

# POSITIVE SPEECH BUILDS A BRIGHTER WORLD

*by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch*

This week's Torah portion, Noach, is replete with conspicuous lessons of G-d's treatment of evil in the world. The most hedonistic, self-serving society in the history of the world is annihilated in a flood, and nature is permanently changed with the introduction of seasons and, with them, shortened life spans. The next generation, while unified, builds a tower to go to the heavens to fight G-d, so G-d introduces languages and ethnicities into the world. Even Noah's misuse of the vine generates a curse for one third of humanity.

Yet, for all of these glaring messages, one of the most profound messages is subtly nestled in the narrative of the initial stages of the flood. In G-d's instruction to Noah and in the account of Noah's follow through on his orders (Beraishis/Genesis 7:2 and 8) the Torah describes G-d's command that Noah take seven pairs of the animals which are clean ("tehora") and two of the animals which are not clean ("lo tehora" and "ainena tehora"). Our tradition teaches us that the Torah does not have any extra words or even any extra letters. There is a unique Hebrew word for "unclean" ("tamai"); why is it not used? Why does the Torah expend eight extra letters (in the Hebrew text) to say "not clean" instead of "unclean"?

The Talmud in the Tractate Pesachim (3a) introduces verse 8 as a proof in discussing the concept a person should never utter a coarse expression. Rashi on the Talmud notes that the alternative expressions are not inherently coarse, but that one who is wise always searches for a bright and clean articulation. Maharsha (acronym for Moreinu Harav [our teacher, the Rabbi] Shlomo Eidels of Ostroh, Poland; 1555-1632; Rosh Yeshiva/Dean and Rabbi in a number of leading communities of Poland; author of monumental commentaries on the Babylonian Talmud) questions the conclusion of the Talmud; the extra verbiage is only indicative of a lesson to be drawn if it is unique, but the existence of extra wording in both verses 2 and 8 indicates it is the norm. Maharsha resolves his own challenge with a lesson found in Tractate Bava Basra; verse 2 is teaching us to refrain from speaking disparagingly of animals, even animals which are not of Kosher species.

G-d is about to send a flood that will forever alter the course of life on earth. Thousands upon thousands of people and animals will die. The entire earth will be buried under tons of hot water that will cover the highest mountains by 25 feet, forever altering the geology and topography of the planet. The world will be uninhabitable for an entire year! And in the course of all of this - right NOW - G-d needs to teach us that refined people choose their speech carefully, even when discussing animals?

Yes. The world was destroyed because of the breakdown of ethics and fair play. The Medrash relates that the people of Noah's time would steal in legally insignificant amounts, to avoid legal recourse. These behaviors reflect the corruption within and concretize it further. Negative speech is no different. It is a reflection of our cynicism and frustration and serves to legitimize and perpetuate them. Rashi is telling us that one whose life effort is striving for G-dliness and maintaining a "G-d consciousness" in all his actions does not just avoid crass expressions, but tries to maintain a bright, positive outlook, an attitude that is manifest in his speech. And this attitude is directed at all of G-d's creations, whether they are used in our service of Him or not, whether they are Kosher or not.

Our gift of speech is like a fire. With it we have the power to warm and foster growth or, Heaven forbid, destroy. Let us use this precious, unique gift to build a bright and positive world.

Have a good Shabbos!

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