

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!



Throw It To The Dogs!

When Moshe describes the final plague where all the firstborn Egyptians will die he contrasts it with 'But against all the Children of Israel no dog shall whet its tongue', against neither man nor animal, so that you shall know that Hashem has differentiated between Egypt and Israel'. The term to whet a tongue is generally understood to mean barking. The simple explanation of the verse therefore is that dogs who have an uncanny ability to sense death (or the Angel of Death) will only be barking or howling in the Egyptian neighborhoods and not the Jewish ones. This will be a straightforward way to tell that G-d has treated the Egyptians and the Jews differently.

The difficulty with this explanation is that in Parshat Mishpatim the Torah commands that we may not eat a 'Treifa', an animal that has or will die soon from injuries, rather we should throw it to the dogs. In the English language the expression 'throw it to the dogs' often means to throw away something that is useless (Macbeth says it about medicine). However on this verse the Midrash points out that although we cannot eat a treifa, we are not just discarding it, we are giving it to dogs as a reward for not barking that night in Egypt.

The question is, if the reason that the dogs did not howl was because there was no death in the Jewish areas, why would they get a reward? Their silence was just a result of the circumstances on the ground?

However, there is another explanation of what was happening that night in Egypt and a slightly different way of understanding the verse. This was the night when the Jewish people were changing from a family into a Nation. At that very moment they were no longer a group of slaves, they were turning into a people in their own right.

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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. In previous weeks we explained that the first word מודה - to give thanks, shares a root with the word הודה - to admit and that in order to thank we first need to admit we're lacking. We also explained the third word, לפניך - before You, that if we are to use our time wisely and succeed spiritually it is integral that we are aware that we are always in His presence.

The second word, אני - I, is no less important. According to the Torah, the character trait of haughtiness, of being conceited and having a swollen ego, is extremely negative. However there is an important place for the recognition of self. If a person wants to succeed in spiritual growth they need to acknowledge that they have been given a unique set of gifts and powers that will allow them, if used correctly, to attain unbelievable achievements that only they have been designed with the ability to accomplish. If a person cannot recognize their potential then practically they won't actually achieve.

When we wake up in the morning, we have to acknowledge that we'd be nothing without the gifts He gives us, that He is there with us the whole time, but also that now that He has invested in us, we are full to the brim with potential! By saying 'I' we acknowledge that it is now over to us to channel all that superb investment and make great things happen!

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

Whenever there is something new or special around you can guarantee that there will be someone, somewhere criticizing it, yapping and commenting, focusing on all the negatives without considering all the wonderful positives.

I sometimes need to drop a key at the home of a work colleague. It is usually late at night and I will just post it through the mail slot in the front door. As soon as I slightly nudge the slot I am met with the most ferocious barking on the other side of the door and even though I know that the dog is a sweet little fluffy thing that wouldn't harm a fly, I instinctively pull my hand back out before she can bite my fingers!

This is the intrinsic nature of a dog. As soon as there is a change, something slightly different, an innocent person walks by, a person drops a little key through the mail slot, they are immediately up in arms, barking, criticizing!

When the Jewish Nation is being created, at that very moment the world stops still, all of creation watches in awe. These downtrodden beings, slaves for generations, have been miraculously extracted from the depths and now stand tall as the Chosen People. Who is going to protest? Who is going to be pessimistic - they cannot be chosen, they cannot be a Kingdom of Princes, they're slaves! Surely, if anyone is going to react to the change it is going to be the dogs?!

But no - even they are quiet that night, and when they are, the world will know that 'Hashem has differentiated between Egypt and Israel', that the destitute slaves have become Royalty. For this silence, completely against their nature, not only they, but dogs of all breeds and for all time, receive a reward.

The Chafetz Chaim in his book Shmirat HaLashon (Guarding the Tongue) has a whole section where he investigates the intense reward for holding back from speaking negatively. He says that this command to reward the dog is there specifically to teach us a lesson. We may think that controlling the desire to criticize achieves nothing. But Hashem wants us to realize that it is so special that He bestows a tremendous reward for controlling negative speech, even for only one occasion, even when it is an animal! So too, us, when we control that desire to criticize and speak negatively our reward is unimaginable.

לעיני יונה חממה בת שלמה

If you are interested in sponsoring a parsha sheet in memory of a loved one, please email support@journeytobeterspeech.com

Tip Of The Week

I can't count the number of times I have asked my wife where something is and when she tells me, I'll go and search but it's just not there. Confidently I will stride over and tell her she's wrong, it's not there. She will normally put on a look which can best be described as a mixture of sympathy and good humored exasperation, go to the cupboard, reach for the exact shelf she said it was on and get me what I wanted!!

During Moshe's final visit to the palace he warns that at around midnight the firstborn Egyptians will all die. **Around** midnight seems an odd thing to say, why didn't he just say **at** midnight? Furthermore, when the firstborn are struck down the verse is clear that it was at midnight, not around midnight.

The Gemara explains that if Moshe had said at exactly midnight, the Egyptians, without the use of an atomic clock (or any accurate clock for that matter!), may well make a mistake, believe that midnight is yet to come or has already been and Moshe lied about when the plague would happen. The Gemara concludes that it is better to say 'I don't know' than to say something in definitive terms and be found to be lying.

What is fascinating about Moshe's case is that he *knew* he would not be lying, he was only passing on what Hashem had directed him to say, and if Hashem says midnight, He means midnight! The only issue was the way it may appear. Nevertheless it was still better for him to couch it in less definite terms than to appear to be telling an untruth. Definitely then, when we want to make definitive statements, we should consider that we may end up lying if we are not careful.

It is reported that the Chazon Ish told a student of his, don't say 'it isn't there' - say 'I can't find it'. I think it's time to try and incorporate this advice into my life!