

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

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any claim to it.'

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?



Initiated by Seed & Gift, the Clean Speech Project will be taking place from 22nd - 27th May across schools and communities. Look out for shiurim, events and engagement opportunities.