

The CLEAN SPEECH UK Project Home Companion



A. Dvar Torah

The gift of speech is so powerful and important. There are many lessons in the Torah about how we speak. Here are two key speech lessons from Parshas Yisro:

Before giving the Torah on Har Sinai Hashem tells Moshe to speak to the Children of Israel to tell us how important the nation and our mission is at this important time.

וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיְקַרָּא אֵלָיו ה' מִן־הַהָר לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

- ▶ Moshe goes up the mountain to Hashem and Hashem calls to him saying 'so you should say to the house of Yakov and speak to the children of Yisrael' (19:3): Rashi comments that the different words 'say' and 'speak' meant that Moshe was to vary his speech according to the audience, he was speak softly to some and more strictly to others. **We learn from here to speak in different ways to different people, recognising what they need.**
- ▶ The Midrash (Shemos Rabba 29:9) describes that when the Torah was given everything went totally silent. The people were silent, the animals stopped making noise, the birds stopped chirping. **We learn from here that sometimes being quiet (or even silent) is important; sometimes we need to focus and hold back before we speak.**

B. Story: The Most Amazing Silence

Sometimes one can achieve a lot by speaking up. Sometimes one can achieve a lot by knowing when not to say something. The following remarkable story is told about R' Shabsai Frankel.

R' Frankel moved to America after the Second World War and made it his mission in life to research key Torah books. He employed a team of rabbis who would study and examine the books of the Rambam and compare different versions to make sure each was accurate. Today, the set they published is known as the Frankel Rambam and is a celebrated monumental contribution to the yeshiva world. Thousands of copies of the Frankel Rambam can be found in yeshivas and shuls around the world.

At one stage R' Frankel found out that the Cairo Genizah had a rare handwritten section of the Rambam for sale. He agreed to buy it for thousands of dollars and the rare old manuscript was sent to R' Frankel in America - preserved in a casing. When it arrived in his office, R' Frankel carefully took it out of the casing for his rabbinic researchers to examine one-by-one. Each marvelled at the new manuscript, looking forward to inspecting it at greater length. However, just as one of the researchers was making his way across the room to view the manuscript, he tripped. Ordinarily that would have been fine, but he was holding a cup of coffee at the time, and the coffee spilled all over the new manuscript! The manuscript disintegrated and was now completely useless. The rabbinic researcher feared the worst – being shouted at, punished, being publicly embarrassed and everything in between! R' Frankel calmly exited the room and said nothing. He returned a minute later holding a cup of coffee and simply remarked to the embarrassed researcher, "I noticed you spilled your coffee – here is another one."

Years later, when R' Frankel passed away, his team came to pay their respects at the shiva. The researcher who spilled the coffee told this story to the grieving family and was shocked to find that nobody had heard it. Not only did R' Frankel have the self-control to not snap at this researcher for his mistake, he never told anyone about the incident – even his own family.



QUESTION:

Can you think of a time when you managed to hold back from saying something that would have hurt others?

C. Some questions for discussion

1. Name five mitzvos that we do with our mouths?
2. If somebody is about to speak lashon hara to you, what can you do?
3. Why is it that for speaking negatively against someone there is a visible tzara'as stain that appears on a person – isn't that embarrassing?
4. What is wrong with saying lashon hara if the information is true?
5. Can you think of a time when you said words that helped someone feel better about themselves?
6. Ariel is upset. His brother Dov has taken his chocolate. Ariel is lying there on the floor crying. Ariel's older sister Rivka comes over and starts giving Ariel a lecture about how chocolate isn't that important and that there are more important things to get upset about. How do you think Ariel will take this? What other things could Rivka do to help Ariel?
7. You hear that a local youth programme is about to hire a new madrich. But you know one of the people they have interviewed was a really poor madrich at a programme he took a year ago. Should you tell this information to the hiring committee?
8. The Chofetz Chaim writes that if a person never speaks badly about another person, they are judged favourably by Hashem, and sins they have committed are not punished. Why is this?
9. Sammy says that he just can't help sharing gossip about others – he finds it enjoyable and he does it naturally. How can you help Sammy?
10. Elisheva's cousin Yocheved approaches Elisheva with an idea. There is a kid who is not well and people are taking on to be careful not to speak lashon hara during certain hours of the day – each person is taking an hour slot. Elisheva feels that this is a silly idea – aren't we supposed to not speak lashon hara the whole time, not just for an hour?! What would you say to Elisheva?

D. Game: Multiple Meanings

As we learnt in the dvar Torah above, there are some words that sound similar but have different meanings. For example amar and dibber both mean 'speak' but amar means 'speaking softly' but dibber means speaking more harshly (Gemara Makkos 11a). Here are a couple of challenges for you.

1. Sentence rearranging

Here are some sentences that sound harsh.

Can you reword them to sound softer?

- i. You got a terrible mark in your homework
- ii. You look really tired
- iii. Why didn't you concentrate when I told you the first time?
- iv. Why did you spill the juice – that's so clumsy of you!
- v. Can you just go to bed already!

2. Tone rearranging

Here are some sentences that can either be harsh or soft, depending on how you say them. Read them out loud in a harsh way and then read them in a soft way?

- i. Look at the time, it's so late already
- ii. This meeting is taking a long time
- iii. I'm so hungry, what time is supper starting
- iv. There's a lot of homework to do
- v. My bedtime is at 7pm, my sister's bedtime is at 8pm

E. Learning

Here are some sources about impactful speech. What does each one teach us about the gift of speech?

Mishnah Pirkei Avos 5:1

בעשרה מאמרות נברא העולם [*]

Hashem created the world with ten sayings -

Hashem created the world through speech; He said "Let there be light."

Mishnah Brurah (Chofetz Chaim) 250:2:

וטוב שיאמר על כל דבר שקונה זהו לכבוד שבת כי הדבור הוא פועל הרבה בקדושה

When one does something to prepare for Shabbos (for example buying food for Shabbos), he should verbalise "this is for Shabbos," for speech creates lots of holiness.

Midrash Mishlei 11:27 quoted by the Chofetz Chaim in his sefer Chovas Hashemirah perek 5

מלאכי השרת מדברין עליו טוב לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, אם ראית אדם שהוא מדבר טוב על חבירו

If you see a person saying good things about someone else, the angels speak good things about that person (the speaker) before Hashem.