

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!

Tetzaveh - Zachor - Purim



The Expert Antisemite

'Haman said to Achashverosh, "There exists one nation that is scattered and dispersed among the nations throughout the countries of your Empire, and their religious laws are different from every other nation nor do they fulfill the laws of the King and it is not worth it for the King to tolerate them".' This verse in the 3rd chapter of Megillat Esther reports Haman's successful attempt to persuade King Achashverosh to give the go ahead to wipe out the Jews. Due to the many unnecessary words and long-winded, flowery language, the Talmud explains that this verse actually hints at a fascinating extended discussion where the evil viceroy had to use all his skills of persuasion before the King capitulated.

Haman approached Achashverosh and recommended that he consents to the destruction of the Jews. The King, however, expressed several concerns. "They have a powerful G-d who, throughout history, has taken revenge against those who hurt His people. I don't want to end up like the mighty Pharaoh and Sancherib who were eventually humiliated". Haman replied, "Their G-d only protects them and fights their enemies when they deserve it. But right now, the Jews are not keeping their commandments, it is as if they have fallen asleep and are no longer listening to their G-d. (*The word for 'there exists' in the verse is שנו which can also be read as the word that would mean 'they are sleeping'.*) Achashverosh didn't give up, "But the good deeds of their spiritual leaders will protect them!". Haman shrugged this off too, "They are **one nation**, they are as one, their Rabbis are no better than the rest of the populace. And even if you could find a few special people, they have a concept called *Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh Lazeh* - All Jews are responsible for one another. Since the people are not following the Torah and their Rabbis are not doing anything about it, they too deserve to be killed". Achashverosh tried a different tact. "If you wipe out a whole nation it will leave one whole country uninhabited and it will become a dangerous, wild place which could negatively affect the surrounding countries. "No" Haman replied, "**they are scattered throughout the countries of your empire**". "But perhaps the Empire gets some benefit from them, maybe they contribute to scientific, philosophical or cultural endeavor and it is useful having them scattered around the Empire?" "My Lord, they give no benefit whatsoever to the Empire. In fact, I would compare them to a mule which is incapable of giving birth" (*the word for 'separated' in the verse is מפרד, similar to the word פרד meaning mule*). "Furthermore they have **different religious rules** to us that require them to keep separate and be antisocial, so they won't intermarry with us or eat our food. What is worse, they don't follow the **rules of the King**, never paying taxes or joining in with communal work. This is

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Learning From Haman

As we said in "The Expert Antisemite", the Talmud says that Haman was the specialist Lashon Hara speaker! And because of that we can possibly use what we know about him to investigate what it is that drives people to speak Lashon Hara in the first place. In the 5th chapter of Megillat Esther there is a telling passage which beautifully sums up Haman's fundamental character deficiency. He is the 'Prime Minister' of the Persian Empire, he is immensely wealthy, his sons are respected and in positions of authority, everyone bows down to him, he has just left a private banquet hosted by the Queen where the only people invited were him and the King and there is going to be another one the next day! He has even got his wish that later on that year the whole of the Jewish people are going to be wiped out. And yet he turns to his wife and says "*all this is worthless to me as long as I see Mordechai the Jew sitting at the king's gate!*" He has everything he could ever want, the whole of the world respects him and adores him, but there is **one person** who won't bow down to him, one person who will be killed anyway with the rest of the Jews in 11 months time, but his continued presence spoils everything else!

We can all acknowledge that this is extreme but on a much more basic level there are many of us that may recognize this fairly natural internal response. Have you ever been speaking or performing to a crowd and it seems to be going really well? Several members of the audience even come over to congratulate you afterwards on a wonderful presentation. And then, one person tells you that they didn't really like it. Or they may not even tell you but you can see from their body language, the way they are playing with their phone, that they aren't really so enamored. Suddenly all you can focus on is the negativity, nothing else matters, all the praise in the world cannot make up for the fact that you haven't reached this individual, you still haven't achieved perfection!

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because they're always muttering SHaHY PaHY". "What is SHaHY PaHY?" the King asked. "Oh! It's their slang for SHabbat HaYom, Pesach HaYom. Whenever we try to get them to do any work they always say that they can't work because they have their Sabbath or their Festivals, and if they aren't working, they definitely can't pay the King's taxes!" Achashverosh was almost convinced but then Haman came up with the coup de grâce and made it personal. "Even if the King was to ignore all the other misdemeanors I have mentioned and he wants to be compassionate to them as a personal favor, **it is not worth it for King to tolerate them**, for they treat the King with unbelievable disrespect. If a Jew drinks wine and a fly falls into the cup, they would just remove the fly and carry on drinking. But if the King of the mighty Persian Empire was to even touch their wine, they would pour it on the ground in disgust and never let it near their lips!"

Haman's diatribe demonstrates all the hallmarks of the professional antisemite! It uses opposing arguments to better the cause - on the one hand Haman says that the Jews aren't religious enough, then he says that they are too religious. He says that they are everywhere, mixing in with us, but then that they keep themselves separate. He uses our own religious arguments against us. He exaggerates, distorts, he downright lies. And of course, he completely omits that the real reason that he wants the Jews murdered is because he feels that their leader has personally slighted him! The Talmud labels Haman as the Lashon Hara speaker (negative speaker/tale teller) par excellence! Surely only the most virulent antisemite would say things like this?

And yet, if we are honest with ourselves, it is not uncommon to hear statements similar to these within our own community (whichever branch of Judaism we ascribe to). "They aren't frum enough"; "That particular community are not so careful when it comes to keeping Mitzvot"; "The Rabbis aren't that much better"; "Why are they so insular, why can't they mix in with society a bit more?"; "Why won't they eat this food"; "Why don't they just get a job?"; "They don't pay their taxes". Unfortunately many of us are guilty of comments like these, some which may even be focused on the truth, many of which are distortions or exaggerations. But whether they are true or not, there is one aspect that we can be sure about. The speaker has chosen to focus on the negative aspects rather than the positive ones and it is possible that that actually says more about the speaker than the group being spoken about! In each comment above we should be able go back now and find the positive aspects of that community. And if we can't identify something positive, we just haven't tried hard enough!!

The antisemites of today in the media, the UN, the BDS movement, all claim that they are only telling the truth. And there may be a tiny kernel of truth in what they say, but it is extremely one-sided, focusing almost entirely on the negative and ignoring the myriad of positives. We must do everything we can to ensure that we don't end up doing the same!

לע"נ ר' דוב בער בן ר' עזריאל זאב

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There are productive and non productive ways for a person to deal with such thoughts. They could work, either on their own or with guidance, on developing the ability to recognize the outstanding beauty inside themselves, to be more self-compassionate about their only human imperfections and possibly even to realize that it is ok at times to have unhappy thoughts. Or they could end up being depressed, self critical and even feeling worthless. Unfortunately when one feels like this a common response could be to bring down everyone else around them, criticize, insult, slander them, until they feel secure that, even though they may lack worth, everyone else around them is even more worthless than they are! To get to the top of the pack one can either raise oneself up or push everyone else down. Regrettably, the second is easier. It is always simpler to attack others than to work on oneself. I feel it is not coincidental that Haman, who is effected to such a severe extent by what others think about him, would also be an expert on negative and slanderous speech.

We have discussed with many people what drives them to speak Lashon Hara and we have received a variety of answers. But one of the recurring themes is a desire to put down others so that one can feel better about oneself. Next time we find ourselves in a situation where we have the most formidable urge to badmouth someone, it would be good to try to pause and experience what is actually going on inside us. Why are we putting this person down? Why are we focusing on their negatives? Could it be that we believe it makes us feel safer, greater, more accomplished? And if so, why do we need that? Choosing at that moment to appreciate that there are other considerably more productive options when dealing with our own personal negative thought patterns is a massive first step to improving the way we speak and react.

The Me'il

In this weeks Parsha, Tetzaveh, we are told about the 8 garments that the High Priest wore while serving in the Temple. One of these was the Me'il, a sleeveless, blue, long robe which was fringed at the bottom with alternate golden bells and colorful woollen pomegranate shaped tassels. The Talmud says that this robe atones for Lashon Hara, where sound was used inappropriately, specifically because its bells make a sound. As this week has mainly been dedicated to Purim, we hope to investigate this concept in greater detail in Parshat Pekudei.