worshipped the Golden Calf he asked, "who is for Hashem shall come with me." The Levyim, although they were small in number immediately rose to the occasion. Pinchas, who was zealous for Hashem was a Levi. After Dinah, the daughter of Yaakov was raped; Shimon and Levi (her two brothers) avenged her defilement. When Levi was born, the Midrash tells us that Hashem sent the angel Gabriel to name Yaakov's third son - "Levi". This indicates his innate spirituality from conception. During the Second Temple Period, when the Jews were being Hellenized by the Greeks and the Temple was defiled with idolatry, the family of Chashmanayim (who were Kohanim of the tribe of Levi) rose up against the mighty Greeks to preserve the glory of Hashem. Thus, reestablishing purity and Torah Judaism. The Midrash tells us that the Levyim at the time of the Egyptian bondage would go out into the fields, where the Jews

were working, and teach them about their ancestry and their heritage. The question is - why do the Levym possess the characteristic of zealotry more than all of the other tribes?

In the case of Pinchas, his zealotry emanated from his understanding and internalizing (to the core of his being) the chillul Hashem that was being perpetrated. Pinchas could not have reacted in this manner (jeopardizing his own life) unless he understood with absolute clarity the gravity of what was taking place. The only person who has the capacity to have that depth of understanding is one who is truly spiritual. This is why the Levym throughout history have always been associated with zealotry because they are the most spiritual attuned members of the Jewish people.

When the Levym saw and understood the spiritual devastation that was being brought upon the Jewish people by the Greeks, they reacted in the most vehement way and rallied the Jews to defeat the Greeks. Although the Greek armies outnumbered the handful of Chashmanayim, this was not a point of concern for them. They saw the spiritual extinction of the Jewish people at hand and reacted regardless of the risk. Only the Chashmanayim, who were of the tribe of Levi, had the capacity and understanding to appreciate the threat - thus acting upon it.

The Torah tells us that the tribe of Levi did not receive a portion in the Land of Israel as the other tribes - as the verse states "Hashem is their portion." The Levym are the officiants of Hashem and had their vis-à-vis responsibilities the Mishkan (the Temple). The Rambam states at the end of the Laws of Shmitta and Yovel that every Jew has the ability to be classified as a member of the tribe of Levi. How is it possible that any Jew can join the tribe of Levi? The Rambam explains that if a Jew devotes his life to the pursuit Torah study then Hashem values him as a Levite. Hashem becomes his portion, thus he is provided for by Hashem because he has dedicated his life to the service of Hashem (as the Levi does).

The Gemara in Tractate Taanis states that if one sees a Torah sage becoming angry (when the Torah is being violated), it is the Torah that he possesses which causes him to become angry. As the verse states, "My (Hashem) words (Torah) are like fire." Rashi in his commentary explains that the Torah sage has a broadness and depth of understanding and therefore is more sensitive to the wrong which is being done. The average person who does not have the sensitivity of a Talmud Chacham (Torah Sage) does not react to the wrong in this manner because he does not have the capacity to sense the wrong to the same degree as the Torah sage.

The Levi, because of his innate spiritual dimension, has the natural capacity to perceive and internalize the world within the context of Torah. Therefore the Levi is motivated to action when the spiritual citadel is being breeched.

Therefore there is a commonality between the Talmud Chacham and the Levi in that they both have a spiritual sensitivity which causes them to see when the standard of Torah Judaism is in jeopardy. Thus responding to what has to be done without any consideration of themselves. The Gemara in Tractate Menachos says that a Jew can fulfill his basic obligation of studying Torah day and night by

reciting the Shema of the morning and of the evening. A person whose only relevance to Torah study is in this manner may fulfill his obligation of the study of Torah; however, he will surely not have the positive affect of Torah upon him to have a depth of understanding and appreciation of spirituality. The person who dedicates his life to Torah study has the "fire of Torah" within him and therefore has a sense of clarity just as the Levi.

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