

# THIS IS THE WORD

by Shlomo Katz

## Parshas Matos

### This Is The Word

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Today's Learning:  
Menachot 11:9-12:1  
O.C. 169:8-10  
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Gittin 15  
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Ketubot 71

Our parashah opens: *"Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of Bnei Yisrael, saying, 'Zeh ha'davar / This is the word that Hashem has commanded'."* Rashi observes that many prophets (including Moshe) introduced their messages with the phrase "Ko amar Hashem / So said Hashem," but only Moshe introduced some of his messages with "Zeh ha'davar / This is the word."

R' Yaakov Kaminetsky z"l (Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vodaath; died 1986) elaborates: Our Sages teach that all of the prophets saw their prophecies with an "unclear vision," while Moshe saw with a "clear vision." In other words, all prophets (besides Moshe) had to interpret the visions they saw, a process that could be affected by the prophets' own personalities and predilections. Moshe's prophecy was different; he understood exactly what G-d meant and transmitted it literally and perfectly. He could say, "This is the word that Hashem commanded."

Why is this message alluded to in our parashah? R' Kaminetsky explains: The first section of Parashat Matot presents the laws of vows and oaths. These laws demonstrate man's special status in that, through a vow or oath, a person can, in effect, create new mitzvah obligations. For example, if a person says, "I swear that I will eat this loaf of bread," it becomes a mitzvah for him to eat that loaf of bread. If a person says, "Apples are forbidden to me like a sacrifice," it becomes a mitzvah for him to refrain from having any benefit from apples. This ability of man to enact new laws might lead one to question the Divine origin of the Torah. Accordingly, the Torah chooses this context to inform us that

Moshe's prophecy - indeed, the transmission of the entire Torah - was a literal transmission of Hashem's words. (Emet L'Yaakov)

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*"Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of Bnei Yisrael, saying, This is the thing that Hashem has commanded: If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not profane his word . . ."* (Bemidbar 30:2-3)

Our Sages derive from these verses that, although one may not nullify his own vow, vows may, under certain circumstances, be nullified by qualified rabbis. R' Itamar Schwartz shlita (of Yerushalayim) observes that this halachah leads to an insight which can become a powerful tool in resisting the temptation to speak lashon hara. He explains:

We are used to thinking that, once we have spoken, the words are gone and we have no more connection to them. However, this cannot be true, for if it were, how could vows be nullified? Nullifying a vow is, in effect, taking back the words that one has spoken. How can one take the words back if they are "gone"?

Rather, the correct understanding of speech is that the words we utter become a part of us. (While this may be an esoteric concept, we see a physical manifestation of it in the fact that our words form memories in our minds, R' Schwartz observes.) Even more, our words form bonds between us and the person about whom we speak. This is the secret behind the well-known teaching that one who speaks lashon hara "receives all of the sins" of the one about whom he spoke. By speaking about another person's faults, one actually binds himself to those faults. [Conversely, this may explain one of the benefits of relating stories about tzaddikim.] (B'lvavi Mishkah Evneh Vol. V, p.237)

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*"He shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do."* (30:3)

R' Yehoshua Leib Diskin z"l (1817-1898; rabbi of Brisk, Poland; later in Yerushalayim) was once present at a hesped / eulogy for one of his students. Following the hesped, a "Kail Malai" was recited, and the assembled crowd dispersed.

R' Diskin then approached the gabbai and handed him a coin. He said, "I am giving this coin to charity in memory of the deceased on behalf of everyone who was present today." He explained: When the gabbai recites a Kail Malai, he often says the phrase, "in the merit that all of the congregation promises to give charity on behalf of the elevation of the soul (of the departed)." I, said R' Diskin, am afraid that people will forget to fulfill this vow that was made on their behalf, so I am acting as their representative. [Ed. note: Perhaps R' Diskin held that the "Amen" recited after the Kail Malai effects acceptance of the vow. Note also that the same concern arises with prayers for the ill.] (Quoted in Ve'karata La'Shabbat Oneg)

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## Pirkei Avot

*"Yose ben Yo'ezer of Tzreidah and Yose ben Yochanan of Yerushalayim received [the tradition] from them. Yose ben Yo'ezer of Tzreidah says, 'Let your house be a meeting place for sages; sit in the dust of their feet and drink in their words thirstily.'*

"Yose ben Yochanan of Yerushalayim says, 'Let your house be open wide; treat the poor as members of your household; . . .'" (Chapter 1, mishnayot 4-5)

R' Yisrael Meir Lau shlita (former Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel) asks: Why does the mishnah say that Yose and Yose received the tradition "from them" (plural) when the previous mishnah lists only one leader--Antignos. The answer, apparently, is that Yose and Yose originally were students of Antignos' own teacher, Shimon Ha'tzaddik, who is mentioned two mishnayot earlier. After the latter died, they continued to study under his disciple, Antignos.

R' Lau notes that this supposition is borne out by the progression of the lessons that each of these sages teaches in this chapter. First, Shimon Ha'tzaddik teaches (mishnah 2), "The world depends on three things - on Torah study, on the service of G-d, and on kind deeds."

Next comes Antignos, who highlights one of his teacher's three pillars -- service of G-d. Specifically, Antignos teaches (mishnah 3), "Do not be like servants who serve G-d for the sake of receiving a reward..."

After him, Yose ben Yo'ezer stresses another of Shimon Ha'tzaddik's three pillars -- Torah study. He teaches (mishnah 4), "Let your house be a meeting place for sages . . ."

Finally, Yose ben Yochanan emphasizes the remaining one of Shimon Ha'tzaddik's three pillars -- kind deeds. Thus he teaches (mishnah 5), "Let your house be open wide; treat the poor as members of your household...." (Yachel Yisrael)

What is meant by: "Treat the poor as members of your household"? R' Shlomo Kluger z"l (1784-1869; rabbi of Brody, Galicia) explains: Just as a man does not support his wife and children with any expectation of reward, so one's intention in supporting the poor should not be to receive reward.

Alternatively, R' Kluger writes, the mishnah is teaching that just as one not only feeds his family but also smiles at them and converses with them, so one should act towards the poor who knock on his door. In this light, we can understand why our mishnah includes the instruction, "Do not converse excessively with women." Lest a man think that giving charity is an excuse for acting in a familiar manner towards women, the mishnah reminds us that this is not so. (Magen Avot)

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R' Ben Zion Abba Shaul z"l

R' Ben Zion Abba Shaul was born in Yerushalayim in 1924 to R' Eliyahu, an immigrant from Persia, and his wife, Benaya. Although a shoemaker by trade, R' Eliyahu was also a dedicated scholar. Benaya, too, valued Torah study; when she was pregnant with the future R' Ben Zion, she asked every scholar she met to bless her that her son should grow up to be a talmid chacham.

At age 11, young Ben Zion entered Yeshivat Porat Yosef. His first teacher was R' Yehuda Sadkah, who taught a class of young prodigies that also included the future Chief Rabbi and renowned posek R' Ovadiah Yosef. R' Ben Zion continued to progress to the highest class taught by R' Ezra Attiah. Eventually, R' Ben Zion himself became rosh yeshiva.

When R' Ben Zion was about 20 years old, one of the leading American sages, R' Eliezer Silver, came to Yeshivat Porat Yosef in the company of a wealthy American who was investigating which yeshiva was most worthy of his sizable donation. R' Ben Zion was chosen as the student to be tested by R' Silver, who asked the young scholar a question in the obscure area of Taharat (laws of ritual purity). When R' Ben Zion gave his answer, R' Silver said that he had asked the same question 40 years earlier to R' Meir Simcha Hakohen of Dvinsk (author of Ohr Sameach and Meshech Chochmah) and had received the same answer. R' Ben Zion later told R' Attiah that he had a second answer to the question as well, but since the first answer sufficed to secure the donation, offering a second answer might have been considered showing-off.

R' Ben Zion was recognized by Ashkenazic and Sephardic scholars alike for his "amelut" (inadequately translated "effort" or "toil") at Torah study. It is said that when he finished delivering a Torah lecture, he would inevitably be soaked with perspiration. His hatmadah / diligence also was legendary. As a young married man, he lived next door to R' Ovadiah Yosef and even their walks to and from yeshiva together would be occupied with reviewing pages of Talmud by heart.

R' Ben Zion encouraged the study of kabbalah, but only for those who had purified their character traits. He used to say, "If a man doesn't know how to get along with his wife, how can he learn kabbalah and be called a mekubal?"

Besides his scholarship, R' Ben Zion was known for giving blessings that were fulfilled. When asked why he had this ability, he responded humbly, "Hashem promised Avraham that anyone who blesses Avraham's descendants will be blessed. When people come to me for blessings, they kiss my hand, which is a form of blessing to me. Thus, they themselves are blessed."

R' Ben Zion passed away on 19 Tammuz 5758 (1998). (Aleppo: City of Scholars p.83)

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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 **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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