



# CLEAN SPEECH STUDY BOOK

30-DAY DOSE OF  
DAILY STUDY INSPIRATION



[WWW.CLEANSPEECH.CO.UK](http://WWW.CLEANSPEECH.CO.UK)



**PRICE OF WORDS** *ONA'AS DEVARIM*

---

# WELCOME TO YOUR CLEAN SPEECH UK DAILY STUDY BOOK

This book contains one idea to read for each day of the project. This year's focus is *Ona'as Devarim* : Hurtful words



# INTRODUCTION

---



We read it, we listen to it, we speak it. We all consume it – and billions of pounds and countless hours are invested in it. In many ways it dictates our lives. It's communication.

Communication is pervasive and nonstop – it's a constant in our lives. In Jewish thought that which is a constant is more essential to life. Breathing is a constant and therefore a necessity. Less frequent activities are by nature luxuries. Communication is constant and by nature therefore such a profoundly important thing. It's the medium through which we connect to others. It's the way we express our selves. And it's the way we reflect our Divine image.

In Jewish sources, communication – speech in particular – is not simply 'a way of conveying ideas.' Speech defines humankind: our being fashioned in 'the Divine image' refers to our ability to speak, as the Targum Onkelus commentary writes. This is because speech reflects the Divine: just as Hashem fashioned a finite world 'from the infinite,' so too do our words take infinite thoughts and package them in finite words. If we abuse our speech, we fail in our mission and standing as humans. But if we succeed then we can encourage, empower and uplift those around us.

And if we are honest with ourselves, among the millions of words we use each day, how many are measured, weighed carefully to make sure there are kind and sensitive? And if we have succeeded in that challenge, how many of the words we hear, read or see are positive and create a constructive atmosphere?

**The Clean Speech Project aims to strengthen and upgrade the way we speak - to focus on the power of a positive word and the danger of a negative one. The project includes sessions, workshops, learning, events and resources for schools, Shuls and communities across the country – with thousands of families participating.**

This year we are launching a 30-day Clean Speech UK inspiration challenge, based on the ground-breaking Clean Speech Colorado project, with whom we are fortunate to partner: we thank Rabbi Leban and his team for the book script. Sign up on our website [www.cleanspeech.co.uk](http://www.cleanspeech.co.uk) and receive a daily short burst of email or WhatsApp video inspiration to take you on a Clean Speech journey. Entitled Price of Words each day will focus on an element of protecting how our words impact others. This book accompanies that journey.

Looking forward to travelling together

Rabbis Fine & Zeidman, Seed & GIFT

To get in touch email [info@cleanspeech.co.uk](mailto:info@cleanspeech.co.uk)

# THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

In the 1960s, meteorologist Edward Lorenz coined the term “butterfly effect.” It means that in complex systems, a small change at the beginning can have dramatic and disproportionate results at the end. A butterfly flapping its wings in Baltimore could become a typhoon in Bermuda.

Or perhaps, a tiny virus from Asia can cause a deadly pandemic.

This model also describes the tremendous effects that a few careless and inappropriate words can have on another person's life. Each and every one of us is a complex system of interactions, feelings and decisions. A few embarrassing, insulting or offensive comments can cause a torrent of discomfort, pain and even debilitating emotional fallout, destroying our confidence and peace of mind.

*Steve wakes up one morning to a text message from his brother, berating him for not being more helpful with their elderly parents. In a foul mood, he complains to his wife Beth that there's no coffee creamer. Feeling criticised, Beth is short-tempered with their teenage daughter, Sarah, who goes off to school in a huff, silent and moody in her rota. Over dinner that night, they sit at the table and describe their rotten day, before retreating from the tension into separate corners of the house on their devices.*





---

## If we stop and think about it, words can be devastatingly powerful.

Without careful attention to the words we say, we are almost guaranteed to make verbal mistakes that will cause serious impact on others. We may have the best of intentions, or no specific intent at all. Either way - the words we say affect other people. Significantly.

Clean Speech UK is a community-wide education and awareness campaign to unite us in the practice of Jewish mindful speech, to build a more positive, respectful, and peaceful world.

In just two to three minutes a day you'll learn powerful, timeless lessons about mindful speech, and by the end of 30 days, you'll be more aware of what you say and how you say it.

When we exercise greater control of the way we speak, we will feel relieved of the stress and tension of challenging relationships and instead feel surrounded by warmth and peace.

### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

As we begin our 30 day efforts at improving our world by improving our words, it's worthwhile to start by meditating on the awesome power of a few little words.

# POWER OF POSITIVE WORDS

*Alan Dershowitz, renowned Harvard law professor and Israel advocate, said that he never thought of himself as a capable person until a camp counselor told him that he was brainy; a simple, positive comment which Dershowitz described as life changing.*

Our opinions about ourselves and our world are extremely affected and shaped by the way other people speak to us. Think about children, whose attitudes and self identity develop from the way their parents speak to them. If they are nurtured and loved, they will thrive — adopting an optimistic confidence about themselves and their future.

Even as adults we love when someone gives us a heartfelt compliment. Our spirits are boosted by a smile. We are honoured when asked for our opinion.

King Solomon wrote in Proverbs (12:18) “Speech can cut like a sword, but the words of the wise heal.”

## **The tongue is a powerful double-edged sword.**

We can inflict serious emotional wounds on others, or we can use the sharp edge like a surgeon, to skillfully heal the wounds and restore a person's self-esteem, confidence and well-being.

*Steve wakes up one morning to a text message from his brother, thanking him for being so helpful with their elderly parents. In a cheerful mood, he*



*compliments his wife Beth on the outfit she's wearing. Feeling loved, Beth is more patient with their teenage daughter, Sarah, who she encourages to speak more confidently with the challenging girls in her rota. Over dinner that night, they sit at the table and share small victories from their day, enjoying each other's company a little longer than usual.*

The awesome power contained in the Divine gift of speech is perhaps why there is so much mystical emphasis on speech in Judaism. The universe was created through speech, our humanity is defined by speech, our relationship with our Creator is built largely through speech.

As we refine our skills to replace negative words with positive, we imbue the world around us with positivity, one word at a time.

### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, make a point of saying something positive to someone, by giving a compliment or showing your respect.

# THIS YEAR VS. LAST YEAR

There are several parts to the art of Jewish mindful speech.

Last year Clean Speech UK ran projects in schools and communities about general awareness of the power of speech. This included syllabuses running in schools, parent-child learning and programmes.

This year's focus is on *Ona'as Devarim*: Hurtful words

Today let's quickly review some of the rules of *lashon hara*. We'll define *ona'as devarim* in tomorrow's lesson.

Although the term *lashon hara* is often used to refer to problematic communication of any kind, strictly speaking the term *lashon hara* refers to gossip and slander — talking about other people in harmful or hurtful ways behind their back.

*Lashon hara* is forbidden:

- whether it's true or not
- whether it is intended to cause harm or only meant as a joke
- whether it's communicated verbally, through facial expressions or gestures, in writing, or any other means
- whether it's referring to an individual or a group
- even if you're just listening to someone else say it





There are exceptions to the prohibition of saying *lashon hara*. For example, if there is a constructive reason you need to say something negative, like to protect someone from harm, you may do so. However, even in those circumstances, there are guidelines:

- We must know the information is true
- We may not exaggerate
- We must not have any ulterior motives
- We can't cause any unjust harm to the person we're talking about
- We may only say *lashon hara* when there are no alternative ways to accomplish the constructive goal without saying it

### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Before we get into our daily learning can you work out what defines words as 'hurtful.' What if somebody needs to be told something harsh? Where are the lines to be drawn?

# HERE ARE THE TERMS

This year we are going to focus on how we speak to people and learn to avoid *ona'as devarim*.

The term *ona'as devarim* means speaking in a way that causes discomfort to the person you're speaking to. The discomfort could be shame, embarrassment, fear, anxiety, anger or any other unpleasant emotional reaction.

*Ona'as devarim* is a specific type of mindful speech that the Torah prohibits, as it says (Lev. 25:17) "*lo sonu ish es achiv*," do not mistreat one another. This phrase is repeated twice in one paragraph; once to prohibit cheating each other in business and the second time forbidding us from mistreating one another verbally.

The Sages of the Talmud taught that mistreating someone verbally is even worse than cheating them monetarily.<sup>1</sup> You can always return stolen money, but you may not ever be able to erase the pain you cause with words.

**The old adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me" is simply false.**

We all know intuitively, and the Talmud takes it for granted, that the effects of verbal abuse are quite real.

One might ask, isn't "cheating" an interesting way to describe verbal abuse?

Each and every person deserves a basic degree of respect. If you show someone disrespect, causing them pain, embarrassment or anguish by mistreating them verbally, you are in effect robbing them of their basic human dignity.





## SPECIAL SENSIBILITIES

In multiple verses, the Torah warns us to be extra careful in our interactions with widows, orphans and converts. These groups represent the vulnerable community. Their especially challenging circumstances make them more susceptible to the pain caused by *ona'as devarim*, and we must be that much more careful when interacting with them.

Widening the lens, each and every one of us has our own unique sensitivities, which create a ready potential for us to suffer from *ona'as devarim*. There is a subjective nature to the prohibition, then, that requires a great deal of sensitivity not to harm people by what we say to them. We have to recognise what would be painful for a person to hear about and be careful to avoid saying it to them.

Without a plan to educate ourselves and maintain awareness of *ona'as devarim* issues, we are highly unlikely to avoid the numerous pitfalls of trampling the sensitivities of those around us. In this daily study book, *The Price of Words | Ona'as Devarim*, you'll find examples, insights and strategies to provide that plan.

1. Bava Metzia 58b

### TRY THIS AT HOME:

Today, think about something that would particularly upset you if someone else brought it up to you.

# JUST FOR PERFECT PEOPLE

*Brian and Julie had hit a rocky patch in their marriage. They did some research, found a marriage class that looked promising, and signed up. The class was very impressive, filled with eye-opening advice about how to build love and respect between spouses.*

*"Did you find the class helpful?" Julie asked as they walked to their car in the cool night air.*

*"I thought it was full of important lessons." He turned to Julie. "I sure hope you were paying attention!"*

Before we laugh too hard about Brian's lack of self-awareness, let's take a moment to ask ourselves: how often do we do the same thing?

If there is a breakdown in a relationship, our natural tendency is to rush to our own defense and lay the blame on the other person. After all, we don't intend to cause people that we care about pain, stress or anxiety. We don't mean to make our loved ones feel embarrassed or uncomfortable.

But occasionally it happens. We get caught off-guard, we're thoughtless for a moment — and suddenly someone is hurt. Someone is angry. We're in a fight.

Whether it's a knock-down, drag-out fight or just a simple misunderstanding, the likely culprit is something one of us said that caused the hurt feelings — *ona'as devarim*. It wasn't respectful enough, it came out critically, or it just wasn't sensitive.

These kinds of unpleasant interactions are awful, but avoidable. Growth



and change are possible, and it all starts from acknowledging that there is something that we can and should change – to become more sensitive to the impact of our words – and significantly improve every important relationship in our lives.

That's where this 30-day daily study book comes in.

As we move through the month, we're going to explore some of the primary principles of avoiding *ona'as devarim*. With greater awareness we can get ahead of the miscommunication, insensitivity and hurtful speech by preventing it from starting in the first place. The people around us will enjoy our company so much more, and vice versa.

**Even the “difficult” people in our lives become easier to tolerate, because once you recognise the pitfalls of mindless speech that trigger other people’s negative reactions, you can avoid those same reactions yourself.**

Of course, don't forget to share it all with your spouse/friend/ roommate/parent - since they're the ones who really need to hear it! ;)

**TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, think about the relationships in your life that have rough spots. Pick one to work on, and be more sensitive when you speak to that person.

## WHAT IS ONA'S DEVARIM? / DAY 6

---

# SILENCE IS ~~GOLDEN~~ SILVER

One way to avoid saying anything painful is just to avoid saying anything. Period. Just be silent. Sometimes silence is the best policy.

But people are social creatures who live in families and communities, and we thrive on communication and connection. We have so many things to share — like wisdom, advice and experience.

The question is — how do we successfully speak up for the values and causes we care about?

In this 30-day daily study book, the goal is to learn to communicate strategically and with forethought, so that our words accomplish their intended purpose without causing adverse reactions in the mind and heart of the listener.

### PUT ON THE DEFENSIVE

Let's say we're speaking in order to explain something or persuade someone.

*For example, Emma believes that everyone should only eat organic produce. When she bumps into her neighbour Hannah at the grocery store, that's her chance to finally convince her.*



*"Anyone eating non-organic vegetables these days is crazy," she says. "You're poisoning yourself and your family!"*

*In Emma's zeal to convince Hannah, she starts by criticizing her. Hannah's reaction is to become defensive. Her mind starts working on creative arguments to counter the attack:*

*#1- You don't know what you're talking about.*

*#2- You're crazy for accosting people at the supermarket.*

*#3- You're not so healthy either.*





---

*And with all Emma's best intentions to share her helpful advice with her neighbour, she completely undermined her own efforts.*

That's *ona'as devarim*, and instead of convincing Hannah, she pushed her further away. Their friendship went down a notch, and Hannah's not buying any organics.

**“People are often carried away by passions when discussing things of great importance to them.”**  
– Michael Austin, *We Must Not Be Enemies: Restoring America's Civic Tradition*

## GO FOR GOLD

Try the softer, more respectful approach that doesn't come on so strong:



*“I know the non-organics are often less expensive. Maybe you haven't seen some of the data. I just read this amazing article. Can I share it with you?”*

*“Sure. Send me a link. Thanks, Emma. Nice to bump into you.”*

Now Hannah appreciates that Emma cared enough to mention it to her. And who knows what vegetable aisle she'll choose next week? Maybe the organics.

## TRY THIS AT HOME:

Today, practice effective speech without *ona'as devarim*. Take note of the emotional reaction of whomever you're speaking to. Are your words and tone helping or hurting you make your case?

# STICK WITH THE PROGRAM

*In his shocking introduction to The Path of the Just, the seminal text of the Mussar movement, the author tells the reader not to expect to learn anything new from the book! What you will find here, he writes, most people already know. The trick, however, is to take what you read and actually do something with it.*

We spend most of our lives collecting information, money or experiences. Few of us spend time acquiring the life skills that will get us what we really want — peace of mind, rewarding relationships, and happiness.

Probably because doing so involves the 'C' word: Change. If we want something to be different than it is right now, we need to *change*. And that's scary.

**The good news is that change is both possible and surprisingly easy.**

Here's the trick: In the Mussar tradition, change results from small acts repeated over time.

Every physical trainer at the gym knows this as well. Doing one push up is easy, but by itself won't get you very far. One push up, repeated regularly over time, however, will make you look like the Rock (almost).

*In fact, modern theories of neuroplasticity say the same thing. In The Brain that Changes Itself, Norman Doidge, M.D., a neuroscientist at Columbia University, describes how new neural pathways are formed each and every time you make a decision. The more pathways that lead to that result, the easier it will be to get there again. Which means change.*







Every day, for two or three minutes, read a short insight about mindful speech, and over the course of 30 days, you will find that you have changed your speech patterns.<sup>1</sup>

It may seem like a small thing — just 3 minutes — and it is. The trick is to stick with the program and do it consistently. In one month's time, before you know it, you will see change.

### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, make a firm commitment to take 3 minutes every day through These 30 days to read the lesson of the day.

# A TALE OF TWO TAPESTRIES

*Akiva, are you crazy? You are 40 years old and you've never learned a word of Torah in your life. What on earth makes you think you can pick it up now? You don't even have the skills of a second grader!*

The famous Jewish scholar Rabbi Akiva only started his meteoric ascent to greatness at age 40. Prior to that point, he didn't even know the Hebrew alphabet. Can you imagine how differently things might have gone if his wife Rachel had criticised his efforts before they even started?

One who lacks faith in their own potential can feel like a failure even in the face of success. A person who believes in themselves, however, can see success even in the midst of failure.

**Calling someone a failure is one example of *ona'as devarim*, verbal mistreatment.**

In Week 2 of our Clean Speech curriculum, we are going to meet some examples of *ona'as devarim*. The first, in today's lesson, is withering criticism, like telling someone that they're a failure.

A person's self-image is a tapestry woven of thousands of threads, and each thread is an impression conveyed by another's words. If the threads are predominately the bright colors of "good job," "thanks," "I can count on you," "I love you," and so forth, the person's self-image is bright as well.

Unfortunately, however, there are people whose tapestry is woven of criticism, derision and insult. It hangs, dark and somber, like a shroud over the person's life.

Even without the use of blunt, negative labels, if a person's efforts are constantly met with criticism, the cumulative message is "You're a failure."





People strive to please a critical person, whether it is a parent, a teacher, a boss or a friend. The critic may believe that they are actually performing a great service, driving others to reach for higher standards. The truth, however, is just the opposite.

The great leaders, teachers and parents are masters of encouragement. They seek out the smallest bit of talent in others and nurture it with encouragement. In such an environment, people are inspired to come up with their most creative ideas, their most idealistic plans; knowing that they won't be knocked down for trying and failing.

The power to build up another human being belongs to each and every one of us. Let's use that power to fill the world with beautiful tapestries.

**TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, find something encouraging to say to someone around you, even if it's just fanning the flames of a tiny spark.

## WHAT DOES ONA'AS DEVARIM SOUND LIKE? / DAY 9

---

# REDUCED TO RIDICULOUS

If you meet someone who just completed their degree in RCS, they might have just become a Registered Cardiac Sonographer or possibly studied Retailing and Consumer Science or maybe even Rhetoric and Communication Studies.

If it's the latter, be prepared to be convinced. You are dealing with an expert. The 'R' in RCS is for rhetoric, and rhetoric is the art of persuasion.

One of the powerful techniques used in rhetoric is known as *reductio ad absurdum*. This Latin phrase describes an argument which proves itself by showing that the opposite viewpoint is ridiculous.

For a philosopher, this may be an appropriate and worthwhile technique to master. For the rest of us, it's more likely a source of *ona'as devarim*.

Ridiculing the opinions of someone you're talking with may win the argument, but it's not going to win friends. No one enjoys being made to look like a fool for their beliefs, opinions or preferences. And to belittle someone in the midst of a discussion with them is *ona'as devarim*.

*In Rabbi Yitzchak Feldheim's delightful talk, "Is Heaven a Red State or a Blue State?" he points out that sometimes we may have to choose between shalom (peace), and emes (truth). Fighting to the last breadth to make your point might lead you to the truth, but you might find it a very lonely place to be.*

Unfortunately, this is frequently the case in this season of argument. Maybe you've been present when some sharp-witted, self-appointed expert spins circles of blistering rhetoric around a coworker for his or her unpopular political opinions. Or maybe you've been the recipient of such a tirade yourself and you know how uncomfortable it is.





(This could potentially be coming from either side of the great political divide.)

Either way, you know how ineffective it is in building consensus or encouraging anyone to change their minds.

The Talmud describes the arguments of Torah scholars as war, but when they are concluded there is love between them.

**The wise King Solomon wrote,  
“there is a time for war and a time for peace.”\***

As we develop our *ona'as devarim* avoidance skills, we'll watch with pleasure as the season of argument slowly but surely ebbs into the season of reconciliation and peace.

\*Ecclesiastes (3:8)

#### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, when you get involved in a discussion or an argument, make sure not to demean the other viewpoint.

# THE ABSENTMINDED PROFESSOR

*Laura felt the tension building up inside. How could she tell her husband that she lost her passport? They were supposed to leave for the airport in 20 minutes to fly to Israel. Where did she have it last? Oh yes, in Aspen! Three hours away!*



*"You're like a little kid," he would chide her. "You can't remember anything! You need a babysitter!"*

It was true that Laura had a rather poor memory for the details of life. Not only did she seem to forget about objects, she tended to forget appointments and social engagements. It wasn't a lack of intelligence or even a lack of caring. It was just the way her mind worked; she had complete mastery of the complex field of software design in which she worked, but apparently had little available space in her own personal hard drive.

Many people find that the myriad commitments, activities and worries of life overpower their ability to stay focused. Then there are those who just were not blessed with good memories, or suffer from attention deficit disorder or — in the case of elderly people — “senior moments” or actual dementia.

It is easy to become impatient with other people's lapses, like the parent who fumes while their child searches for his lost homework and misses his bus: “You'd lose your head if it weren't attached!” Or the adult child who constantly interrupts their elderly parent's sentence, supplying the simple word they can't seem to come up with.

Granted, such lapses often present an inconvenience, sometimes a significant one. Nonetheless, insulting the person who has caused the inconvenience or the loss by their forgetfulness does nothing to mitigate the damage.



**Even worse, criticizing someone for their memory lapse is a guaranteed way to make them feel unintelligent, irresponsible and childish. A clear cut case of *ona'as devarim*.**

Rather than issuing insults, if you notice that someone has difficulty remembering things, you can offer help or advice. There are numerous apps and devices that can alert people to important dates and appointments. There are simple routines that can be established to help children remember their belongings and homework. An elderly person might need someone to help them keep their papers and bills in order.

In some cases, patience and acceptance are the only viable responses.


Whatever the response, the words you choose and the tone of your voice can express compassion and empathy. Very likely, your forgetful parent, child, or friend doesn't want to cause you the inconvenience any more than you want to experience it.

**TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, when something happens that slows you down or gets in your way, put yourselves in the shoes of whomever caused the situation, rather than thinking of your own inconvenience.


# BURSTING THEIR BUBBLE

*"The kids were practically climbing the walls," the teacher told his principal. "You could tell in a second that it was the day before vacation. So I knew I had to do something radical to get things under control. All of a sudden, this story popped into my head about the Golem of Prague". I shut off the lights and started telling the story in a low voice ...practically a whisper. In seconds, the room was dead silent. We ended up having one of the most productive days we've had all month," the teacher proudly concluded.*

 *"You shouldn't have to do tricks to get your kids under control," the principal responded. "You're probably too lenient with them in the first place. Maybe you're a little too desperate for them to like you. You know a teacher isn't a friend, they are a teacher'r."*

Instantly, the teacher in the above story went from feeling like Teacher of the Year to feeling totally incompetent. In just a few words, his principal imparted a lack of confidence in his abilities, implied that he had a desperate need for his students' approval, and was most likely an ineffectual teacher who didn't command respect.

There are many ways to deflate another person's pride, like a sarcastic comment or a needless reference to a past mistake.

 *A teenage boy walks in proudly and proclaims, "I passed my driving test!" His friend responds, "Oh, well, I guess the third time's a charm."*

Instead of getting to enjoy the accomplishment of passing the driving exam, now the boy is reliving his two previous failures.

In these cases, the comments demonstrate an inability to share another's happiness.





---

## If someone else's triumph is your triumph too, you would never want to dampen it.

At the moment when someone is offering to share a taste of their success, our best response is to graciously taste it along with them and appreciate its sweetness.

That's the Jewish concept of *nachas* — the feeling of pleasure we feel when hearing about someone else's success or accomplishment. Although there's no word for it in English, *nachas* is an important attitude to embrace. It helps us avoid *ona'as devarim* and instead give off positive vibes precisely when people are yearning to receive them.



*What the principal could have said was, "Telling that story was a clever way to deal with a tough situation. What a great way to start the holiday."*



*What the teenage friend could have said was, "You must feel pretty good to finally pass the test. Nice job!"*

In the third week of Clean Speech, we'll talk about reasons why we are tempted to say *ona'as devarim* like this and how we can learn to avoid it.

\*A human figure made of clay, the legendary Golem was brought to life by Rabbi Yehudah Loeb in the 16th century, to protect the Jewish ghetto of Prague - there is much debate about whether this Golem actually happened.

### TRY THIS AT HOME:

Today, take note of the emotional state of the people you speak to. If you sense that they're on a high, don't burst their bubble.

# NOT EVEN NORMAL

*"Let's go on the new roller coaster, the Tower of Doom!" one boy suggests to the group. They are visiting Elych Gardens and everyone is wildly in favor of the idea. Only David, the boy who is afraid of heights, hangs back as they all make a dash to the Tower of Doom's long line of restless ticket-holders.*

*"What's the matter, David?" one of the boys calls over his shoulder.*

*"Oh, you know, I don't like going up that high," David answers, trying to sound casual. The friends have all known each other — and each other's quirks — for years. "*



*"You're 14 years old already!" his friend exclaims. "It's not even normal! You better get help." He laughs and runs to catch up with the other boys, thinking nothing more of his comment.*

*David is an athletic, bright, and good-looking teen. But at that moment, he feels like a pathetic wimp with a big sign over his head: he's not normal. He glances around the periphery of the Tower of Doom, hoping to see some others lingering on the sidelines like himself. All he sees are strollers with babies. Babies and David. "Why can't I just get over it?" he chides himself.*

The term “normal” is a rock upon which many individuals’ self-esteem has been haphazardly smashed. People dearly want to be within the realm of normal: not too tall, not too short; not too brainy, not too simple; not too nice, not too selfish. It doesn’t take much for a debilitating sense of self-doubt to be activated — like when someone tells us that we’re not normal.





---

The label of “not normal” comes in many forms:

- You should really speak to someone about that [habit, fear, problem\*]
- What’s wrong with you?
- How could you think such a thing?

And all of them deliver the same verdict: that of strangeness.

These are terms that can throw a healthy person with “normal” insecurities into a state of distress. Imagine what they can do to someone who really does suffer from emotional or social issues.

There may be times when we have to communicate to someone that they need help. In such a case, we have to choose our terms very carefully and refrain from causing any needless pain. There is rarely, if ever, a useful purpose in labeling someone “not normal.”

God created each of us with unique strengths and challenges.

**The Talmud actually says that just like no two people’s faces are the same, no two people think the same way\*.**

Our task is to appreciate, not to deride, the distinct personalities that populate our rich and diverse world.

\*Berachos 58a

\*Of course, some things do require professional treatment, but referrals need to be made in a sensitive way

### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, look for a unique character trait in a friend or family member, and appreciate it.

# THE CUTTING EDGE



*"Wow, you're a ball of sunshine this morning," the mother said to her sullen teenage daughter, who was eating her breakfast cereal in hostile silence.*



*"What a genius you are," the boss said acidly to his assistant, who had just made a costly mistake.*



*"Nice job cleaning the playroom," the father told his children. "Soon it might be possible to see the floor."*



*"You get an A+ for customer service," the irate customer told the clerk who refused to accept her returned merchandise.*

All of these comments have two things in common. First, their meaning is the opposite of what it seems to be. Second, the people on the receiving end of these comments will end up feeling either foolish or insulted. What they will not feel is repentant.

Sarcasm is a form of *ona's devarim* that wears a thin veil. The words used in a sarcastic comment could be taken at face value, coming across as neutral or even positive. However, the circumstances and tone of voice supply what the simple meaning of the words does not — criticism. And what's worse, sarcasm conveys a level of disdain and derision that would be absent from the same criticism if stated directly.





*For instance, the father could tell his children, "There are still lots of toys on the floor. It isn't clean until everything is put away." The children might not like hearing the criticism, but they wouldn't feel demeaned by it. They would simply understand that they had not yet completed the task and were expected to do better.*

Sometimes, we use sarcasm as a way of veiling our displeasure, as if a bit of ironic humor will convey the message less painfully. A teacher might think it preferable to ask an unfocused child, "How are things in outer space?" rather than, "Please pay attention to the work!" In reality, however, the latter comment gives the child direct instructions that they can implement, while the former demeans their personality.

Other times people make a sarcastic comment to get a laugh. Clearly, however, we can't speak *ona'as devarim* and embarrass someone for our own amusement or to entertain whoever is listening. It's like shooting an arrow at someone and then claiming you were only joking.

## **With few exceptions, a sharp comment is a potent weapon.**

However, it is nowhere near as powerful or effective in conveying the message as a clear, direct statement.

### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, be on the lookout for sarcastic comments, and if you are tempted to make one, see if you can stop and say it in another way.

# THE WORDLESS WORDS

Once a child learns how to read, the world opens up to them. The written word becomes a means of accessing the information we need to function at maximum capacity. Road signs, newspaper articles, textbooks, instruction manuals — all of these words convey important information we use to navigate life.

**One of the most important messages a person must decode, however, does not come from the written word.**

It comes from the expression on a human face. Without uttering a word, a person's expression can tell us, "I think you're wonderful," "I'm happy to see you," "I'm interested in your story," and hundreds of other messages. Rabbi Lord Sacks z'l famously commented that the question he was asked the most is 'do you remember me?' As the phrase goes 'people may forget what the teacher taught, but they will never forget how the teacher made them feel.

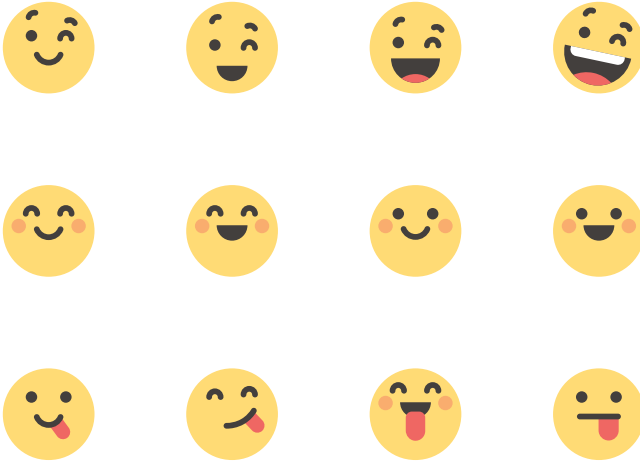
By the same token, facial expressions carry negative messages as well: "You bore me," "I'm angry at you," "You're strange."

Fluency in non-verbal communication is a vital tool for understanding the feelings of others and responding appropriately. Human beings are born with the basics. Infants have been shown to respond to facial expressions, becoming upset when their parents gaze at them with a frown, and becoming relaxed when they smile.

If even an infant can pick up the negative message of an angry face, older children and adults can read what is written there, too.

Because facial expressions say so much, we have to take control of the messages our face is sending.





*In the Ethics of our Fathers\*, the Mishnah teaches, "Greet everyone with a pleasant countenance." While I looked this up, someone came in and interrupted me, and I was forced to hide my impatience and make a pleasant face!*

During the pandemic, as we pivoted to Zoom and FaceTime, it was even more critical that we gave off the right vibe with the face that we showed others. In virtual communication, there is a lot less natural context and warmth, making it much easier to trample on each other's feelings.

One way of doing this is to adopt a pleasant expression as your "default mode." Try to look like everything is fine, even when it's not.

By mastering this skill and putting on positive facial expressions, we can brighten each other's day and make people feel welcome, loved and appreciated, without saying a word.

\*Pirkei Avos (1:15)

### TRY THIS AT HOME:

Today, work on your default face of pleasantness. Practice in the mirror and see how it feels. Then walk around with it for as long as you can.

# THE PAUSE BUTTON

In the third week of the Clean Speech campaign, we are going to explore some of the causes of *ona'as devarim*.

After all, for most of us, speaking in a way that causes discomfort is an inadvertent mistake, not a deliberate one. If we don't deal directly with the root of the problem, the same mistake will happen over and over again. It's like putting a plaster over a leaking tap.

The most significant attitude that causes someone to speak hurtfully is anger.

For thousands of years, generation after generation of Torah scholars and Jewish leaders have urged us to strive to remove anger from our lives.

In a state of anger, a person loses control of what they say. All kinds of irrational, self-destructive and foolish behavior can result, very much like a childish temper tantrum.

*The following exchange was overheard in a parking lot, from two adults fighting angrily over a parking space. "You're stupid!" the first one yelled.*

*"You're stupider!"*

*"You're the most stupid person in this city!"*

*"Oh yeah? Well you're the stupidest person in the country!"*

*"And you're the stupidest person in the world!"*

*"Well you're the stupidest person in the universe!"<sup>1</sup>*

There's really no better state of mind to say something offensive, hurtful and destructive than anger; and no faster way to sacrifice peace and happiness. One should run away from anger like running away from a fire.







**“Speak when you are angry, and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.”  
– Ambrose Bierce**

The right temperature at home is one of warm hearts and not hot heads. If you find yourself getting angry, one of the most recommended ways not to say anything you shouldn't is to pause. Count to 10 (or in the case of real wrath, 10,000) before you say anything. When you're no longer seeing red, you may find that you don't need to say anything at all. And even if you do, you will be in better possession of your senses, and more likely to avoid *ona'as devarim*.<sup>2</sup>

The 'counting to ten' method will not cure anger – it may push it off or mitigate some of its ferocity. We really want to develop a strategy that rids ourselves of anger before it begins. One such strategy is known as *kitzur nefesh*. A person gets angry when they are taken out of their comfort zone. In a mix of ego and ceding control, you feel 'I cannot possibly exist in such a situation – it is threatening my ability to function!' When you are frustrated stuck in traffic knowing you are likely to miss that vital meeting that's where anger happens. 'It's not fair! I'm not supposed to endure this.' *Kitzur nefesh* says 'expand your comfort zone' – the more breadth of situations you are able to encompass, the fewer situations will get a person angry. And the ultimate way of increasing that comfort zone is *emunah* – trusting in God that you are not alone and the situation is tailor-made for you to master and cope with.

1. This incident was witnessed by Rabbi Dovid Kaplan. His comment? It's a tie.
2. For a helpful book on overcoming anger, try *Anger: The Inner Teacher*, by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin.

### TRY THIS AT HOME:

See if you can go the whole day today without getting angry. If you can, great. If not, you've got your work cut out for you.

# FEELING GREEN

*Michael knew he should be happy for his brother, Jason, as he watched his nephew, David, reading his bar mitzvah speech with perfect diction and a clear, musical voice.*

*Michael's own son, Benjamin, was still struggling to learn the short blessings said before the Torah reading – a few simple lines – and his bar mitzvah was in just three months. Why couldn't he have a son like his brother's? But then again, his brother had always had the perfect life, and Michael had always struggled to just hold his own.*

*After the service, Michael gave his nephew a nice compliment, as a good uncle would. Then he approached his brother.*

*"David did great," he forced himself to say. He knew he should leave it at that, but he couldn't. His jealousy boiled up from his heart to his mouth and spurted out: "Of course, he must have known his father wouldn't settle for less than perfect. My Benjamin knows we'll be proud of him even if it's not perfect."*

When we feel inferior to someone, the tendency is to look for their flaws just to prove to ourselves that they're not so great. And when jealousy sets in, *ona'as devarim* is not far behind.

In the context of a long-term relationship, like with family members, feelings of jealousy can run very deep, unexpectedly bubbling up to the surface in an attempt to “even the score” at any moment.





## Jealousy likewise has the ability to suck the joy and pleasure out of life's best moments.<sup>1</sup>

As we look over our shoulders at everyone else's success, our achievements pale in comparison. Social media exacerbates the issue, showing us an endless stream of picture-perfect moments in the lives of everyone we know — and plenty of people we don't.

To avoid the *ona'as devarim* that results from jealousy, we should consult Jewish tradition for a healthy outlook on comparing ourselves with others. If we accept that each one of us receives what God has apportioned for us, and that this portion is precisely what we need to accomplish our purpose in this world, there can be no jealousy. What I have is what I need, what they have is what they need. We should look at another person's circumstances as if it was the other person's shoe: a comfortable fit for them, but totally unsuitable for anyone else.

With this attitude, other people's good fortune no longer impinges upon our sense of self-esteem. And the world is a much more enjoyable place to be.

1. Jealousy is one of a short list of things listed in *Ethics of the Fathers* (4:28) that prevent a person from enjoying life.

### TRY THIS AT HOME:

Today, try to curb your sense of envy for something that someone else has and you don't. Think of it as their shoe.

## WHERE DOES ONA'AS DEVARIM COME FROM? / DAY 17

---

### MY WAY

*For what is a man, what has he got?*

*If not himself then he has naught*

*To say the things he truly feels*

*And not the words of one who kneels*

These lyrics, from the song *My Way*, popularised in 1969 by Frank Sinatra, were described by the BBC in an article after Sinatra's death as "a hymn to individuality and egocentricity."

In fact, Sinatra's daughter Tina said the legendary singer came to hate the song. "He always thought that song was self-serving and self-indulgent."

Another major cause of *ona'as devarim* is our ego. Things have to go the way I think they should, or else I get upset. And I let others know in no uncertain terms.

Although the concept of idol worship might be foreign to us, our Sages equate an egotistical person with one who worships idols. Idol worship was selfishness codified into religion. The adherent of the idol was not so much interested in the honour and glory of the idol — just in what he could gain from worshipping it. The rain god was the right address when you wanted rain, the god of fertility when you wanted children, etc.

Judaism, by contrast, is a life of serving others for their benefit. We serve God for God's honour. We care for our fellow human beings in whatever ways they need. It's not about what we get, but what we can give. It's not about our rights, it's about our responsibilities.



**JFK said it well:  
“Ask not what your country can do for you, but what  
you can do for your country.”**

The war we wage with our ego is a life-long battle. No one gets to the finish line of selfless humility after reading a page of the Clean Speech daily study book. But as we sharpen our skills in avoiding ona’as devarim and speaking to others in more respectful ways, we should try to remember that the more it’s about others, and the less I need things to be My Way, the better everything will be.

A key way to reduce stress is to move from thinking (mistakenly) that you can control the situation towards stepping back and instead realising that I can control my reaction to the situation. This is in effect humility and also happens to reduce stress massively, as it brings back your centre of stability and happiness towards the internal instead of it being regulated by external events.

**TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, if you feel tempted to speak in a demanding, egotistical way, check yourself to see whose benefit you’re really fighting for.

# AND THE WINNER IS ...

Did you ever talk with someone and it felt more like a competition than a conversation?



*You think you got a bargain? You should see what I got. The same exact paper towels for half the price!*



*You got a 98 on the spelling test? Well, guess what? I got 100 plus 5 extra credit points!*



*Your daughter got into medical school? That's nice. Did I tell you that my daughter just passed the bar?*

When we're always trying to "one-up" the person we're speaking with, we're not really hearing what the other person is saying. We're just using what they're saying as a backdrop to share our own news.

In a really competitive moment, we will even compete over bad news. One mother complains that her baby kept her up half the night, and her friend replies that her baby kept her up the entire night.

It's like saying, "I don't care about your tiredness, because it's nothing compared to mine."

One has nothing to do with the other. She's not less tired because of how tired her friend is. Do I have to prove myself to be the most tired person in the world to merit some sympathy from a friend?

Sometimes we get so wound up in our own worlds that everything refers back to ourselves. If someone tells us, "I got a parking ticket," our first response is to tell the story of when we got a parking ticket. If someone tells us that their child is engaged, we immediately launch into a discussion of how we felt when our child got married. A problem shared is a problem halved, but not when it's all about you instead of trying to empathise



## In these moments what we're saying is, "It's all about me."



*An effective way to avoid this kind of on'a's devarim is to focus on the other person in the conversation. If we are genuinely interested in them, we wouldn't try to outshine their moment with one of our own — since our goal is to hear whatever it is that our friend wants to tell us.*

### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, when someone is telling you something about themselves, resist the urge to respond with a story of your own, and take interest in their story instead.

# THE BLAME GAME

*To Richard, the problem at work was that his co-workers simply did not like to hear the harsh truth about themselves. The office was disorganised, the staff was incompetent, and here he was, just a junior associate, having to compensate for everyone else's laziness and sloppiness.*

*The situation was all the more irritating because he had endured the same problems in school. Even his family seemed to fall short most of the time. It's like incompetence was a malady and he was the only one with antibodies.*

Ever play the blame game? The rules are simple. You're always right and everyone else is always wrong. The game doesn't take too long, because no one else gets a turn. Since it's always your turn, the *ona'as devarim* can really fly.

Sound like fun? It isn't fun for anyone else.

**Being with someone who is playing the blame game is downright unpleasant.**

There are two common motivations for the tendency to blame other people for our problems:

1. We place the blame on others to avoid having to face a mistake or flaw of our own.
2. We often find it easier to point out a flaw in others, than to recognise that very same flaw in ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

Social psychologists have shown Attribution Bias, whereby we attribute our successes to us and our failures to external factors ('I won because I'm great, but I lost because of someone else...'), but when it comes to others we attribute their successes to external factors and their failures to them ('they

---





came top of the class because they got lucky with the questions,’ ‘they got a bad mark because they can’t work hard.’) The mitzvah of giving others the benefit of the doubt (conditions apply) redresses this imbalance.

Recognising this tendency in ourselves will help us to “call it a game” and put the blame game back on the shelf.

Even in the event that another person really does deserve blame for something they did or said, the only constructive purpose would be to ensure that they learn from their mistake. Harsh words of blame will almost certainly not accomplish the goal. Instead, calmly suggest and/or model a better approach to the situation.

1. “*Kol Haposel bimumo posail*,” says the Talmud, meaning that we accuse others of our own flaws.

### TRY THIS AT HOME:

Today, see if you can catch yourself placing blame on others. Then see if you can look a little deeper and accept the blame yourself.

# THREE STRIKES

*Jen came home late from a long shift at the restaurant. Her roommate was up late doing some classwork, books and papers spread across the table, living room floor and the couch. The music was blasting from the kitchen so loudly that she didn't notice Jen come in.*

*"Can you turn it down!" Jen practically had to shout.*

*"What?" she looked up blankly.*



*"Can you turn that #\*\$&! music off!" Jen shouted back at her. "It's after midnight. What's wrong with you?!"*

Normally a polite, gentle girl, there were three things that pushed Jen over the edge into a frightful outburst of *ona's devarim*, hurtful words.

First, she was tired. At the end of her work day, coming from a stressful environment like a restaurant, her emotional reserves were drained. There was nothing left but a time bomb of impatience on a short fuse. Without sufficient emotional energy, she was unable to keep her negative feelings from emerging as an ugly remark.

Second, she was frustrated. Her roommate was always making a mess and taking over their shared space. Over and over again Jen wanted to sit her down and discuss the issue with her, but she never did. Without having the tough conversation, the feeling of frustration festered. Like rising flood waters bursting through the dam, the frustration found the weakest point, and poured out at just the wrong moment.

Third, she was at home. If there was a difficult customer at the restaurant, she always managed to handle them diplomatically. That's just what you have to do at work.



## At home you can let your hair down, right? No need to walk on eggshells.

Jen relaxed the restraint she would normally employ to refrain from *ona'as devarim*, and just let go.

Tired, frustrated, at home. Three strikes that would knock the most well-intentioned of us off our commitment to practice mindful speech. But here are some suggestions:



*Keep a snack in your car. When you're feeling tired after a long day, take a minute to breathe, and eat something to give yourself a little energy boost before going inside.*



*Avoid frustrations from mounting. Have the tough conversations in a timely manner.*

Your home is your most sacred space, and its residents are royalty. You should be more vigilant to speak mindfully at home, not less so.

### TRY THIS AT HOME:

Sometime today take your pulse. How tired and frustrated are you? How likely are you to be able to guard your tongue from *ona'as devarim*?

# MISCONSTRUED

A few days after his new pool table was installed, Dave invited a few of his neighbours over to the house to play pool. Eddie, an experienced pool player, stepped right up for the first game. Halfway into the game, it was Eddie's turn, and he was stuck for a decent shot. There was nothing he could really do.

"It's an ugly table," he remarked.



Dave was shocked. "Better than your table, wiseguy!" he retorted.

One of the easiest sources of *ona'as devarim* is a simple misunderstanding.

As an experienced pool player knows, an "ugly table" in pool lingo means that the balls are not spread out in your favor.

This was something that Dave, who was new to the game, however, did not realise. He thought that Eddie was criticizing his pool table. Indignant at the imagined insult, he reacted by slamming Eddie with a snide comment to "even the score."

It's particularly sad when *ona'as devarim* comes as the result of a complete misunderstanding. Yet it's common.

We get upset for snarky comments we think we hear, insults we imagine





we receive, and for offenses that we assume we've suffered. In fact, no such negative comment was made. But the sirens went off in our head, and we came out with guns blazing.

One of the first things we should do when we feel that we've been insulted is to clarify — make sure that what we heard is what was meant. Ask for clarification. It's easy to miss the subtleties of what people are saying. Don't assume.

**“Assumptions are the termites of relationships.”  
— Henry Winkler**

Another important tip is to presume the positive. Some things people say are ambiguous, and you don't know if it was meant as a joke or seriously, sarcastic or sincerely. Expect that people are out to love you, not hurt you, especially if the person you're talking to is a friend. Clear your inner dialogue and let the good times roll.

**TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, when you think you hear something that sounds aggressive or insulting, ask a clarifying question. Don't assume the worst.

## HOW DO WE FIX ONA'AS DEVARIM? / DAY 22

---

# 'TIL THE LAST BREATH

With three weeks of Clean Speech under our belts, we should have a good idea what constitutes ona'as devarim and what a big problem it is. Now it's time to strategise how to make real progress towards longterm solutions and lasting changes.

To remove the weeds from the garden, you have to dig down below the surface, and pull them out by the roots. Since we want to uproot ona'as devarim, we have to address the attitudes deep within us that produce ona'as devarim.

*One upon a time, in a small Jewish community in UK, there was a very respected fellow who went into the hot springs in the heat of the summer. After an hour he was so fashvitzed\* that he climbed out of the water and toppled over in a heap nearby. People came running. They tried to rouse him, unsuccessfully. They thought he was dead.*

*"Oy what a great man he was!" One person bemoaned. "Such a generous philanthropist."*

*"He dedicated the synagogue," said another.*

*"And the day school," said a third.*

*Just at that moment the fellow himself woke up. "And what about the social hall?"*

### TRY THIS AT HOME:

list three talents you have and how you can put them to best use.





## The greater we are, the greater the challenge it is to remain humble.

A humble person can be great and still not regard themselves as more important than anyone else. With humility we can be respectful of others and not feel any inclination to speak with disdain, contempt, ridicule or condescension.

How does one achieve humility?

Like any transformative achievement, becoming a humble person doesn't happen overnight. But one tactic is to imagine the day of our deaths. Our feelings of pride, strength and superiority can be offset by meditating on the final moment of life when we are powerless. This is one of the explanations for the custom of wearing white on Yom Kippur — it reminds us of shrouds, and instills humility in our hearts.

Here's another tactic. In today's global village, where we are intimately aware of amazing things going on around the world, we can compare ourselves to those greater than we. If we tend to think of ourselves as God's gift to mankind, there are always others whose contributions far surpass our own.

Our talents were given to us by Hashem for us to nurture and put to good use. Whilst we can look back at our achievements with a sense of accomplishment, these talents are responsibilities and could have been deposited with anyone. Note that humility does not mean denying our abilities and talents – it means recognising their Source and using them in the right way. As one educator put it 'every person has to realise that they are the centre of the world, but not the centre of the universe.'

\*overheated (yiddish)

# THE LITTLE WHITE LIE

What should you say?

Your close friend drives up in her new car. She's delighted with it. She asks what you think.

You don't care for it.

Should you tell her that it's not your taste, which is true but will hurt her feelings, or should you give her a nice compliment, which will make her feel good, but isn't really what you think?

The Talmud discusses this very situation, and concludes that you should give the compliment.<sup>1</sup>

"But it's not true," you ask. "Should I lie to her?!"

Rabbi Zelig Pliskin would answer your question with a question.<sup>2</sup>

"But it's hurtful! Should you hurt her feelings?!"

For most of us, the strong ethic of always telling the truth is deeply ingrained in us. And that's a good thing. The Torah explicitly commands us to stay far away from falsehood.







**However, there is another ethic which should be ingrained in us just as deeply, if not more so. The Torah also explicitly commands us not to hurt other people's feelings.**

In this case, there is no constructive reason to tell her what you really think of her car. She's not going to return it. You'll just be hurting her feelings. And you can't do that.

If this attitude is not already firmly established in our heads and hearts, it should be. Just as you think of yourself as an honest, upstanding person, you should also think of yourself as someone who doesn't hurt others.

The Ramban in his celebrated letter advises that if we positively anchor and label ourselves in a certain way, this will protect us from succumbing to negative actions. For example, if I brand myself as 'a giving person' I am less likely to be stingy. If a person conducts themselves with calmness they are less likely to be angry – it will be harder to overturn that 'calm anchor.' If we define and anchor ourselves as 'someone who does not hurt others' it will be much more difficult to actually hurt others.

1. Kesubos 17a
2. The Power of Words, by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, p. 91

**TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, spend a few minutes meditating on the thought, "I do not hurt other people's feelings."

# AN UNLIKELY COMIC OPERA

*In 2015 Derrick Wang wrote an unlikely one-act comic opera about the relationship between Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.*

*Although they differed dramatically in their legal perspectives, Scalia and Ginsburg shared a love of opera. And perhaps even more surprisingly, of each other.*

*The play brought to light the charming real-life fact that these two opposing iconoclasts were personal friends. It's possible to differ vehemently with someone and still like them.*

How do we do that?

Taking a page from their playbook, we focus on what we have in common. Find points of connection, which will elicit positive feelings towards the person, despite the other things about them that you disagree with.

## A person is a whole world.

Why was mankind created originally as one sole human being in the story of Genesis? All the other facets of the world were created as an entire species — all the trees were created together as one, all the birds, all the beasts, etc. Adam was one person\*. The rest of humanity comes from him. Why?

The Mishnah<sup>1</sup> explains that this is to teach us that each person is an entire

\*The Gemara mentions that Adam and Eve were originally created as two parts of one being – only later were they separated'





world. If we uplift and encourage one person, it's like we uplifted the entire world. If we destroy one person, it's like we destroyed the entire world.

It also teaches us to keep the peace between us, because no one can say my father was greater than yours (because we all have the same first father).

And finally, it teaches us the greatness of the Creator of the Universe, who made each and every person unique, even though we were all “minted from the same coin.”

To embrace both the uniqueness and the common connection between us all is a powerful way to avoid *ona'as devarim* and instead speak positively to everyone around us, to build real peace.

#### 1. Sanhedrin Chapter 4

#### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, imagine the long chain of ancestors that extend backwards in your past to the first human being. Recognise that each and every one of us has a similar line to draw.

# DON'T BE SNARKY

In the previous three lessons, we addressed some of the attitudes that one should develop in order to naturally speak in a more positive way. Now we'll present some tricks, tips and tactics that will also help.

Don't talk about problems globally, as if the person is defective or deficient. Address the behavior, not the person. Be clear and specific, and avoid statements that make people defensive. "Can you stop that annoying tapping on the table" rather than "You are so annoying sometimes."

Speak in a way that shows clearly that you're interested in solutions. Don't just complain, blame or criticise. Bring up challenges in order to fix them. "We need to figure this out" rather than "We have a problem here."

Focus on what can be improved, not on what was done wrong. Bringing up a painful incident from the past with no purpose is *ona'as devarim*. "I appreciate when you refer to me respectfully" rather than "How could you say that about me?!"

Avoid speaking in extreme terms. Leave out superlative words like "always" and "never" and don't exaggerate. If you do, the listener will take issue with the exaggeration and reject your whole point. "I don't get to hold the clicker enough" "OK, here" rather than "You never let me hold the clicker" "Yes I did once."

Don't make snide or snarky comments. "That is not something I want to spend my time on" rather than "How about never? Is never good for you?"





## Let's be the change we want to see in the world.

Avoid speaking in a mean way about people who are mean. Model proper speech. "I do not subscribe to that way of communicating" rather than "Don't speak like that clown."



### TRY THIS AT HOME:

Today, make a point of putting the brakes on your mouth and leave out counter-productive words.

## HOW DO WE FIX ONA'AS DEVARIM? / DAY 26

---

# WRITE OR WRONG

William Strunk Jr., author of *The Elements of Style*, insisted that writers “omit needless words.”

This should be the motto of mindful speech.<sup>1</sup> If you need to say something that may be painful to hear, distill the message down to its essential parts, and omit the rest. The extra words will likely be negative-emotion-inducers, otherwise known as *ona'as devarim*.

**In the words of our Talmudic Sages,  
“One who adds, subtracts.”**

The efficacy of the message is in reverse proportion to how many words you use to say it. In other words, less is more.

*Case in point: a parent needs to tell their teenager that they cannot borrow the family car and then leave it full of trash. If this takes more than two sentences, it is categorised in the adolescent brain as a “lecture” and summarily dismissed as “parental abuse.” This kind of attitude is not exclusive to teenagers. No one likes to feel “lectured.”*

Nevertheless, using words to build relationships is itself important – even if the words themselves are not full of information

## LET'S CALL A TRUCE

A valuable piece of advice when a conversation becomes tense, bitter or argumentative, is to call a truce. Take a time out. “Can we pause this conversation for a little while? Let's take a break and talk again in 20 minutes.”





The extra time will allow some of the emotions to subside and both parties can gain a little perspective. Thinking about what the other person is saying and feeling can be very helpful to regaining empathy. In the heat of the moment we often say things we wouldn't say with a clearer head. Calling a truce really helps.

## **GRAB A PEN**

Another productive idea for a time-out or before engaging in a tough conversation is to write down what you want to say. The exercise of drafting sentences to express your point helps to choose the right words. After you write it out, you can look back and read it to yourself as if you're the listener. Is this the way you would want someone to tell you? Are there any words or points you should remove or soften?

If you're not sure whether or not your words will cause pain, don't say them.

1. Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, in *The Power of Words*.

### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, practice pausing before responding to a challenging conversation.

# TEACH YOUR CHILDREN

As parents, our job is to set our children on a path to success: to teach them how to earn a living, how to swim, etc. Included in the list of critical life skills is how to speak respectfully and avoid *ona'as devarim*, as well.

Left to their own devices, it's quite common for kids to mock, tease, jeer, bully, make fun of and generally torture each other. People are not usually born with a highly developed sense of sensitivity or great degree of experience interacting with one another.

If parents, teachers and role models don't intentionally demonstrate and demand good *middos*, children can cause tremendous, long-lasting harm to one another. Bullying can impact a kid for life. Therefore it's critical that we take care to teach children not to speak badly of others.

**There are many excellent parenting books out there. But the best parenting techniques in the world will be next to useless if kids see adults disparaging and bad-mouthing each other.**

Nor is it acceptable for adults to speak in a demeaning way to the children themselves. Just because they are young doesn't mean they don't have feelings. When you speak to children in a way that hurts their feelings, it's *ona'as devarim*.



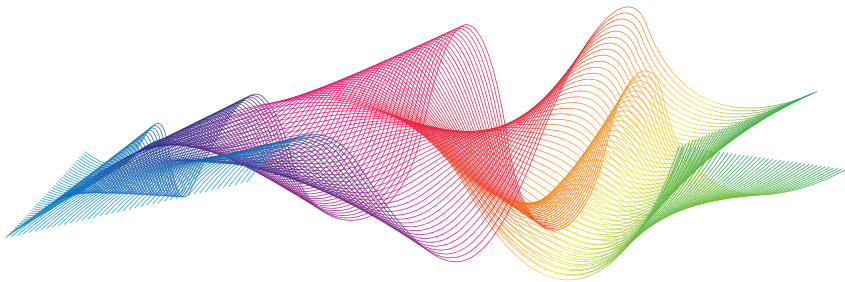




---

*There is a story told of a young man who brought his adolescent son to visit a leading rabbi on the Sabbath. During the meeting, the little boy started playing with something he shouldn't have. Clearly embarrassed, the father rebuked his son sharply. Afterwards the rabbi noted that the son might possibly have violated a minor rabbinic ordinance, but the father had undoubtedly transgressed a major Torah prohibition: ona'as devarim.*

This means that if we see one child bullying another, we can't pounce on them and give them the same treatment. A better technique is to catch them when they're speaking well of each other and reward their positive speech. "Wow, I saw how nicely you spoke to your friend just now. I have a special treat for boys who speak nicely..."



### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

If you have occasion to be around children today, make sure to speak to them as respectfully as you want them to speak to each other.

# FILLED WITH POSITIVE

If we fill our mouths with positive words — like expressing gratitude, judging people favorably, giving compliments, and being pleasant — there's no room for negative ones to come out.

*There was once a fellow who worked in a meat packing plant in Norway. One day at the end of his shift, he went into a walk-in freezer to do an inspection. The freezer door fell off the safety latch and closed with him inside. He banged on the door and yelled, but most of the employees had already gone home and no one heard him.*

*Five hours went by and he was nearly frozen to death. Suddenly the door opened and a security guard looked inside and found him.*

*Later, when the security guard was asked why he opened the freezer door, he explained, "I've been working here for 35 years. Hundreds of people go in and out of this plant everyday. No one pays any attention to me except for that guy. Every morning he says "Hello" to me and every evening he says "Good night." I heard him say "Hello" this morning and I didn't hear him say "Good night." So I knew he was still inside.*





Here's another story of positive words.

*The dean of the Yeshiva was in a meeting with the staff. There was a knock on the door and a student barged in excitedly.*

*"Rabbi, did you hear? Shlomo just got engaged!"*

*The dean responded warmly, "Mazel tov! Thank you for telling me the wonderful news."*

*Two minutes later another student rushed in. "Rabbi, Shlomo is engaged!"*

*The dean smiled broadly and said, "Mazel tov! Thank you for telling me."*

*A few minutes later the scene repeated itself a third time.*

*Finally one of the staff at the meeting asked the dean, "Why don't you tell them you already heard instead of repeating the charade over and over again?"*

*"Don't you see how much pleasure they have when they come to share the news with me? Why should I take that away from them?" he replied.*

1. From *Impact!* by Dovid Kaplan
2. From *Major Impact!* By Dovid Kaplan

### TRY THIS AT HOME:

Today, don't just avoid making negative remarks, instead find something positive to say in their place.

# SIGN OF THE TIMES

One of the unfortunate reasons that Clean Speech is such a timely campaign for us to participate in together this year is the current state of social divisiveness and polarisation.

Relationships that should be loving and genial, have become stormy and bitter, or worse, have been severed completely. Our passionately held viewpoints on national politics have created a wide aisle that runs down the middle of families, friendships, and communities, slicing us apart.

The stormy seas of this turbulence are larger than we are. Political differences are very real, the gap seems to be growing, and the stakes are high. Election campaign machinery is designed to stir up the ire and anger of the populace. The media thrives on vitriol. The world prefers to talk about big problems much more than small victories. Social media exacerbates extremities and does not allow for subtleties and middle ground.

And all that seeps into the fabric of our otherwise calm inner world.

How do we navigate all this? How do we maintain the recognition that we are all in this together? That we must preserve our connections with one another despite our differences. Although this was obvious in previous decades, it has been forgotten.

**Elections come and go. Candidates come and go.  
Political parties change and fade. But our homes  
and friendships and communities cannot.**

We must strengthen our abilities to hold it together, to hold each other, together.





Here are three suggestions:

1. *Keep the goal in mind.* Remember that keeping the relationship is the long term goal. Longer than making the point you want to make.
2. *Discretion is the better part of valor.* Maybe it's not the right time to have this conversation with this person. Save it for a better time.
3. *Consider the other person's experience.* You know how you feel. How does the other person feel about the conversation you're having? If they are not appreciating it, don't have it.

Not only can these three tips help preserve important relationships, they can even make it more likely that others will be open to hearing and considering what we have to say. The more you care about your cause, the more critical it is to develop these skills.

And let's remind ourselves that this is a problem. We've not mastered this yet. There will be mistakes. We can forgive each other.

May all our collective interest and efforts in navigating this storm together bring peace upon us, speedily and soon.

### **TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Today, imagine having a calm, measured, dispassionate political discussion with someone. What would they say? What would you say? Rehearse it by yourself. Practice phrases that keep the tone of the conversation in check.

## HOW DO WE FIX ONA'AS DEVARIM? / DAY 30

---

# YOU DID IT!

Thanks for participating in . Your friends, family, roommates, coworkers, distant relatives, random people you meet on the street, your barista, your elected officials, and everyone else thank you.

Avoiding *ona'as devarim* is a powerful way to bring the world up to a better place, closer to the peace that we all yearn for. Now you need to practice. Remember when you got your driver's license? Then it was time to get out on the highway and drive. Now it is time to interact with other people mindfully.

And there are many more things to do, as well.

- Take a look at some other great resources on Jewish mindful speech, review this daily study book a second time (and a third), or take just one of the many lessons and work on it diligently until you master it.
- Share this daily study book with someone else. If it's someone you normally interact with, you'll be a beneficiary of your own gift as they become more careful about how they speak with you. And if not, you'll still benefit along with the rest of humanity, as each one of us improves the way we speak to one another.

In the final lines of the this Clean Speech study book, it's worthwhile to quote from the final lines of the entire Mishnah.

**“Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chalafta taught,  
‘God could find no better vessel for blessing  
than shalom.’”**



When we make efforts to increase the peace, we likewise surround ourselves in blessing. My blessing to you is that your efforts should bring you health, prosperity and eternal happiness.

**TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Make a prompt decision today about how you will continue your efforts in improving your speech patterns and your quality of life and the quality of life of everyone around you.







# GLOSSARY OF HEBREW TERMS

---

**Ethics of our Fathers:** A section of the Mishnah (see below) focused on character development

**Fashvitzed:** Yiddish for overheated

**Golem:** A mythical human figure made of clay, the legendary Golem was brought to life by Rabbi Yehudah Loeb in the 16th century to protect the Jewish ghetto of Prague.

**King Solomon:** Heir to the throne of King David his father, King Solomon reigned in Jerusalem as the king of a united Israel at the height of its influence from 970–931 BCE.

**Lashon Hara:** Although the term *lashon hara* is often used to refer to problematic communication of any kind, strictly speaking the term *lashon hara* refers to gossip and slander — talking about other people in harmful or hurtful ways behind their back. It's the subject of Clean Speech UK 2019, Volume 1.

**Middos:** Hebrew plural for character traits

**Mishnah:** An early compendium of Jewish thought from the Oral Torah, studied continuously for the last eighteen centuries

**Mussar:** A type of Jewish study devoted to character improvement. Gained popularity as a Jewish movement in the 19th century.

**Nachas:** A Yiddish word for the Jewish concept of pleasure we feel when hearing about someone else's success or accomplishment

**Ona'as Devarim:** Hurtful words, the main focus of this daily study book

**Proverbs:** Known as *Mishlei* in Hebrew, Proverbs is a book of the canonised works of Jewish Prophets, written by King Solomon, containing many concise teachings of wisdom.

**Rabbi Akiva:** A great Sage in the first century CE and a leading contributor to the Mishnah

**Rabbi Zelig Pliskin:** Contemporary scholar, writer and teacher, residing in Jerusalem. Author of *The Power of Words*, a seminal English text on mindful speech

**Talmud:** A second compendium of Jewish thought from the Oral Torah, built upon the Mishnah

**Torah:** The five books of Moses, the primary source of Judaism and all monotheistic religions, given at Mt. Sinai over 3,300 years ago

**Yom Kippur:** The Jewish holiday of atonement, celebrated in the fall on the 10th day of the Jewish new year

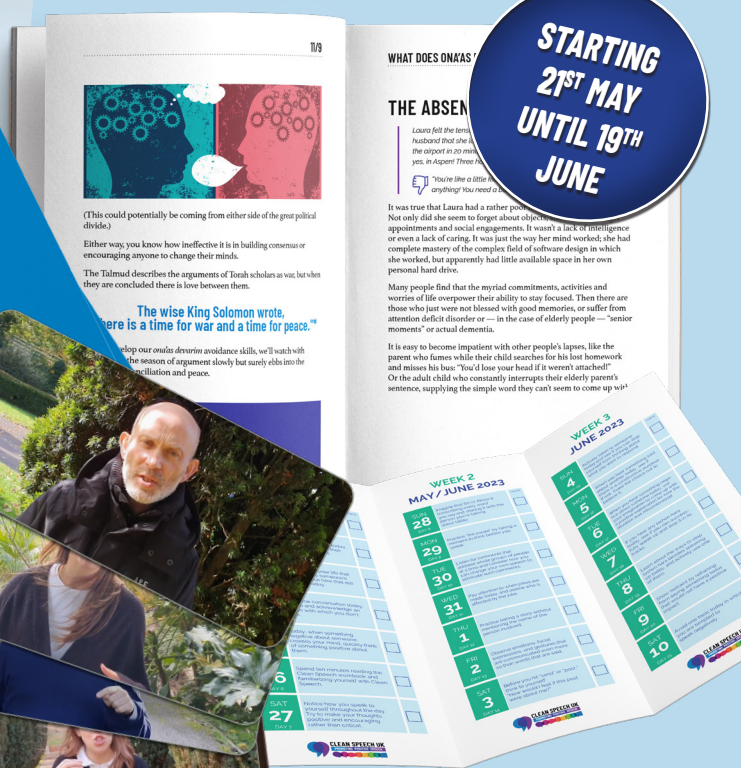
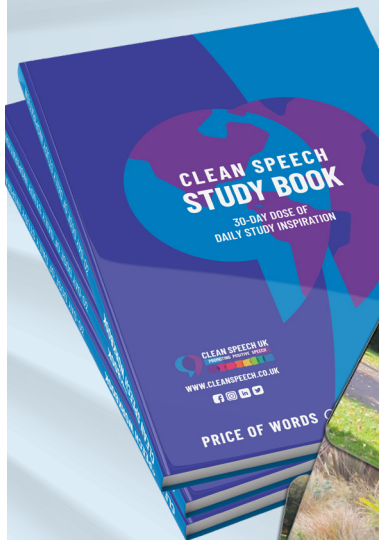


**SIGN UP TO ▶**

# THE 30 DAY JOURNEY TO CLEAN SPEECH

A 30 day programme to enhance the way we communicate with each other

Sign up at  [www.cleanspeech.co.uk](http://www.cleanspeech.co.uk)  or send 'CLEANSPEECH' to 07984 320 320



**STARTING  
21<sup>ST</sup> MAY  
UNTIL 19<sup>TH</sup>  
JUNE**

### WHAT DOES ONKAS?

### THE ABSEN

Laura felt the loss of her husband that she had spent the last 10 years of her life in his care. "You're like a little anything! You need a..."

It was true that Laura had a rather poor memory for appointments and social engagements. It wasn't a lack of intelligence or even a lack of caring. It was just the way her mind worked; she had complete mastery of the complex field of software design in which she worked, but apparently had little available space in her own personal hard drive.

Many people find that the myriad commitments, activities and worries of life overpower their ability to stay focused. Then there are those who just were not blessed with good memories, or suffer from attention deficit disorder or — in the case of elderly people — "senior moments" or actual dementia.

It is easy to become impatient with other people's lapses, like the parent who fumes while their child searches for his lost homework and misses his bus "You'll lose your head if it weren't attached!" Or the adult child who constantly interrupts their elderly parent's sentences, supplying the simple word they can't seem to come up with.



(This could potentially be coming from either side of the great political divide.)

Either way, you know how ineffective it is in building consensus or encouraging anyone to change their minds.

The Talmud describes the arguments of Torah scholars as war, but when they are concluded there is love between them.

**The wise King Solomon wrote, there is a time for war and a time for peace.\***

Develop our onus devorim avoidance skills, we'll watch with the season of argument slowly but surely ebbs into the tranquility and peace.

**Receive daily videos and the Clean Speech workbook for FREE!**



a joint project of





**CLEAN SPEECH UK**  
PROMOTING POSITIVE SPEECH



[www.cleanspeech.co.uk](http://www.cleanspeech.co.uk)



**WOHL LEGACY**  
Empowering Communities.  
Transforming Lives.

a joint project of

**Seed GIFT**

Avrohom Zeidman - [az@jgift.org](mailto:az@jgift.org) | 07984 320 320

Daniel Fine - [danielfine@gmail.com](mailto:danielfine@gmail.com) | 07392 310 866

a member  
of the  
**jewish  
futures**  
family