

# INTRODUCTION TO OMER

## COMMUNICATION UN-TWEETED

Relax, it's the Omer. That hiatus between the highly-prepared-for Pesach period and the much calmer Shavuot. It seems like a valley between two mountains. But it's more than that. Originally a form of chol hamoed between these two festivals, this period took on a different focus during the times of Rabbi Akiva. When his students died in a plague for 'not exhibiting respect to one another,' the focus turned towards correcting their mistakes – re-focusing on their essence as one nation, with occasional disagreements, but permanent respect. And this unity was central to our receiving the Torah, "As one nation with one heart," as Rashi famously writes.

Any family will tell you that the details are as important as the bigger picture. Try accomplishing a pre-Pesach clean-up operation by simply declaring, "In two weeks' time, this house will be chametz-free!" Nothing would happen. It needs focussed goals – "today we are cleaning this room, these cupboards," etc. The Omer too, has a clear seven-week structure with a different sefirah building block each week – one that we refer to in the tefillah that follows the Omer count. Explaining each one and their roots in macro and micro Jewish History and Torah personalities could take hours, but here are the seven sefiros, defined broadly...

■ **CHESED** – loving-kindness. Expanding beyond self. Initiation.

■ **GEVURAH** – discipline. Knowing how and when to restrict and restrain in order to give the project form.

■ **TIFERES** – balance or synthesis. The ability to combine different talents to form a whole.

■ **NETZACH** – endurance. Seeing daily events as part of a bigger picture.

■ **HOD** – gratitude in its generalised sense.

■ **YESOD** – connection and focus on depth of relationships and loyalty.

■ **MALCHUS** – leadership, ability to break boundaries.

The articles in this publication will focus on various elements and applications of the above sefiros. But my articles will focus on speech, in anticipation of the Clean Speech Project in late May.



**"To You, G-d, are the greatness (chesed), the strength (gevurah), the splendor (tiferes), the eternity (netzach), and the glory (hod), even everything that is in the heavens and the earth (yesod). To You, G-d, belongs kingship (malchus), and You are elevated over every head."**

**Divrei HaYamim I, 29:11**

I recently chanced upon a Niagra-Falls-esque conversation between a parent and a child. The parent was trying to explain to the child what a Nokia phone was – the type that the parents used twenty years ago. The child looked relatively confused and then said, "Are you seriously telling me that the only thing your phone did was call people?" It was Niagra-esque because the generation chasm just got bigger. It's not uncommon for teens to engage in all forms of communication apart from actually calling each other. And why would they? Facebook generates four million posts each minute, Instagram over 1.7 million per minute and Twitter 21 million per hour.



**THE CLEAN  
SPEECH PROJECT**  
promoting constructive speech  
22<sup>nd</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> May 2022  
a joint project of Seed GIFT

By Rabbi Daniel Fine, Seed, UK

In late May (22nd to 27th to be precise), we will be launching the national Clean Speech Project. It aims to shine the spotlight back on speech – in particular to promote positive speech and to sideline negative speech. But in order to evaluate anything, we need context. Is 50 points a season a good accounting for a football team? It depends on expectation and ability! Speech and communication have developed hugely over centuries – to think that my late grandfather proposed to my grandma at a family wedding, for that was the easiest way to tell the entire family! So we are past cave scratchings, language, sending a human messenger, messenger pigeons, letters, telegrams - and for some people even emails are 'old.' Face-to-face communication is not the modus operandi. But what is the Jewish view on speech and communication? Is there any meaning to it, or is it just a means by which to communicate ideas?

Our first clue is the centrality and atypical nature of early speech in the Torah – it is the central feature in each of the first three chapters of the Torah. The Torah reflects that Hashem "spoke the world into existence" – Hashem said, let there be light (1:3), with the Mishnah in Avos (5:1) summarising that "Hashem created the world in Ten Sayings." Hashem creates each object by "saying the name of that object." An interesting form of speech indeed! Following this, we have Hashem instructing Adam what can and cannot be done in the Garden of Eden. And in perek 3, the serpent begins with the most destructive speech – convincing Chavah and then Adam to eat from the Etz Hada'as. These three 'curtain-opening' examples of speech are all atypical – and best shown so in contrast to current social psychology models of communication.

Current wisdom places communication as the encoding-decoding method, revolving around conversation. When we speak, we 'encode' our thoughts in words. Then the recipient (listener) of the communication has to 'decode' the words to work out what the person actually means. Any couple who have errantly communicated about directions have been on the

end of this encoding-decoding model, where something gets lost in translation and inevitably strained, frustrated-laden sentences like, "I thought you realised that I didn't mean the first right turn, I meant the second," become commonplace.

For the Torah, speech is not simply communication of ideas. It may begin as that, but its aim and goal is much more. The fact that Hashem 'speaks' the world into existence tells us that there can be communication even without an audience (no doubt that teens take their lead from this!). That Hashem can communicate with mankind (the Infinite instructing the finite, with no reply and probably without a normal 'voice'), shows that communication and conversation are not the same thing. And that the serpent speaks to Chavah is also an anomaly – so much so that the Netziv writes that this was an angel speaking to Chavah (the angel tasked with looking after the species of serpent), not the serpent – after all, the Torah does not record a 'muting punishment' to the serpent, whereby the serpent's ability to speak is removed from it (and serpents do not speak today).



**"Our job in redressing this balance is to reclaim speech. To stand up for what speech is supposed to be about. To use speech to construct and focus on people's good essences"**

The Oral Law is replete with greater prominence given to the notion of speech. First, the Mishnah at the start of Bava Kamma labels mankind a maveh, which means 'someone who speaks.' That means that mankind's defining feature is that they speak! Second, the much-quoted Targum Onkelus (Bereshis 2:7) explains the Torah's narrative that Adam was created as a 'nefesh chayah,' to mean that mankind is 'someone who can speak.' Our ability to speak defines our essence! But



**"When you judge others, you don't define them, you define yourself"**

before we work out how it does so, let's pause and reflect on why we should not be surprised by the centrality of speech in Jewish thought. After all, how many mitzvos can we name that revolve around speech?! From prayer to full viduy-led repentance, from brachos to vows. And written testimony is often unsubmittable in Beis Din – we want speaking witnesses. Lying, Lashon Hara, Motzi Shem Ra, creating Machlokes, Kiddush and Havdalah, Ona'as Devarim – they're all based around speech! Additionally, how does one make their animal into a korban – by verbally declaring it so. And how do we begin our Yom Kippur service (and erev Rosh Hashanah)? - By annulling vows – cleaning up our speech via a speech-filled corrective measure!

The Jewish view of speech goes far beyond any 'encoding-decoding' theory. At its core, speech is 'creative.' But not 'creative' in the 'thinking outside the box' type – but in the 'creating something from nothing' sense. When we speak, we are taking innumerable thoughts and converting them into finite words. These words mimic Hashem's role in creating the world: He created something from nothing: finite from near infinite. When we speak, we are emulating Hashem. It is not simply functional speech and communicating ideas. It is about emulating Hashem. That is, after all, the definition of mankind – to emulate Hashem. When Hashem spoke the world into existence, His speech 'created'. When Jews would declare an animal to be a sacrifice, or when Jews repent or reach out to Hashem in prayer, it is through speech – because these are ways of creating and asserting a new reality.

Therefore, when we ponder 'clean speech' and have to speak about not bad mouthing others, not focussing on their failures and faults and not spreading gossip, it's not just about ruining Jewish unity. It's not just about being callous to others. It's not even about the harrowing revelation by the Gemara that after one passes away, all of the words a person uttered will be repeated to them publicly in the Next World. It's a travesty of failure to recognise something central to our core. It's about not realising or acknowledging that the gift of speech is what makes us uniquely human. And to actively allow that to disintegrate to an extent that we can use speech to put others down, is worth crying about.

In a world in which many see themselves and their moral fibres as nothing more than functional pleasure-seeking apes, is it any wonder that we have totally lost the sense of what speech should look like? And we see this so clearly in Torah commentary. When the Torah

ascribes hints in the speech of Torah personalities (such as veiled references to future events in the conversations between the Avos) – this is because they acknowledged and appreciated the multi-faceted layers of speech that can be creative and reflect reality: past, present and future reality.

Nowadays, speech no longer reflects reality, and often it doesn't reflect us either – it's based on getting likes, attention and more. It is nowhere near what speech is for a Jew. Our job in redressing this balance is to reclaim speech. To stand up for what speech is supposed to be about. To use speech to construct and focus on people's good essences, not their bad peripheral failings. To tap into reality and not distract from reality.

## Colors of the Sefiros

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**Based on the writings of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero**

**Sefiros have colors, Yes they do.**

**Chesed is white, or maybe light blue.**

**Gevurah is red and violets are blue,**

**Discipline is strength that fortifies you.**

**Chesed feels soft, gevurah feels hard,**

**Tiferes is balanced in this regard, Appearing as splendor, lively not mellow,**

**The color of harmony is a pretty yellow.**

**How long can you endure?**

**What do you think?**

**When Netzach is victorious, its color is light pink.**

**Your attitude is elevated when to gratitude you link,**

**When hod is appreciated, it blushes dark pink.**

**The foundation of connection is opening your heart,**

**Through a channel of orange**

**Strong connections build foundations, On which generations can be built,**

**Yesod will shine bright orange**

**When towards each other we all tilt.**

**Malchus is special majesty, Leadership that's true**

**Shining the light of Torah, garbed in deepest blue.**