



A Taste of Torah Talk Isn't Cheap

By Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher

The Ribnitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Chaim Abramowitz (1902-1995), whose efficacious blessings were much sought-after, was once visited by an individual who had run afoul of the law. The Rebbe was told that the man was seeking a blessing, as he had been accused of stealing. "Don't say that he stole!" exclaimed the Rebbe. "Say 'He took'." The Rebbe was not merely brushing off the severity of theft. Rather, he was disturbed by the use of such language; "stealing" was too uncouth a word to use. It was more sensitive to say "taking".

The Torah teaches this lesson when discussing the animals that entered Noah's Ark. The non-kosher animals, rather than being called "tamei", the Hebrew word for "impure", are referred to as "ainenu tahor", "not pure". The Torah teaches us that a great deal of sensitivity must be used when speaking.

The double parsha of Tazria-Metzora, while containing many laws, is perhaps most famous for its discussion of tzara'as, a skin ailment commonly translated as leprosy. The Ramban (Nachmanidies) tells us that tzara'as is actually a spiritual ailment that manifests itself on one's physical body. Furthermore, tzara'as can occur on garments and houses, as well. Its purpose is to alert the bearer of a spiritual shortcoming. While our Sages list a variety of evils that can lead to tzara'as, the most well-known cause is lashon hara, speaking negatively about another. The Torah, as well as the Sages, makes it quite clear that speaking negatively about others, despite the truth of the statement, is a very serious sin. But why is such severity attached to mere speech?

There has been much written and said to explain the seriousness of lashon hara, but it is important to understand

that at the root of it all is the great importance Judaism places on the power of speech. Onkelos, a Roman convert who translated the Torah into Aramaic, makes this apparent. When the Torah tells of the creation of Adam, the first human, Onkelos refers to him as a "speaking spirit".

The seat of the intellect, the spiritual aspect of man, is the mind. The body, by contrast, expresses itself primarily in the physical world. The point of transfer from the spiritual intellect to the physical takes place via speech, for it is through that medium that thoughts are expressed in the world. (Thus, the vocal chords reside in the neck, which connects the head, the location of the mind, to the rest of the body, the physical expression of a human.)

When speech is used negatively, a most fundamental element of what makes us human - the power of speech - is corrupted. When one speaks negatively of others, or even merely lacks sensitivity in manner of speech, then the purpose of mankind, to connect the physical with the spiritual, specifically through speech, is not achieved. A serious failure, indeed.

As Jews, we must constantly strive to develop this unique faculty granted us by G-d. While modern society tolerates, and even admires, humiliating others (in a guise referred to as "comedy" and "humor"), speaks openly and unabashedly about subjects that would have turned a listener's face beet-red a few decades ago, and allows "freedom of speech" to take place virtually unchecked (are parental warnings worth anything at all?), we must battle to utilize the power of speech for the purpose G-d intended - to make the world a more refined, spiritual place.

Stories For The Soul

The 3-String Violin

It was November 1995 and Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, came on stage to give a concert in New York City. Stricken with polio as a child, he has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches. To see him walk across the stage one step at a time, painfully and slowly, is a sight.

That evening, just as he finished the first few bars, one of violin strings broke. You could hear it snap - it went off like gunfire across the room. The crowd knew he'd have to make the painful trek off stage to find another string, or another violin.

But he didn't. He signaled the conductor to begin again. And he played with such passion and power and purity as they had never heard before. Everyone knows it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. But that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head.

When he finished, there was an awesome silence. And then people rose and cheered. He smiled and said, not boastfully, but in a pensive tone, "Sometimes, it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."

After giving birth, a woman brings a purification offering to the Temple. The offering consists of a sheep and a dove. The Torah says that if she cannot afford a sheep then she brings two doves. We see a simple idea that a person should never give up, but should make do with what he has.

Adapted with permission from ShulWeek, by Rabbi Baruch Lederman.

Kollel Happenings

INSIDE THE ALEPH-BAIS

There is a unique fascination with the Hebrew language and the aleph-bet. Mystical sources explain that the letters of the aleph-bet are the building blocks of the whole world. Discover the world of the aleph-bet with Rabbi Heyman in this informative, dynamic class. For time and location, contact rmh@denverkollel.org.



A DEEPER LOOK

Join Rabbi Shachne Sommers as he discusses a number of difficulties encountered in the weekly Torah portion, and develops a comprehensive approach to resolve the issues, simultaneously conveying a deeper understanding of the material being discussed.



TRUST THY FATHER

Join Rabbi Schachne Sommers for "Trust Thy Father," a series based on Chovos Ha'Levavos/ Duties of the Heart. Discover and delve into the vital Jewish concept of bitachon. The classes will resume following the Pesach break on Tuesdays, from 7:55-8:25 a.m. at Aish. For info email info@denverkollel.org or call 303-820-2855.

Interpersonal Issues Miscellaneous Laws of Lost Items

Even if the homeowner passed away, and a guest in the home, now owned by the heirs, subsequently found a long-lost item, it belongs to the heirs. (If the owner or heirs admit that it never belonged to them, but must have been lost by a previous homeowner or a

guest, a halachic authority should be consulted.)

Adapted with permission from "The Halachos of Other People's Money" by Rabbi Pinchas Bodner (Feldheim Publishers)

Ask the Rabbi Evil from Birth

Bryan at Columbia University writes:

Does the fact that we have a Yetzer Hara mean that Man is intrinsically evil?

Dear Bryan,

The Yetzer Hara is commonly translated as the "Evil Inclination." Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (the Ramchal) in "The Way of G-d" describes the role of the Yetzer Hara in man's quest for perfection.

"Man is the creature created for the purpose of being drawn close to G-d. He is placed between perfection and deficiency, with the power to earn perfection. Man must earn this perfection, however, through his own free will..."

Man's inclinations are therefore balanced between good [Yetzer Hatov] and evil [Yetzer Hara], and he is not compelled toward either of them. He has the power of choice and is able to choose either side knowingly and willingly..."

The Ramchal explains that this balance existed prior to the sin of Adam.

After his sin, however, he became more inclined to listen to the wiles of his Yetzer Hara. His job is now two-fold: First, he must even the balance between the spiritual and the physical. Then, he can work to perfect his soul until his spiritual so overwhelms the physical

that the physical becomes elevated to its level of perfection.

The Yetzer Hara is an inclination to "stray," but Man has the wherewithal to overcome it. The pull of the Yetzer Hara is the more powerful of the two inclinations, but is by no means impossible to conquer.

The Torah states:

"G-d said to Cain, 'Why are you so furious? Why are you depressed? If you do good, will there not be special privilege? And if you do not do good, sin is crouching at the door. It lusts after you but you can dominate it.'"

And the Talmud tells us how:

"So said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Israel: 'My son, I created the Yetzer Hara and I created for it the Torah as an antidote. If you toil in Torah you will not be handed over into his hands...'"

Sources:

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto - The Way of G-d, translated by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Feldheim Publishers.

The Book of Genesis, 4:6-7, [translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in "The Living Torah", Moznaim Publishing Company].

The Talmud - Tractate Kiddushin, p.30b.

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