

Parshat Va'era



Journey To Better Speech

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Journey To Better Speech is a website set up as part of an ongoing project by a group of people who are working on improving the way they speak in every element of their lives. If you feel this is important please come and join us!

Snakes and Ladders

Hashem instructs Moshe and Aharon to visit Pharoah a second time and, when Pharoah inevitably asks for a sign, Aharon should take his staff, throw it to the ground and it will turn into a snake. Aharon complies and Pharoah's magicians appear to replicate the feat. Aharon's staff then famously swallows their staffs.

The question is why a snake? And why, in last weeks parsha when Moshe said that the Jewish people would not believe that Hashem had appeared to him, Hashem made Moshe throw down his staff and it, too, turned into a snake?

Rabeinu Bachya explains that the snake transgressed with his mouth when he convinced Chava in the Garden of Eden to eat from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The snake claimed that the reason Hashem didn't let them eat was because 'He knows that when they eat from it they will be like gods'. He therefore slandered Hashem by implying that it was purely out of 'egotistical jealousy' that they had been forbidden from eating the fruit.

In both of the above situations, someone had spoken badly. In last weeks Parsha, Pharoah denied Hashem's existence saying "Who is Hashem that I should listen to His voice. I do not know Hashem", and therefore Hashem sends a sign that he will be punished for his speech just as the primeval snake had been. Moshe had suggested that the Jewish people would not believe that Hashem had appeared to him and for this Lashon Hara, however subtle, Hashem used a snake (and also leprosy on his hand - another punishment linked to Lashon Hara) to show him he had spoken inappropriately.

We see a similar concept in Parshat Chukat when the Jewish people speak negatively about the *Man* - the heavenly food

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Prayer Insights

The first thing we say when we wake up in the morning is מודה אני לפניך I give thanks before You that You returned my soul to me. That first word מודה - **to give thanks** - comes from the same root as the word הודה - **to admit**.

If we believe that we are self-sufficient, that we truly don't need anything, then we will find it almost impossible to thank in an appropriate way when people help us. At the back of our minds we may even have a resentment that now we 'owe' the person.

Only when we can **admit** that were it not that we were supported by those who care for us and of course by Hashem who provides everything, the air we breath, the food we eat, our physical and mental capabilities, only then will we appreciate what we have received. Only then will we be able to truly thank.

Sleep is a daily routine for us. We rarely consider that when we wake up in the morning we have just received our life back once again. But it is not just our life that has been returned, it is our נשמה - our soul, i.e. the desire to build and grow spiritually, to fight for what is right, that has been renewed as well.

Let's first **admit**, then **thank** and then **utilise** to the utmost what we have yet again been gifted!

Prayer Insights has been written as a zechut for a refuah sheleima for Elisha Ben Ayala, a young boy who is undergoing treatment for leukemia. Please take a moment to say some tehillim on his behalf

that they had been eating for almost 40 years. Hashem sends snakes as a punishment because they had transgressed with their mouths.

If we were to examine these cases from a deeper perspective we can see a further possible pattern. When the snake spoke Lashon Hara, it was also an attack against the very essence of the spiritual world, Hashem's omnipotence and His desire to do good to us. The snake created a crack in Chava's belief framework and the spirituality of humanity and the world slid down. The snake therefore represents speech that causes spiritual decline.

Pharaoh too spoke against the existence and omnipotence of Hashem. Moshe, instead of seeing the innate power of the Jewish people to trust that Hashem had sent a messenger to save them, cast doubt on their belief. And one reason given for the complaint about the *Man* was that they could not store it, it just went bad. They therefore had nothing saved for a rainy day and were forced to have complete trust that Hashem would provide their food tomorrow just as He had done today. They hated living on this level of spirituality.

It is extremely hard to climb the spiritual ladder when there are snakes everywhere trying to belittle and destroy, waiting for you to trip and slip down. A common occurrence is the 'Letz' or joker who mocks people when they are trying to grow in Torah and good deeds. Have you ever decided that you would be careful to keep a Mitzva only to be mocked publicly for being too religious or too 'stuck-up', for making a blessing with obvious concentration or for refusing to listen to the latest gossip?

Ramchal in his work Mesillat Yesharim compares the Letz to the oil that a warrior would smear on his shield so that arrows would slide off and not pierce through. An inspiring sermon or words from self-improvement books can enter into our hearts, but with just a couple of 'well-spoken' words the Letz causes them to slide off without reaching their target.

We must take the message of the snake and be careful both to ignore those who would cast doubt on our growth and to not trip up others on their personal spiritual ascent.

לע"נ הרב יוסף אליהו בן הרב מנחם יעקב

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Tip Of The Week

When you walk around and see people, what is the first thought that comes to your mind? Do you find yourself thinking about the aspects of their appearance, their behaviour or their character that are not quite right or are you the type of person who naturally sees the positives first?

Unfortunately most of us fit into the first group. Even if we don't speak it out, our minds are constantly in criticism gear. But if we are always surrounded by 'bad' people, even if we are putting great effort into not speaking Lashon Hara, it will be difficult to succeed. Afterall, there is so much 'negative' to talk about!!

If, however, we train ourselves to focus on the positives, to see the good in each and every person we meet, working on not speaking Lashon Hara will no longer be an uphill struggle. What Lashon Hara is there to speak when you are surrounded by such amazing special people.

How do we make such a substantial change in the way we view people? Firstly we need to realize that the reason this is happening is that many of us secretly do not value ourselves. Because we do not see our own self-worth, we are scared to recognize another's because that will mean they are 'better' than us.

But understanding the mechanism is not enough. In order to create new habits we have to be proactive!

Therefore this week let's firstly find **one** element of real value that we can respect in ourselves and remind ourselves of it (privately!) every day. Secondly let's start practicing **once a day** seeing **one** positive aspect in **one** person we meet.

Who knows, if we keep this up we might find the world around us becoming a much brighter and positive place!