

# 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!



## The Value Of Silence

Parshat Pekudei (as well as Parshat Tetzaveh) details the clothes that the Kohanim wore during their service in the Tabernacle and Temple. The Kohen Gadol (High Priest) wore 8 articles of clothing one of which was the Me'il, a long 'techelet-blue', sleeveless, open sided tunic with decorative bells and woolen pomegranates on its hem. The Talmud explains that the wearing of each one of the the Kohen Gadol's clothes aided the Jewish people's atonement of a particular transgression - the Me'il atoned specifically for the transgression of Lashon Hara. A deeper look at the verses reveal a wealth of hidden symbolism and advice with regards to negative speech.

The verses as they appear in Tetzaveh are as follows: *"You shall make the Me'il entirely of techelet. The opening of its head shall be (folded over) within it, its opening shall have a border all around, the work of a weaver, like the opening of a suit of armor, so it won't be torn. You shall make on its hem pomegranates of techelet, purple and scarlet wool on its hem all around and golden bells inbetween them all around. A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate on the hem of the robe all around"*.

The verse goes into what seems to be fairly repetitive detail about the neckline border and the decorations on the bottom hem. With regards to the neckline, the Kli Yakar explains that this is an analogy for the mouth. The mouth (the word opening in the verse is 'pi' which can also mean 'mouth of') has two 'guards', the teeth and the lips. A person should be careful to keep those guards in place at times when they feel the urge to say something disparaging or negative. First of all the mouth should be kept **'within it'**, i.e. within the first sentry of the teeth. Then it should also be enclosed by the **border all around** of sealed lips (the word for a border - safah - is related to the word sfatayim - lips, as they are the borders of the mouth). Chafetz Chaim continues to interpret the verse in the same vein by saying that a person should keep those lips sealed as if they were woven together (**work of a weaver**). And why tell us that the neckline is like the neckline of traditional chain mail armor that was folded inwards - have we not understood how to design the

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## Calm Cleaning!

In many households the Pesach preparations are already in full swing. Cupboards are being scrubbed, Chametz covered children are being vigorously brushed down after meals/snacks to ensure that they don't transport a crumb to an already cleaned room and aluminum foil is being generously distributed across any and every surface. The Jewish people are so particular at Pesach time about what goes into their mouths. Even Jews who may be less strict with regards to other Mitzvot appreciate the importance of Pesach and the removal of Chametz.

But while we are being so careful about what we put into our mouths are we being careful about what comes out of them? Many people find all the cleaning and preparation to be stressful and when people are stressed they are more likely to snap and shout at others. The Mishna says that a person needs to say three things in his home before Shabbat, to check that certain jobs that need to be carried out before Shabbat have been done and to instruct that it is time for the lighting of Shabbat candles. Raba son of Rav Huna said however that these checks and instructions must be said in a soft gentle way. Friday afternoon is a time fraught with anxiety in many homes, the food needs to be ready, the house cleaned, table set, people showered, shaved and dressed. It is therefore unfortunately not uncommon that in the stress of the moment a person may communicate without showing appreciation, may bark out an order forgetting for a moment that actually, the person they are aggressively commanding is not their slave!

Pesach preparations are no different! Calm cleaning is not always easy to achieve but we must try our best, while we are getting rid of the Chametz in our home, not to simultaneously dirty our mouths, hearts and souls.

border without this unnecessary comparison? The Chafetz Chaim explains that the Torah is telling us that a person who uses these natural mouth-guards correctly will find that he is shielded from arguments and strife in the same way as armor protects its wearer. When a person wants to have an argument but the other person isn't willing to be involved, the argument will quickly dissipate.

What about the bells and pomegranates? The Alshich points out that it is perfectly clear from the final verse that they were placed alternately. Why then does the verse before say that the **bells were inbetween the pomegranates?** It could equally have said that the pomegranates were inbetween the bells! His answer is that the verse is giving us yet further direction on how best to use our mouth. The bell represents a talking mouth, it has a clapper which when strikes creates a sound, in the same way that the tongue moves around inside the mouth to speak. A woolen pomegranate makes no sound and therefore represents silence. The Torah is telling us that we should not assume that it is appropriate to speak and be silent in equal proportions. Instead the bells should be inbetween the pomegranates, i.e. there should be one bell for two pomegranates and one speech for two silences. There are a several proverbs that illustrate this balance. The Talmud says that in Israel they would say "*A word for a selah* (a coin of that time), *silence for two*", the stoic philosopher Epictetus wrote "*We have two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we speak*" or you may prefer the more modern phrase "*speech is silver, silence is golden*".

Here are the questions we honestly need to ask ourselves. Do I really need to rebuke my child every time, or even half the times, they do something wrong? Do I need to criticize when my spouse or work colleagues makes a mistake? Do I need to comment on everything that I see on social media? Is my comment appropriate for all the people who may be reading it or will it needlessly upset some? Do I need to state my opinion in all situations? Do I need to be the one speaking when I am in a social setting or is it alright if I just listen for a while? Do I achieve anything when I am always speaking or does it then just become background noise while everyone switches off? Maybe I would make more of an impact if I spoke less and then people would sit up and take notice when I do choose to comment?

We live in an age when silence is greatly undervalued. And yet it allows us to learn from others, it gives us space to learn from and understand ourselves and greatly reduces the harm we can cause others from indiscriminate and badly placed words.

לע"נ הרב יוסף אליהו בן הרב מנחם יעקב

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## 'Seeds' Of Greatness

On the surface, Song Of Songs written by King Solomon appears to be a heartfelt and eloquent love song to his beloved. But our sages explain that it is actually a beautiful piece of prose describing the intense love between ourselves and Hashem. The verse in chapter 4 - "Your temples are like a section of pomegranate" are therefore interpreted not as describing the red color of the young lady's forehead but rather as some amazing quality that Hashem sees in us.

The word in Hebrew for 'temples' is Rakatech which the Talmud says can be understood as a contraction of two words 'Reikanin Shebach' or 'Empty ones among you'. They therefore say that Hashem is praising the Jewish people that even the 'Empty ones', those who may seem to be lacking in spiritual accomplishment are still filled with good deeds like the many seeds of a pomegranate.

We often have a tendency to look down on others, "they are not quite as religious as me" and to judge them based on a superficial assessment of their actions. And yet Hashem Himself does the opposite, even those that seem empty are really full to the brim with positive deeds and He requests that we do the same with the command to judge others favorably (see Vayikra 19/15 - *Judge Your Fellow With Righteousness* - and explore the commentaries there.) The pomegranate therefore represents the concept of seeing the beauty when it may not be so obvious, searching for the light when it appears to be dark, finding the aspects to love in everything around us and also communicating that love. Furthermore the Hebrew for pomegranate is *Rimon* which is related to the word *Ram* meaning elevate. We have the opportunity to elevate a person from an apparent lowly position to something much higher and greater just by adjusting the way we look at them and speak about them.

It is therefore possible to suggest that the pomegranates on the hem of the Me'il further signify this concept, that if you are going to speak, make sure it is speech that will be positive, that will elevate others and ensure you see the many 'seeds' of greatness inside a person who appears to be just ordinary.