

GUARDIAN OF THE MOUTH

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read the parsha of *Ki Seitzei* which begins with going out to war. For me personally, this Shabbos is more 'coming in' than going out. I just returned home after being away for the past three weeks at a sleepaway camp that I run. I was able to write *Parshas Eikev* and *Re'eh* in advance before camp but I apologize for not getting to *Parshas Shoftim*.

The parsha is replete with mitzvos and it was hard to decide what to discuss. However, there were a few *pesukim* [verses] which sort of jumped out at me after some of the experiences that I had this summer in camp.

"Motza s'fasecha tishmore [That which comes from your mouth you shall guard][23:24]." The pasukim are actually discussing when one takes an oath to bring a voluntary offering to the Bais HaMikdash [Temple]. The Torah warns that the bringing of this offering must not be overly delayed. If you won't take this oath, there won't be any sin. You didn't have to do it. But if you did, make sure to fulfill it properly. *"Motza s'fasecha tishmore va'a'sisa [That which comes from your mouth you shall guard and fulfill]."*

The words, however, hit me in a different way. *"Motza s'fasecha tishmore [That which comes from your mouth you shall guard]."* The theme of this summer was the Sanctity of Speech. An incident occurred which drove home to me just how careful we must be with the words which come from our mouths. Very often, especially in a camp type of environment, there is a lot of good-natured banter and joking going on. In such an atmosphere it is very easy to let go a little bit and not weigh so seriously what we say. If a cute line comes to mind, say it! However, whereas we are the master of our words before they leave our mouths, once they have been vocalized, they are no longer under our jurisdiction. Even though we might have meant them one way, if they seem to indicate otherwise, all of the explaining and apologies won't undo the damage that they have caused.

The scenario was a two-hour bus ride down to the Dead Sea where there is a beautiful water park which offers separate swimming in the late afternoon. We were using a bus company which we had used the past two summers. I had established a very warm rapport with the owner of the company during our many phone conversations and he had phoned me the day before the trip to tell me that he'd be driving one of the busses and was looking forward to finally meeting me face to face. The reason the owner himself was driving was because the company had purchased two brand-new, top-of-the-line busses a few days earlier and he wanted to try them out. He also wanted to bring his son along to the water park. I knew he'd be watching to see how the 'religious camp' would behave

and I was sensitive to this being an opportunity to make a *Kiddush Hashem* [bringing honor to Hashem's Name].

In spite of the fact that he was the very wealthy owner of a large and successful business, he proved to be a very warm, friendly, down-to-earth person. Besides the obvious advantage of having a friendly driver for a bus filled with fifty children, there was also a slight disadvantage. Running the camp is pretty exhausting and I try to relax and doze off on the bus rides. Being so excited about the features and handling of his new bus, he felt the need to share it with somebody. As soon as my eyes were about to close I'd hear, "Yisroel, do you feel the way the bus...?" I would perk up and sound interested and then again try to catch a snooze. After this pattern was repeated a number of times I gave up on trying to sleep and began to ask him questions about the different features of the bus. He was only too happy to explain.

We were on a straight-away stuck behind a relatively slow moving car when he pulled out to pass him. The bus accelerated like a sports car and we were around him in a matter of seconds. The whole bus gave him a standing ovation as he proudly told me all about its 420 horsepower. One of the staff members thought that the concept of horsepower was pretty funny. Does a touch more than 420 horsepower make it 420 horse and one chicken? Can that then be upgraded to a turkey or even a goat? That was the harmless concept he had in mind when he piped up and said, "420 horses and one donkey." We all looked at him in horror, wondering how could he refer to the driver as a donkey. Thank the Good Lord, the driver had turned that moment to speak to his son and didn't hear what had been said. The counselor quickly explained what he had meant and we understood. However, I couldn't help but thinking that the driver would never have accepted the explanation as easily as we had. Two years building of a relationship and a *Kiddush Hashem* would have been dashed in a moment of carelessness. *Motza s'fasecha tishmore* [That which comes from your mouth you shall guard!]" Even, or perhaps especially, while joking around.

At the same time, this summer showed me what incredible strength can be displayed by speaking up. We were in the midst of a heated Color War and we had the entire camp lined up on either side of the basketball court for a game of 'steal the salami'. It was a very close competition with every point making a difference and there was a lot of pressure on everyone who was called to try to make the snatch. One of the last plays involved two ten year olds, being cheered by the entire camp which included campers twice their size. One boy made the grab and tried to run back across his line without being tagged. From my angle I called him safe and as a roar erupted from his team, a simultaneous groan came from the other team. Suddenly, this brave young boy took a deep breath, stood tall at 4'11" and said to me, "I felt him tag me before I crossed the line. The point goes to the other team."

That was the biggest 4'11" I have ever seen. What control of himself and of what had to be said.

"Motza s'fasecha tishmore [That which comes from your mouth you shall guard]."

Good Shabbos,

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