

SPEECH IS THE ESSENCE OF MAN

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The two parashot that are read this week deal primarily with the laws of tzara'at and the process of obtaining purification from that ailment. Regarding this, R' Zvi Yehuda Kook z"l (1891- 1982; rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Merkaz Harav) taught:

The Torah necessarily encompasses man's entire existence. Certainly the Torah relates to a normal, healthy person. The first part of the Book of Vayikra describes lofty spiritual levels - the sacrifices and the dedication of the mishkan. However, the Torah is meant to direct a person, and the life of a typical person includes times of illness. In Parashot Tazria and Metzora we meet the Jew when he is in an unhealthy state, specifically, when he is spiritually unhealthy.

The unique aspect of the human being is his power of speech. Thus, on the verse (Bereishit 2:7), "And G-d blew into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living being," Onkelos comments, "He became a speaking spirit." Man's speech reveals his thoughts. Man has within him a special soul, and that soul's power reveals itself through speech. Man is known to be a social creature, and society is made possible by speech.

On the other hand, speech is a terrifying and horrible thing when used in an impure fashion. This is why Chazal speak so strongly of the evils of lashon hara. When one corrupts the power of speech, he corrupts the essence of the human being.

At the head of all illnesses are those which come from unhealthy speech. All other faults stem from there. When man is worthy, he radiates the light of Torah on his surroundings. When he is unworthy, there will (G-d forbid) be tzara'at in his house. (Ha'Torah Ha'go'ellet II p.134)

"The rest of the oil that is on the kohen's palm, he shall place upon the head of the person being purified; in order to bring him to atonement before Hashem." (14:29)

R' Meir Simcha Hakohen of Dvinsk (died 1926) asks: Regarding the sacrificial offering of a wealthy person who has been struck with tzara'at, the Torah says (14:20), "The kohen brings him atonement." This implies that he has been fully purified and forgiven. In contrast, regarding the poor person, our

verse says, "[I]n order to bring him to atonement before Hashem." This implies that the pauper has come closer to achieving atonement but has not yet attained it. Why is there a difference between a rich person and a poor person?

Our sages teach that tzara'at is a consequence of haughtiness. While haughtiness is wrong, a rich person's haughtiness is at least understandable, as it is written (Devarim 8:13-14), "And you increase silver and gold for yourselves, and everything that you have will increase. And your heart will become haughty and you will forget Hashem, your G-d." In contrast, what would cause a poor person to act haughtily other than a bad character? Therefore, the Torah says, "in order to bring him to atonement." Because of his bad character, his atonement is not yet completed with the oil being placed on his head. (Meshech Chochmah)

The above explanation is illustrated by the following story: A chassid who visited his rebbe and said, "Rebbe, I brag too much, and because I know that humility is a good trait, I would like your help."

Before the rebbe could respond, his study door opened and in walked a sobbing chassid. He managed to regain his composure just long enough to say that a mad dog was killing all his chickens, and soon his entire livelihood would be lost. Turning to his first visitor, the rebbe ordered, "Go help this man."

"Who me?" the chassid said incredulously. "I'm scared of the dog." So the rebbe offered some advice to the second chassid, who then left.

Immediately another chassid entered and asked the rebbe's opinion regarding a match that had been proposed for his daughter. "What do you think?" the rebbe asked his original visitor.

"How can I give advice?" the chassid responded. "I'm not an educated man." So the rebbe made some remarks to his latest visitor, and he too left.

A fourth chassid entered and asked the rebbe for a loan so that he could buy a certain investment that had been offered to him. "Please lend this man 1,000 gold coins," the rebbe said to his first supplicant.

"But I myself have no money," the chassid answered. Hearing that, the rebbe opened his drawer, removed some bills from the box of the gemach (free loan fund), and turned them over to this fourth visitor.

At last the rebbe and the first chassid were alone. "Tell me," the rebbe asked his chassid. "You have no money, no education, and you are a coward. Exactly what is it that you brag about?"

That is, perhaps, the meaning of the gemara (Nedarim 38) which teaches: "G-d rests his spirit only on one who is brave, wise, wealthy and humble." What G-d really wants is the fourth trait, humility. However, in the absence of the other traits, humility is too easy.

Pirkei Avot

"Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai received the Torah from Hillel and Shammai. He used to say, 'If you have studied much Torah, do not keep the goodness for yourself, because this is what you were created to do.'

"Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai had five [primary] disciples . . . He said to them, 'Go out and discern which is the proper way to which a person should cling.'

"Rabbi Eliezer says, 'A good eye.'

"Rabbi Yehoshua says, 'A good friend.'

"Rabbi Yose says, 'A good neighbor.'

"Rabbi Shimon says, 'One who considers the outcome of a deed.'

"Rabbi Elazar says, 'A good heart'." (Chapter 2, mishnah 9, 10, 13)

R' Eliezer Zvi Safran (the "Komarno Rebbe"; died 1898) writes: After Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai taught that a person who has studied Torah has an obligation to share what he has learned, he told his students to "go out" in the world and begin teaching. However, people's souls are different, and each person needs to find a mentor to whom his soul can relate. Therefore, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai told his students to identify and make known their own approaches to spiritual success so that would-be students could choose an appropriate teacher from among them and cling to that teacher.

Rabbi Eliezer responded: A good and kindly eye is the key to success because one who looks kindly on others will consider how his mitzvot and sins will affect them, and will make proper choices accordingly.

Rabbi Yehoshua contended: One's own "good eye" is not enough. The key to spiritual success is having a good friend. Since no one can be on guard against sin at every moment, a good friend will help a person remain on the proper path. Thus it is written (Kohelet 4:9-10), "Two are better than one . . . for should they fall, one can lift the other; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and there is no one to lift him."

Rabbi Yose stated: A good friend can't help if he is not nearby. Rather, a good neighbor is the key to spiritual success.

Rabbi Shimon said: Even a good neighbor cannot be at your side constantly. However, if this neighbor can appreciate the outcome of your deeds, he can counsel you before you face a spiritual crisis. (Mitzvot, too, R' Safran observes, must be performed with forethought. Every mitzvah has its time and place, and not every good deed is appropriate at every moment.)

Rabbi Elazar argued: No! What good are a good eye or a discerning and insightful neighbor or friend if one does not himself have a good heart. That is the key to spiritual success! (The mishnah records that the master, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, agreed with this last opinion.) (Zekan Beto: Mishnah Yud, Ofen Dallet)

Letters from Our Sages

The following open letter was written by R' Yisrael Meir Hakohen z"l (the "Chafetz Chaim") in the month of Iyar 5686 (1926). It is reprinted in Kol Kitvei He'Chafetz Chaim, Volume I, page 84.

Through Hashem's kindness, I have reached my eighties. For nearly my entire life, I have never stopped thinking about the power of speech, regarding which there are many positive and negative commandments. These mitzvot are like hefker [roughly translated: "lawlessness"] in the eyes of the multitudes, who think that it is merely a nice custom to refrain from transgressing them.

I have come to alert the understanding people of our nation, those who have studied Torah but nevertheless do not consider these prohibitions at least equal to the prohibition of non-kosher meat - how would your hearts be pained and how would you hate someone who caused you to drink soup made with non-kosher meat?! In contrast, if person "A" tells person "B" that "C" did such-and-such, and based on that information "B" shames "C" in public, and later "B" finds out that "C" did no such thing, nevertheless "B" typically will not remain angry at "A" (who caused him to transgress numerous sins) . . .

The Ramban writes at the end of Parashat Ki Tetze regarding the verse, "Remember what Hashem, your G-d, did to Miriam": "We are commanded to tell our children and future generations. Although it might have been appropriate to hide Miriam's sin and not to speak ill of tzaddikim, nevertheless, the Torah commanded to reveal the sin so that the dangers of lashon hara will be known to all. This is because it is a horrible sin and it causes much evil, and people stumble over it constantly."

Ramban teaches us that not only is every person obligated to take care to not speak lashon hara, one must also warn his children and tell the generations after him how terrible this sin is . . . If one will fulfill the mitzvah of "Remember what Hashem did to Miriam" and will publicize this matter, this will be a great aid to him in not speaking prohibited matters.

Seeing the importance of the matter, I have seen fit to lower the price of my works Chafetz Chaim, Shemirat Halashon volumes one and two, and Chovat Ha'shemirah for any person who will join a study group consisting of at least five people learning the above works together.

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ("lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah"), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Project Genesis](#) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>. Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible.
