

LEARNING TO BE "STINGY" WITH OUR WORDS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Learning To Be "Stingy" With Our Words

Rashi on the first verse in this week's parsha [Bereishis 32:4] teaches us a lesson in Biblical grammar. [Hebrew uses single-letter prefixes such as "hey" for "the", "beis" for "in" or "with", "caf" for "like", or "lamed" for "to".] Regarding the words "Artzah Se'ir," Rashi explains that adding the letter "hey" as a suffix to a word is the same as adding a "lamed" as a prefix. Thus when the "hey" is added to the word "Aretz", land, the resulting word "Artzah" (Aleph-Reish-Tzadi-Hay) means *to* the land of Se'ir. The meaning would be the same if the Torah had written L'Aretz (Lamed-Alpeh-Reish_Tzadi) Seir.

The question may be raised, why does the Torah have such a grammatical rule? If the same number of letters are needed in either case, what is gained by introducing this Biblical construct of adding a "hey" at the end of the word in lieu of the more common prefix?

I saw a beautiful insight into this question in the name of Rav Yitzchak Vorker. The first law of running a business, or running any type of financial endeavor, is to delay the expenditure of assets. If one has a choice between spending money now and spending money later, it is always preferable to spend the money later rather than sooner. If I know that my payment is due thirty days from now, I will wait until later to pay it. Why should I pay it now?

This is the way we deal with money. We treat money as something precious. We need money. We have to preserve our "cash flow". We try to retain our money as long as possible. We dispense it only when absolutely necessary.

The Torah's relationship to words and to speaking is the same as our relationship to money. If I have to say a word -- or even a letter -- I should be so stingy in my usage of the words and letters that

when confronted with the choice -- between saying them now or saying them later - - I should always defer the utterance of the word or letter. The Torah illustrates this idea here in our pasuk by "spending the letter hey" at the end of the word rather than "spending the letter lamed" at the beginning of the word. Thus, the Torah deviates from its common practice in order to teach this lesson.

Just as we know how to be stingy with our money, we must learn to be stingy with our words. There are a multitude of sins that we commit with our mouths. When one scans the list of "Al Chet"s [for the sin of...] in the Yom Kippur confession, one immediately notices that the preponderance of these sins are related to speech: Slander, tale-bearing, scoffing, lustful speech. There are so many sins committed by our mouths. The ethical lesson to be derived from Rashi's grammatical insight is that we must be judicious with our use of letters.

The Ability To Not Be Influenced: A Good Or Bad Character Trait?

Rashi teaches a famous Gematria lesson on the words "With Laven I have lived (garti)" [Bereishis 32:5]. The numerical value of the word "garti" [I have lived] is 613 (Tarya"g). [In fact they are the identical letters in a different order.] The subtle message in Yaakov's words to Eisav was "I have lived with Lavan for twenty years, but I have kept the 613 mitzvos of the Torah; I have not learned from his evil ways."

When a person is away from his family for twenty years, without any support system to buttress him against the mores of the surrounding culture, it takes great fortitude to maintain one's religious convictions. Yaakov Avinu possessed a special attribute that gave him immunity from societal influences.

Where did Yaakov get this attribute from? Yaakov acquired this attribute from his mother, Rivkah. Rivkah was the daughter of Besuel and the sister of Lavan. Her home influences were negative, yet she remained a righteous woman characterized by kindness and piety. She transmitted the attribute of not being influenced by one's surroundings to her son, Yaakov.

But, we must remember, Rivkah had another son as well. In fact, her sons were twins! Even though they were not identical twins, all studies show that twins are very similar in nature. Why didn't Yaakov's twin, Eisav, also inherit this attribute?

Rav Matisyahu Solomon offers a brilliant insight. Eisav *did* also inherit this attribute. He had a grandfather named Avraham. He had a father named Yitzchak. He had a mother named Rivkah. He had a righteous brother named Yaakov. Eisav should certainly have turned out to be a tremendous

Tzadik [righteous man]. And yet that is not what happened. Eisav became wicked. He murdered, he practiced idolatry, he committed the worst of crimes. Why? It is precisely because he had this attribute. The same giant gene that he inherited -- like his brother -- from Rivkah, his mother, is what enabled him to ignore his positive surroundings, and grow up the way he did *despite* his environment!

The "gene" that does not let one be influenced by his surroundings can be spiritually advantageous, or it can be spiritually destructive. The same is true of all attributes that make up a person's personality. They can each be used for the greatest good or for the greatest evil. This has frightening ramifications. Any gift or blessing we possess can be used for good or for bad. It is simply a matter of free choice to determine how we will channel our G-d given powers.

The Power of Sama-el Is To Blind

The Kli Yakar [Bereishis 32:25] comments on the epic struggle between Yaakov Avinu and the Guardian Angel of Eisav (Sama-el), who represented the forces of evil in this world. Our Sages equate this angel, Sama-el, with Satan, with the Yetzer Hara [evil inclination], and with the Malach HaMaves (Angel of Death).

The Kli Yakar links the name Sama-el with the word "Suma", meaning blind. The whole goal of the evil inclination is to blind a person to reality. The ability of the Yetzer Hara to make people blind is the oldest story in the world. If we look around and see how other people act, we sometimes ask ourselves, "How can one person be so stupid? How can one person be so blind?" The answer is that is the power of the Yetzer HaRah. The worst things that happen to people are what they do to themselves. Man's own stupidity and blindness results in the most horrible of consequences.

As I was preparing this shiur [this being, of course, several years ago -- Ed.], I heard the news about the widening investigation into the Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich. I have nothing against Newt Gingrich, and this is not a political speech. Here is someone who is ostensibly a very bright fellow. Only three or four years earlier, he had brought down the former Speaker of the House, Bill Wright, on the basis of a book deal that did not pass the smell test.

I may not be as smart as Newt Gingrich. But if I were the Speaker of the House and I was the guy who brought down the previous Speaker of the House because of a scam book deal, then whatever shortcomings I may personally have, the last thing in the world that I would do would be to sign a scam book deal meant to enrich me. How on earth can a person who is so bright and so talented be so stupid as to accept an offer of a \$4,500,000 advance on a phony book deal under those

circumstances!

The answer is that he was blinded. "I became Speaker. I am now powerful. I have been making relatively small salaries and now I have my big chance. He is offering me four and a half million dollars. I am going to take it."

That is being blind. It is the bribe of money. It is the bribe of power. It is literal blindness, because everyone in the rest of the country knows it is stupidity of the highest order. This is the power of the Yetzer HaRah --

be it the Yetzer HaRah of money, of power, or of other lusts.

The problem is that we always see the stupidity in the *other* person. We do not see the stupidity in ourselves. Sama-el's whole purpose in existence is to blind the eyes of people from the light. We must guard against allowing the Yetzer HaRah blind us from that which should be as clear as the light of day.

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