The CHESED of Speech

By Rabbi Daniel Fine, Seed, UK

Ironically, when teaching about 'kosher speech,' there is a tendency to focus on the negative – what one may not say – over the positive, what one can and should say. Apparently, the Chofetz Chaim was quite the conversationalist: he went to great verbal lengths to show that even though there are various laws surrounding guarding one's words, that does not mean that one should shun speech. Speech is a gift: gifts can be used constructively or destructively.

Do you believe in free speech? That was a clever line used by a friend of mine to convince a top Jewish American lawyer to give a talk without charge in his Synagogue. On a less jovial note, one of the tenets of liberal Western society is freedom of expression. True, it must be balanced carefully with other freedoms and protection against discrimination, but freedom of expression and speech is key. In the words of many teenagers: who are you to tell me what to say!

Yet Jewish law is rife with laws about speech: whether these are positive laws about prayer and blessings, or the various prohibitions against slander and lashon hara (to be discussed in a few weeks' time). But why are there so many laws? Isn't it my basic right to speak my mind?

The following Midrash from parshas Noach is crucial to understanding this, as well as many other Jewish areas:

A man who had bought a house from another, found in its precincts a treasure-trove, which he took back to the seller, saying: This is yours; I bought the house only, and not what may be found in it.' The other, in refusing to accept the proffered treasure, argued that he sold the house, and the buyer was the rightful owner

of all that might be found within it. The judge gave his decision that the son of the purchaser of the house should marry the daughter of the seller, and the young couple should receive the treasure as a dowry. As the onlooker, Alexander of Macedon expressed his wonder at and approval of the wise verdict. He was asked by the judge how a similar suit would be decided in his own country. 'In my country,' replied Alexander, 'the treasure would be taken by the Crown, and both parties would be deterred by the threat of death from laying any claim to it.'

"The chesed within speech is to ponder how we can utilise our speech to build others."

As Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, and Professor Susan Last-Stone (1993 Harvard Law Review article 'In pursuit of the Counter-Text) all write, the above Midrash is highlighting a divide between the Jewish and Western outlooks on the world. The Western world revolves around rights, but the Jewish perspective is to focus on obligations – what I can give to others.

Speech has various laws and limitations in Judaism, because at its most essential level, we do not fully 'own' our speech. Speech is not about me, about my self-expression rights – it is about how I use it to further my obligations and duties. We have responsibilities with our speech – it is our opportunity to excel in our three relationships, to self, to others and to G-d. Given that speech is so

powerful, Jewish law moulds and directs our speech to make it as effective and meaningful as possible.

The Talmud Yerushalmi states that if one excels in not speaking lashon hara, one's Heavenly judgment will be filled with leniency. The Talmud also ponders whether embarrassing others is a cardinal sin that requires giving up one's life instead of committing. Rav Chaim Volozhin writes in his Nefesh Hachaim that: Prayer affects the upper worlds; it reaches the heights, changes the celestial spheres and then allows gifts to descend downwards. That a medium for direct contact with the Divine should be speech is incredible, when pondered in depth.

The chesed within speech is to ponder how we can utilise our speech to build others. Can we use every interaction we have, to make the person feel better after your conversation with them than before the conversation started? In his profound celebrated letter to his son, the Ramban writes, 'Look at every person as if they have one good quality that you do not.' Can we express that in words – can we tell people about the good quality that they have, or the achievements that they made?



GEVURAH

Self-Restraint of Speech

By Rabbi Daniel Fine, Seed, UK

I don't know about you, but I think there is a certain thrill in discovering something new in an old site. You may walk past the same row of houses every day, but one day you notice something fascinating that you realise has been there all along, though you never noticed it. In this piece, we will be sharing two events that show tremendous self-restraint in controlling one's speech. The first is a comment of the Ramban (Bereishis 45:27) that totally transforms a well-trodden story.

(Please note that sometimes one must divulge negative information, if fulfilling all of the criteria for being considered constructive lashon hara).

The Yosef story is well-known. The brothers sell Yosef into slavery and Yosef rises up from being a slave to being appointed second in command of Egypt, via prison and dreams. Finally, Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, whereupon "operation bring Yakov to Egypt" is launched. Yakov descends to Egypt and lives there for 17 happy years. Here comes the Ramban. There is a curious passage in the latter stages of Vayechi whereby the brothers tell Yosef that before their father died, he had instructed him to forgive them. This seems to be a bending of the truth - we find no such instruction in the pesukim. Why didn't the brothers ask Yakov to tell Yosef this explicitly before he died? Says the Ramban, Yakov never knew that the brothers sold Yosef. Yakov died thinking that Yosef must have been kidnapped and taken down to Egypt - nobody told him that the brothers sold Yosef! That the brothers never told their father is understandable - who would own up to such a thing? But what about Yosef - did he not feel a need to set the record straight for his father? The answer is a very profound 'no.' Much like his mother Rachel not revealing to Leah that she had allowed her sister to take her place in marrying Yakov, Yosef didn't feel a need to reveal the full story to Yakov.

But let's pause for a second. Imagine the worst thing someone has ever done to you. That surely has to pale into insignificance in the face of Yosef being sold by his brothers. And try to picture the urge to tell Yakov what actually happened. Yosef surely wanted to describe the pain, the uncertainty and the neglect he felt when being left for dead by his brothers. And the jubilation in being reunited with them and seeing his dreams come true. Maybe this temptation could even be layered with a wish to see Yakov admonish the brothers for their cruelty. But no, Yosef kept quiet. Why? He felt it unnecessary to dwell on past faults and events that were no longer relevant. Why badmouth others unneces-

"If someone wronged you, perhaps there is a lesson to learn or a sensitivity to develop"

sarily? Amazing self-control! Which middah allowed Yosef to control this natural urge to divulge? The ability to focus on consequence and not personal hurt. If Yosef wanted to avenge, he would have told Yakov. But he saw the consequences of telling Yakov and that wasn't necessary. Put slightly differently, Yosef put the project over the person. It wasn't about him and feeling vindicated. It was about what was the best thing to do for the Jewish People. That's strategy number one, to control the urge to speak negatively of others.

A second episode shows a second strategy. When David Hamelech was on the run

from his son Avshalom, he is accosted by Shimi ben Geirah. Shimi ben Geirah curses David, prompting Avishai to offer David to kill Shimi - Shimi was rebelling against the king, after all. David's response is, "What does this matter to me or you, he is cursing because Hashem has told him to do so" (Shmuel 2 16:10). Whilst this is not the time to fully discuss freewill and Divine ordinance, David says something very profound to Avishai: things happen for a reason. Therefore I don't feel a need to lash out in response. When somebody does something wrong, they are culpable. But this doesn't mean that it happened for no reason. Only Hashem can evaluate what is deserved, given the balance between this world and the next. If someone wronged you, perhaps there is a lesson to learn or a sensitivity to develop. If the response is bad mouthing and anger, will that be constructive or productive? Doubtful.

We are constantly faced with challenges relating to lashon hara and the like. Do we filter what we read? Do we stop before sharing? Do we pause before telling others? Can we even walk away before listening?

If we harness the qualities of Rachel, Yosef and David, we will be able to rise above such temptations.



TIFERES the ability to frame

By Rabbi Daniel Fine, Seed, UK

Ask anyone in advertising and they will tell you that there is a science to which words to select to elicit certain types of feelings and emotions. Too many negative words in a commercial or advertisement will put a viewer off the product. But the right words will create a customer. That also goes for the spelling and shape of words: a 'c' is softer than a 'k' ('Succah' can sound nicer than 'Sukkah.' as odd as that may feel). And some words just sound calm: the word tranquillity sounds calm. The word synthesis also has a calm ring to it. For synthesis (our sefirah middah of tiferes) is the ability to utilise and connect various different strands to form one whole. Stress comes from different things pulling a person in different directions. Peace of mind is when there is one unified goal. Tiferes is that merging of the parts to create one unified goal.

Yakov Avinu was tiferes: he took the very different traits of Avraham (chesed) and Yitzchak (gevurah) and formed them into one. He was therefore the only of the Avos who married two very different wives who were both still Immahos and the only of the Avos whose children remained part of the Jewish People – he found a place for each of his children (the tribes) in one wholesome tapestry called the Jewish People. It is also why tiferes is often the third in a sequence – much like a triangle in which each side connects to the others. Tiferes takes two relatively opposite prior traits and finds the ability to connect them in one bigger structure and goal. This is also why you will find many sets of three pieces of advice in the Mishnayos of Pirkei Avos, comments the Maharal. For each of the three are synthesised into three parts of an overarching thematic triangle.

And think how many other threes there are in Judaism – from Avos to *regalim* and beyond.

When it comes to speech, the art of synthesis is the ability to frame a situation with the appropriate words. The simplest example of this involves children. Children may experience an event, but without a parent framing the event, the child won't necessarily process it properly or fully. If, at a Shabbos table, the parent takes a moment to spell out to the child, "Isn't it wonderful to be at a Shabbos table," or "Shabbos is special – it is a gift from Hashem," the child now has a simple take-away theme and something with which to frame their experience.

"There is power to the words we say. But there is also power to the backdrop, context and framing that our words create"

This is not only applicable to children. Adults too, frame their experiences (and emotions) via words. If you have heard a shiur or read an article, you will want to process it: by commenting (verbally or even mentally), "what was the takeaway message," or "what did I feel during and after the session." If a person has a fitness or exercise goal, thinking about the goal before setting off on their run will provide the run with context. And the same goes for

a Jewish learning goal – pondering the goal before each learning session will provide it with context and bring it into unified focus.

Here is where words come into sharp focus. Often, words can paint a background picture. To use the Shabbos table example, if at the family Shabbos table, a parent chooses to discuss how much money someone else has, the message the child gets is "daddy values being rich". Similarly, if you speak about the bad things that so-and-so did, the message your child gets is "daddy loves to gossip". But if you decide to focus your speech on the good qualities that somebody has, the message is altogether different. If you say, "Person x has such great middos – she is always so helpful and kind," the child realises, "daddy values kindness." Likewise, if we use words like 'training' or 'experience' when referring to setbacks, we are telling our children that failures are parts of growth - they are to be viewed as training. It's all about framing.

So yes, there is power to the words we say. But there is also power to the backdrop, context and framing that our words create. Synthesise carefully – for your words reveal more than you think!



NETZACH

Endurance and Goals

By Rabbi Daniel Fine, Seed, UK

We have elaborated upon speech in the past three essays. The question we shall address this time is a very simple one. We value speech. We want to avoid negative speech. But it's not easy. Even if we make goals (like "for the next hour I won't speak lashon hara," etc) it's not always easy. How do we achieve these goals?

Personal training. Though the job may be synonymous with fitness, exercise and perhaps weight loss, personal training has a much broader meaning, especially today. Any assistance in reaching one's targets can be referred to as training. And here begins our discussion. A person sets a target; let's say it's a nutrition target - a diet. There are two different parts of a person coalescing around this diet commitment, as are there two parts to our beings. There is my mind-set/thoughts and there are my actions. My commitment to diet requires a mental commitment and then my actions to follow suit. What is the relationship between my thoughts and my actions? The Sefer Hachinuch's principle provides an answer to this question.

The prohibition is not to break the bones of the Korban Pesach (12:46). The root of this mitzvah is to remember the miracles Hashem did for us in Egypt. And the reason is that it is not befitting or dignified for princes to break bones to get out every last piece of meat from the food...Therefore every year at this time, we focus on actions that remind us of our origins as princes and a holy nation – so we will fix these concepts in our essence....

In other words, the prohibition of breaking the bones of the Korban Pesach is aimed at sensitising us to our essence as dignified regal people. This is an example of the Sefer Hachinuch's celebrated principle that "what we do impacts our character and thoughts." (The Rambam in Hilchos Temurah 4:12 says the same, as does the Ibn Ezra, Ran and others, based on the Gemara in Yoma and other sources.)

But does this really happen? We do many mitzvos – do they always impact on ourselves in a measured apparent way? There was an incident that happened to me that nearly dashed my belief in this entire idea.

"When we commit to avoiding negative speech, we need to make sure we get more pleasure from speaking kindly."

I was flying from Israel to England on El Al and I decided to test the Sefer Hachinuch's theory. I know the drill on a flight very well. The air stewards serve refreshments and then the food relatively early into the flight, and then they get a rest at the back of the plane. It's during this break that the air stewards are most available, though they don't massively like to be disturbed. This was my chance. I walked to the back of the plane and very politely asked one of the stewards if he minded me asking him a question. He kindly agreed, whereupon I asked a question that had been bothering me for a while. With the Sefer Hachinuch's principle of "what you do impacts who you are" in mind, I proceeded to unload my question. "I notice that you are very kind and courteous throughout the flight. You answer people's questions, bring them food and don't get angry even at difficult customers. Tell me, does this impact your life in general – have you become a kinder person since working for El Al?' The air steward paused for a few moments and thought, then confidently replied, saying "not really, but I like the auestion."

So there it was, the Sefer Hachinuch's theory dashed. Here was someone who was doing many kind actions each day but it wasn't impacting him whatsoever. Why, I wondered?



Then I realised (and Rav Hutner says something similar) that in order for an action to really impact us, we need cognisance during the mitzvah. We need to be aware of the mitzvah we are doing, and we need to want it to impact us. This air steward was kind to people simply because it was his job. He didn't actively want or need it to impact his life.

When a person breaks a diet, it is because there is tension between what they want and what they do. They want to eat the unhealthy food, but they know that they must hold back. A person who wants to succeed in their commitment must reach a place of cognisance that it is more pleasurable/better to avoid the unhealthy food than to eat it. I knew someone who always stood when riding the bus in Israel. For he said that it gave him more pleasure to see others sitting than for him to sit. When we commit to avoiding negative speech, we need to make sure we get more pleasure from speaking kindly than from bad mouthing. And the rest will be history.



Hod

Gratitude and Speech

By Rabbi Daniel Fine, Seed, UK

In understanding gratitude and its relationship with speech, there's a core principle about gratitude that we must understand. It is no coincidence that of all the parts of the Repetition of the Amidah, the only paragraph we say out loud, is *Modim* (expressing gratitude) – for gratitude cannot be discharged via someone else, it needs to be expressed by you (Siddur Abarbanel). We shall first cite some social psychology studies about the centrality of gratitude in everyday life, then move on to defining gratitude *Jewishly*.

- Dr. Gordon's study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology explores the role of gratitude and appreciation in maintaining long and healthy relationships. In the study, 50 committed couples were given a week to fill out appreciation journals. On days when one partner reported feeling more appreciated, he or she tended to appreciate his or her partner more the next day.
- A study conducted by Wichita State
 University found that the top 5 of 65 motivating factors in the workplace were
 "praise related". Asked why they quit their
 jobs, many employees up to 79% in one
 study cite a lack of appreciation.
- "Lay praise on people and people will flourish" – Richard Branson

The Jewish take on gratitude is best defined by what it is not. Gratitude is not a simple 'saying thanks.' In fact, you will be hard-pressed to find the perfunctory word 'thank you' in the Torah, said between two people. Gratitude is based on the notion that you cannot fully pay someone back for what they have done to you – and you should not use gratitude to pay them back. When a person does you a favor, they have connected themselves to Hashem. Saying thank you does not do it justice. Gratitude, however achieves two things: first, it is an admission that you are not perfect, you need some-

one else's assistance – and that's fine. And second, it allows you to realise all the other blessings in your life. Let us illustrate this.

There are various sources that write that one must express gratitude even to inanimate objects:

Rashi on Shemos 7:19 and 8:12: Why was Aharon the one who hit the water and the ground for the plagues of blood, frogs and lice? Because Hashem said to Moshe, "The water protected you when you were thrown into the Nile, and the ground saved you when you killed the Egyptian and the ground covered the body. Therefore, the water and the land should not be hit by you, rather Aharon will hit them and bring the plagues."

• Into a well from which one drinks, do not throw a stone - *Bava Kama 92b*Why would there exist a notion of gratitude even to inanimate objects? After all, they cannot feel your gratitude (neither did they make the choice to provide you with a favor in the first place!)?

"Gratitude is an admission that we are not fully independent, we still need others"

Because gratitude is not about the person who did the favor – it's about you. Gratitude is a basic character trait that has to become so much part of us that it overflows even to inanimate objects; hence modeh being the first word we utter when we wake up.

In the words of Rav Dessler: The characteristics of every person are not only affected by their intellect but also by their emotions. For example, if someone would be ungrateful to an animal or even to an object that had helped him,



this would negatively affect his character and diminish his sense of gratitude.

In summary, as mentioned above, gratitude produces two things: First, an appreciation for life's blessings and a barrier against becoming someone who is overly-expectant and spoilt.

In a thesis called the 'experience stretching hypothesis' from the University of Liege in Belgium, psychologists proposed that by raising our standards of living from necessity into well beyond the parameters of luxury, we have hampered our ability to appreciate the more 'mundane' facets of life. Since most of the joys of life tend to be these more mundane things, like the gifts of the senses - a refreshing breeze on a sunny day or tasty food - spending money on luxuries does not make us any happier. On the contrary, we become spoiled with these luxuries and fail to appreciate the pleasures embedded in every day life.

And second, gratitude is an admission that we are not fully independent, we still need others (and definitely we need Hashem) to help us: The word hoda'ah has two definitions in the Jewish language. 1) offering thanks, and 2) admitting to the truth - Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (1906-1980): Pachad Yitzchak Chanukah 2:2.



YESOD Connection & Speech

By Rabbi Daniel Fine, Seed, UK

In our speech-filled journey, it is hard to deny that speech is the ultimate connector. In a world which seeks connection beyond belief, the proliferation of speech in all forms has grown beyond proportion. But with great growth comes great responsibility. For one can share information with thousands via a simple click. And this means that getting speech right is all the more important when it comes to real relationships. We shall list some of the most common speech-related prohibitions, before focussing on their rationale.

The Torah warns us against three forms of improper speech towards our fellow Jew:

- 1. The first is called *motzi shem ra*. This is when a person lies about someone else's behavior by saying they did something wrong. For example, if someone spreads a false rumor that Reuven stole, this is *motzi shem ra*.
- 2. There are two forms of speech which involve telling the truth but are nevertheless forbidden. The first is *lashon hara*. This involves reporting that somebody did something negative. For example, if you see somebody bowing down to an idol, you may not report this to somebody else. (Under certain conditions one may report something negative that someone did, if it is for a constructive purpose, e.g. to save someone else from harm.)
- 3. The third category is called rechilus, whereby you report information that is not negative but it will break down relationships between people. For example, you tell Reuven that Shimon said that he does not approve of his dress sense. Or, you tell Levi the Chazan that Yehudah said that Levi has an awful voice. This information is not about somebody doing something wrong, but it will cause ill-feeling between people.

Lashon Hara is bad for several reasons:

- a. It devalues speech by using it to spread negative things about others.
- b. It destroys relationships: the speaker and listener are badmouthing the victim. And it also creates distrust between the speaker and listener, because the listener is thinking, "Maybe tomorrow the speaker will say bad things about me!"

Motzi shem ra is bad for two main reasons:

- a. The speaker is lying.
- b. It creates false rumors that can hurt others and ruin their reputations.

Interestingly, there is a debate between the Rambam and Ra'avad about whether motzi shem ra is worse than *lashon hara*. For the corruption of speech may be worse if one is telling the truth and still spreading negativity.

4. Ona'as Devarim

The Torah cautions us not to use words to hurt others' feelings. This is especially true when it comes to people who are sensitive and vulnerable.

Here are some common cases of ona'as devarim that people may not realise fall into this category:

- Inventing a disparaging nickname for someone
- Calling someone by a nickname that they don't like
- Making fun of someone when their foot ball team loses
- Playing a practical joke on someone (es pecially in front of others) by getting them to believe something that is clearly not true
- · Making fun of somebody's family

Here are some crucial laws of *lashon hara*, just so we understand how far our responsibility goes:

It makes no difference here whether the negative information is a sin against others or a transgression towards Hashem alone. For instance, reporting that Reuven serves idols is *lashon hara* but so is saying that Reuven stole from the shop.

Likewise, it is *lashon hara* to comment that a person did not perform a mitzvah that he or she was obligated to perform. Thus, saying that Reuven could not be bothered to light the Chanukah candles constitutes *lashon hara*.

Even if it is very common for people in the area to ignore a certain halachah, it remains prohibited to report it. For instance, even if it is commonplace for people in the area to drive to shul on Shabbos, one may still not tell a friend that a certain person does so.

It is *lashon hara* to say that somebody did something negative, even if the exact act was not specified. For instance, it constitutes *lashon hara* and is forbidden to say, "I have some juicy information about Reuven, but I can't tell you, because it is lashon hara..." This is because you are implying something negative about Reuven.

It is not lashon hara to tell someone about a bad thing that someone did, without naming the person — unless it is obvious about whom you are speaking. For instance, telling someone that there is a person in the room who stole yesterday is not lashon hara if no one can guess who it is (note, this is still not a smart thing to say). After all, why would a person want to delight in the fact that another Jew sinned? However, providing enough identifiers so that your audience can possibly identify the subject is genuine lashon hara and is entirely forbidden. It is not even necessary to make the subject obvious, such as, "Someone in the room stole yesterday. They were wearing a red scarf, and this is their address." Even if it is not this obvious whom you are speaking about, it remains forbidden if there is a possibility that the audience can figure out the subject.

Lashon hara is not limited to speech. It is also forbidden to type lashon hara or to communicate it in any other way. For instance, one may not shrug or raise an eyebrow in a circumstance that denigrates another Jew.



THE ABILITY TO RISE ABOVE

By Rabbi Daniel Fine, Seed, UK

In our last article about speech, we shall focus on a key element of *malchus* and how it relates to speech.

In his Drashos, the Ran points out that across Jewish history, there were two ways in which cases could be judged. We know that the Sanhedrin judged cases, as per their job description. However, we also know that the king judged. For example, there was the famous case when the two mothers came to Shlomo Hamelech for a judgment on the disputed baby, while the Gemara tells us that David Hamelech had cases brought before him

The Ran tells us of a pivotal difference between the judgment of a king and that of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin follow the letter of the law, with no exception. For example, the penalty for stealing is that the thief pays back double what he stole, regardless of the motive for the theft. It makes no difference whether a person stole out of pure hatred for the victim of the theft, or to feed his hungry family. However, the judgment of a king is entirely different, as he is allowed to veer from the letter of the law if the circumstances dictate so. As an illustration of this, let us consider the case of Shlomo Hamelech and the mothers arguing over the baby. The two mothers came to Shlomo, each one vociferously claiming that the baby belonged to her. Shlomo Hamelech ruled that the baby should be cut up and split, and in this way, the true mother was found. According to the strict letter of the law, such a tactic could never be used to find out who the mother is. Nevertheless, Shlomo Hamelech had the discretion to utilise this means to solve the case. Similarly, when Nassan Hanavi told David of a rich man who stole from a poor neighbor his only sheep, David Hamelech ruled that the thief should be put to death and be made to pay fourfold for the theft. There is no death penalty for stealing, but David felt it a necessary punishment due to the circumstances of the case.

Malchus means the ability to rise above and break out of a mold. A king must be a torchbearer – delineating ambitious direction even if others may think it is unrealistic.

"The key to controlling speech and using it in its correct way is to be able to rise above"

The key to controlling speech and using it in its correct way is to be able to rise above. There is so much out there that is negative, puts others down and takes joy in reporting others' failures. And to a certain degree it is infectious. We feel that in order to 'be counted' we must also badmouth others, or at least feign pleasure from the gossip. We feel that we must also share any information we hear. There is social pressure to do so. But as Jews, our mantra is to rise above. Avraham spent his entire life rising above what others thought of him. We have spent centuries rising above cultures that sought to destroy us - physically or spiritually. And as people we have the ability to simply take a step back, not get embroiled and rise above negative speech.

In order to assert our Jewishness, we must regain the Jewish notion of speech. We must resensitize ourselves to avoiding negative speech: Lashon Hara, Rechilus, Motzi Shem Ra, Ona'as Devarim. And when others notice this, they can follow suit too. Others will notice that we do not enjoy badmouthing - and they will stop. Then they too will ultimately realise that negative speech does not achieve anything worthwhile - and they will stop. And so on and so forth. Instead of negative speech being infectious, positive speech will be infectious. Complimenting others. Praising others. Expressing gratitude. Reclaiming the Jewish art – the moral art - of communication and truly reflecting our Divine essences as 'speaking spirits.'



Leadership is not about titles, positions or flowcharts. It is about one life influencing another.

— JOHN MAXWELL

