

Journey To Better Speech

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Are We Sensitive Enough?

When we were considering what we should call our website, we toyed with several ideas. In the end we decided on *Journey To Better Speech*. One of the reasons for such a long website name was that we felt it was important to stress that this is a **journey**. Although we may be writing and sharing ideas we are still, ourselves, on a long journey towards improving our own speech and communication, we still struggle (and sometimes fail) to speak in the correct way, we still have much to learn and grow in this area.

This last Shabbat I learnt a valuable lesson taught to me by one of the guests at our table. I was giving over a perspective on a topic that I still believe to be true, to be in line with the Torah's view on the matter. The guest I was speaking to would not accept my view and started to get emotional about the issues. I could not understand why! I challenged them to put emotion aside and view the topic from a logical perspective.

Much later they explained to me that they have personal history and involvement in the issues being discussed and although I could not have known that, I should have been more sensitive to the fact that people may have a past that makes some topics or opinions painful for them. To quote their words to me "*The point is that everyone is carrying something. Something that may make them (in someone else's eyes) irrationally emotional. We never know what that thing is. And therefore we must be very careful with our words and who we tell not to become emotional, especially without first trying to realize where their emotion stems from.*"

In this week's parsha we are told that Yitro joins up with his son-in-law Moshe and the Jewish people in the desert. Moshe regales him with stories of all the amazing miracles that Hashem had done for the Jewish people and Yitro rejoiced (VaYichad).

Or at least that is how it seems on the surface, however the Gemara suggests a different understanding for the word VaYichad, that his skin was covered in goosebumps (chidudin) as he was distressed by what he was hearing. Even though he had discarded the idols of his past and knew that Hashem was the only true G-d, even though his own son-in-law was the leader of the Jewish people, even though he himself (according to the Midrash) had been an advisor to Pharaoh and had advised him to treat the Jews kindly, he still felt a distress when hearing that the Egyptian power had been destroyed.

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Parshat Yitro

לֹא תִרְצֹז	אֲנֹכִי ה
לֹא תִנָּאֵף	לֹא יִהְיֶה
לֹא תִגְנוֹב	לֹא תִשָּׂא
לֹא תִעֲנֶה	זְכוֹר אֶת
לֹא תִזְמַד	כְּפָד אֶת

Prayer Insights

Over the last few weeks we have been investigating 'Modeh Ani' where we thank Hashem for returning our souls to us every morning. In Tehillim it says בידך אפקיד רוחי - in your hand I deposit my spirit, from which the Midrash understands that overnight we return our souls to Hashem as a deposit and he gives it back to us in the morning.

Imagine the following situation: Your 18 year old son who has recently passed his driving test approaches you and asks if he can borrow your car for a few days. He needs it for a really good cause that he and some friends are setting up, but they lack funding and therefore cannot afford to hire a car. You are willing to help but you set out certain criteria, he should drive it carefully, no speeding, no illegal maneuvers, always wear a seatbelt, no scratches or bashes on the car, no driving late at night when tired or taking it for a spin when slightly inebriated. Yes, a fair amount of rules and regulations but you want the car looked after and you want him to take responsibility and actually achieve what he has set out to do, rather than get distracted by the freedom that a car can provide to someone of his age.

After a few days your son enters your office looking contrite and highly embarrassed and hands over the keys. Yes, you've guessed it, one friend spilled beer all over the backseat, one of the headlights is smashed and there is a long scratch down one side where he misjudged his distance from a barrier, he has a speeding ticket and, possibly most devastating, he never actually managed to get the project off the ground, there was always something distracting him, something that he just needed to do first.

Unfortunately, this is pretty much what takes place with us on a daily basis. Hashem gives

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The Gemara quotes a proverb of the time "Don't denigrate an Aramean in front of a convert, even until the tenth generation", i.e. even though a person has taken on Torah and Mitzvot and rejected their past, they will still feel pain when attacking something that they used to be close to.

Chizkuni and others take this further and say that Yitro himself was a tenth generation descendant from the original ancestor Mitzraim (son of Cham, grandson of Noach) and still felt distress when the Egyptians, the nation 'Mitzraim', got destroyed. This explanation is astonishing. We are talking about a person feeling distress about the downfall of distant cousins despite it being in his personal interest! Whatever negativity Yitro felt it must have been extremely minor. What the Torah is teaching us is an important lesson that everyone has a story and we are required to, as best we can, be sensitive towards it, however subtle it may be.

There have been articles written, in the past, on the online Jewish press by people who are in difficult situations, unmarried, without children, who feel that people make comments around them which are insensitive to them in their situation. Sometimes someone will leave a comment on the article which will encourage them to toughen up, suggesting that people can't always spend their time thinking about exactly what they are saying. However, what the Torah is telling us here is actually exactly the opposite: It is not our responsibility to tell anyone else to toughen up, it is our responsibility to work on ourselves to be more sensitive.

us life, he inserts into our body a soul that wants to do the right thing, wants to achieve greatness, set up the next great cause, change the world for the better. But giving us such a precious gift, He also provides for us clear instructions on how to use it and how not to damage it. And yet at the end of each day, when we hand back the keys, what do we have to say for ourselves? Did we follow the rules? Did we achieve the greatness that we could have achieved?

The father in the story is highly unlikely to give his son a second chance with the car. But Hashem gives us a second, third, hundredth, thousandth, daily chance to try again! This is what we mean by בחמלה - He returns our soul with unbelievable, undeserving, compassion.

How are we going to use it today?

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

When Is Blessing Hashem An Insult?

The 3rd of the '10 Commandments' is 'You shall not take the Name of Hashem in vain'. Although this is understood to refer to unnecessary or incorrect oaths, Ramban makes it clear that we should also understand the verse in its most simple meaning, that the name of Hashem must not be said for no reason unless it is to praise Him. The Gemara says that even if one says a **blessing** unnecessarily they have transgressed this commandment. Rambam and Shulchan Aruch quote this as the Halacha. The question has to be asked: Why is it so bad? Let's say I'm not eating an apple and I say the blessing anyway, I am still praising Hashem for producing fruit! Why do I need to eat something to praise Hashem in this way?

Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits explains that the reality is that any blessing we say to Hashem is a massive understatement. He is infinitely more than anything you could say about Him. Would it be praise for a King who has a massive entourage to say that he has a footman? Would it be correct to say about a rich man that he has a dollar? No, on the contrary, it is intensely disrespectful! The Gemara tells the story of a man who led the service in the presence of Rabbi Chanina and started adding extra words of praise in the first Bracha of the Amida. When he finished Rabbi Chanina asked him "have you now finished all the praises of Hashem?" The words we use were said by Moshe and the Men of the Great Assembly with the power of prophecy that they are appropriate for us to say. Otherwise we would not be able to say any praises of Hashem for once we start we would not be able to stop. As soon as we add words of our own and don't carry on praising forever it implies that this is all we have to say about Him and that is tremendously insulting.

There are times we are told that we must praise and thank Hashem either as a mitzva from the Torah or as a Rabbinic deduction. But saying blessings randomly without being told to is minimising how great He actually is. To then use His name in a way that supports diminishing His greatness is a staggering 'slap in the face'.

Many of us have been saying Brachot for so long we often don't even consider what we are saying. How often have we just spouted a blessing completely forgetting that we have already made one and don't need to say it again? How many times have we made Hamotzi on bread and don't need to say another Bracha on the other food in the meal and yet do so without thinking? According to Rambam and Shulchan Aruch we are transgressing the 3rd of the 10 Commandments. We may even be doing this on a daily basis! Maybe if we contemplate how insulting it is, it will help to motivate ourselves to think before we spout!

לע"נ יונה חממה בת שלמה

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