

# 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!



## Patience

One of the most well-known passages of the Torah appears in this week's parsha. Many recite it daily as part of Tachanun, it is part of Selichot, sung on Yom Tov when the ark is opened and, on Yom Kippur, appears both in Kol Nidre and also as the centerpiece of the climactic Neilah prayer. After the Jewish people had built a golden calf and the original two tablets with the 10 Commandments engraved on them were smashed, Moshe pleads on the Jews' behalf. Hashem, in a demonstration that no matter how serious the transgression He will always accept sincere repentance, not only forgives them and instructs Moshe to carve a further two tablets but also teaches Moshe the 13 Attributes of Hashem's Mercy. The verses in question are "*Hashem Hashem Kel rachum v'chanun erech apayim v'rav chesed ve'emet. Notzer chesed la'alafim noseh avon va'fasha v'chata'ah v'nakeh*" 1) Hashem 2) Hashem 3) G-d (of power) 4) Merciful 5) Gracious, 6) Slow to anger, with 7) Abundant kindness and 8) Truth. 9) Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, 10) Forgiving purposeful and 11) rebellious transgressions and 12) mistakes and 13) He cleanses.

The Talmud explains that Hashem told Moshe that whenever the Jewish people sin, if they say the 13 Attributes of Mercy, He'll forgive them. This appears rather too simple and seems to contradict the many sources we have that clearly delineate the extensive process of repentance. We do not believe in saying a few fairly meaningless phrases to gain forgiveness like some religions prescribe, and yet it looks like this 'magical' phrase just needs to be uttered and - abracadabra - it's all better again!

In order to grasp what is going on we need to gain a better understanding of what the 13 Attributes really are. The simplest explanation is as follows: 1) Hashem (this is actually the 4 letter Name YHV - H which signifies that Hashem Was/Is/Will be, is beyond time and therefore knows what 'will be', what we will choose, even before we do so) gives us everything we need even though He knows we will use the life and tools that He has given us to transgress 2) and even after we have sinned He continues to provide us with life and everything we need so we have an opportunity to repent. 3) His immense power which could be used to strike us down is instead used to hold back punishment while He waits for us to repent and if we still don't repent 4) His trait of overwhelming Mercy means He will wait a little longer. If we still haven't repented and don't really deserve any more time, 5) His trait of Graciousness ('chanun' means providing something that is completely undeserved) means He will still wait. *What! We still haven't returned to Him?* Even though He would have every right to be angry by now 6) He is nevertheless slow to anger to give us yet more time to repent. And when He sees that we still aren't making it back and He is searching for any merits that we have 7) He demonstrates great Kindness

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## Prayer Insights

There are a series of verses that traditionally are recited as one enters the Synagogue in the morning. The first verse are actually words of the non-Jew, Bilaam. He had come to the edge of the Israelite camp in the desert at the behest of Balak, the Moabite king in order to curse the Jews, however, Hashem would not allow him to do so. Instead, to his great consternation, every time he opened his mouth to curse, a blessing was emitted. One of these blessings was *מה טובו אהליך יעקב משכנתיך ישראל* - How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Yisrael. When Bilaam saw how the Jewish people were organized according to their tribes, close families looking after each other and yet at the same time giving individual families the privacy they require by ensuring that the entrance of one tent was not directly inline with the entrance of another, he was moved to praise what he was witnessing.

On a deeper level, the Talmud explains that this is referring to the Synagogues and places of Jewish learning. The Vilna Gaon (Rav Eliyahu of Vilna) defines a 'tent' as a temporary movable home while a 'dwelling place' implies something more permanent. He also explains that the term 'Yaakov' refers to a regular Jew but the term Yisrael (with its princely motif - **Sar** means prince or ruler) are the spiritual giants. In that context, it is possible that Bilaam is saying that when the great spiritual leaders take up permanent residence in the halls of learning it is great, but it is also great when an average Jew, even though he has work and other aspects of his life that take up much of his time, dedicates part of his day to learning and prayer.

We therefore start our Synagogue prayers with this verse. How good it is when we enter the House of G-d for our prayers have real power.

**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**

## Preaching & Practicing

When Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen first wrote his now famous work on speech, *Sefer Chafetz Chaim*, at the age of 34, he went to the great Rabbi Baruch Mordechai Lifshitz who was at that time the Rabbi of Novardok (now in Belarus) to receive his approbation. However, Rav Lifshitz was not willing to give his approval immediately. He wanted to know what type of person the author was, had he just sat down and studied for a while until he was able to author a book on the laws of Lashon Hara or had he actually incorporated what he had learnt into his life, did he practice what he preached?

He therefore asked his closest students to spend the day with Rabbi Yisrael Meir, chatting to him about a variety of topics and Torah subjects throughout the day. As evening arrived the students returned to Rabbi Lifshitz and explained that they had tried their hardest to lead the conversation onto a subject that was forbidden but each time, Rabbi Yisrael Meir had managed to change the subject or refused to comment. With great excitement Rabbi Lifshitz sat down to write his support and his endorsement appears at the beginning of the book including the line "*He teaches the laws beautifully and personally upholds them beautifully too!*"

Rabbi Yisrael Meir used to go from town to town selling his books in anonymity, pretending to just be a book peddler rather than the actual author. His only aim was to encourage as many people as possible to join him on a journey to improving speech, loving each and every Jew and loving Hashem. He would dress like any other average Jewish person dressed at that time, eschewing any Rabbinical garb and even later on in life when he was acknowledged as one of the spiritual leaders of the generation (a role he took on reluctantly, only because he realized that it was extremely necessary) he still wore a simple cap rather than a Rabbi's hat.

When an author is recognized as being so sincere, so altruistic, it is worthwhile spending time finding out what they have to say. His books on speech and other interpersonal behavior have been translated into many languages and easy to study summaries have also been published. And for those who have already learnt them, revisiting them constantly is essential if we want to entrench the concepts into our daily lives.

even towards those who lack merit 8) and He is Truthful in that every tiny good deed we've ever done is taken into account and not forgotten. Don't have enough personal merit to allow for yet more time to do teshuva? 9) He turns instead to our forefathers going back thousands of generations gathering together their good deeds to be a support to us. And finally, when eventually we do repent sincerely, He not only 10) forgives our willful sins but even those carried out 11) specifically as an attempt at rebellion. When forgiving us He also looks at all those 12) mistakes we made unintentionally but that demonstrated that we didn't really care (for if we did care, we would have been more vigilant) and forgive those too. Finally 13) He will cleanse us to the extent that it will be as if we never did anything wrong and we are left with no lasting 'stain'.

When we say this verse we should be overwhelmed by the never ending love He has for us, we should feel like we are completely enveloped in His embrace as He waits patiently, 'searching' for any and every possible reason to give us just a bit more time to realize that we have strayed from the One who gives us everything. When the Talmud says that reciting these verses will ensure that we will be forgiven it means that when we say it and understand what we are saying, the regret we feel at betraying such a loving Father will itself be the first stage in real repentance.

But recognizing how our Father loves us so much is actually only just the beginning. He has much greater plans for us! He gives us a Mitzva of *V'halachta bidrachav* - a command to 'Follow in His ways'. He implores us "*Just like I am merciful and gracious and slow to anger, just as I wait patiently way beyond what would be considered appropriate, just as I will search for every possible merit to give a person another chance, just as I, when they finally regret their actions, accept them back with open arms, so you too, I challenge you to follow in My ways, **become G-dly and act the same way to your fellow man***". He believes in us, He knows we have the ability to achieve greatness!

But it is so difficult! I am surrounded by people who won't follow simple instructions and this costs me money. Surely it is acceptable to tell them off, shout at them for not listening - How do you expect me to be patient at such times?! The Chafetz Chaim makes a simple, beautiful, suggestion. We are all willing, on whatever religious level we are on, to spend money doing the right thing. Whether that is budgeting for kosher food, charity, for celebrations like a child's circumcision or bar/bat mitzva, for Pesach, for a lulav and etrog. We understand that we have responsibilities and that to fulfil them correctly needs a certain amount of financial investment. So why is it that when it comes to the mitzva to **follow Hashem's ways and be patient**, to overlook when people do things wrong, that we aren't investing? This needs a budget too! At the beginning of each year, we should set aside an amount of money that will be our '*patience budget*'. And then when our child leaves on the heating all night, we don't need to shout at him because the cost just comes out of our budget. If our wife goes on a spending spree to buy yet another (in our opinion, completely unnecessary) pair of shoes, we don't have to shout at her, the money just comes out of the budget. When our husband buys a lottery ticket and the chances of winning are almost zero we needn't get annoyed because it's already been pre-paid! With this simple technique we will increase our patience, control the way we communicate & actually be happier people!

לע"נ מרים בילא בת אברהם דוד הלוי