



The Path To Follow

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THE SANCTITY OF SPEECH (BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

The beginning of this week's parsha speaks to us concerning vows. What exactly are vows? When someone wants to prohibit himself from using a certain object, or from eating something in particular, he can pronounce the words, "This object is forbidden to me." At that point it becomes forbidden for him to use or benefit from that object. How long does this prohibition last? Until he goes to a Torah scholar and is released from his vow.

From here we see just how great and sanctified speech truly is. It can change reality, instantly transforming something that is permitted into something forbidden. Enormous power is thus hidden in speech, both for better and for worse. Do we need further proof of the sanctity of speech?

At the beginning of the parsha it is stated, "When a man vows a vow to the L-RD...he shall not profane his word. According to all that proceeds from his mouth, he shall do" (Numbers 30: 3). The Sages interpreted the phrase, "He shall not profane his word" to mean: "Let him not make his words profane." He must accomplish everything he says because a person's words are sacred. Hence if someone explicitly says that he is going to do something, but does not, he has uttered his words in vain. He has quite simply profaned his words, and one day he will be punished for it.

My friends, my dear brothers, these few remarks should suffice to prove to each and everyone the power that a few words have to exert a perpetual influence on things. What we have said up to now is all that is needed to demonstrate just how much importance we should attribute to each word emerging from our mouths, in order that they should have a beneficial effect, not a detrimental one. In fact when we utter a word, it becomes

impossible to take it back; it has already been released, and what has been done cannot be undone.

This is a fitting place to recount a well-known incident that occurred to the disciples of the holy Rebbe of Pshischa, Rabbi Simcha Bunim, may his merit protect us. One day the Rebbe of Pshischa called several of his disciples and told them to go on a journey. He said that upon arriving at a certain place, they would understand why they had been sent. Thus they took to the road, without knowing where their steps were leading them. Towards nightfall his disciples arrived at an inn by the side of the road, where they decided to stay for the night.

The innkeeper welcomed them with great honor, setting up a table and serving them fine dishes of meat to replenish them after their day's journey. At that point, however, some of the disciples turned to the innkeeper and began asking him all sorts of questions. "Who's the shochet here? Is he reliable? Did he slaughter the animal according to all the stringencies of Halachah? Was there a rav who checked the knife from time to time? Can we trust his shechita?"

All of a sudden, a faint voice was heard coming from near the stove: "Gentlemen, gentlemen! May your ears listen to what your mouths are saying. You're asking many questions with regards to what enters your mouths, engaging in all kinds of inquiries. But do you do the same kind of checking when it comes to what leaves

your mouths [a reference to speech], to determine whether it is permitted to say or not?" As soon as Rabbi Simcha Bunim's disciples heard that, they understood that it was solely for this reason that their Rav had sent them there.

All this should instill us with a new way of looking at things, a completely different way of thinking about what we say. It should infuse us with a sense of the holiness of words, and it should make us think about what we are actually saying. When we look at what our Sages have said regarding this subject, we find dozens and even hundreds of instructions concerning the sanctity of speech and the extreme attention that we must give to it.

Concerning the command, "You shall speak of them" (Deuteronomy 6:7), our Sages said: "Of them you may speak, but not of other things" (Yoma 19b). This means that a person must constantly speak of holy things, not forbidden subjects, for if he gives free reign to his tongue, he will allow himself to say everything that comes to mind. In that case, "Sin will not be lacking" (Proverbs 10:19), as noted by King Solomon, the wisest of all men. Forbidden speech leads to sin, and it is only by guarding one's tongue that a person can protect himself. Do we need anything more than the teachings of the Chafetz Chaim, who composed an entire book devoted to the subject of guarding the tongue and the power of speech? The Sages said, "The curse of a Sage, though uttered without cause, takes effect" (Makkot 11a). This means that when a tzaddik says something, Hashem takes his words into consideration, even if they were said unintentionally.

We also find in our parsha (Parsha Masse, the second one that we read this Shabbat) something that is completely incredible. Parsha Masse deals with cities of refuge. An individual who had unintentionally killed another person was to flee to one of these cities of refuge, and there he would stay until the death of the High Priest. Once the High Priest died, the killer could return to his home. Now since every killer living in a city of refuge wanted to return home as quickly as possible, such individuals were liable to pray to the Holy One, blessed be He, for the death of the High Priest, thus enabling them to regain their freedom. This is the reason, say the Sages, why the mother of the High Priest would provide food and drink to those killers living in cities of refuge. She did this so they would not pray for the death of her son. Can we grasp the meaning of this? The Holy One, blessed be He, listens to the prayer of everyone. Even when a killer prays, addressing his words to Hashem, He listens to his prayer, which in this case might provoke the death of a High Priest! Hence the mother of the High Priest would provide nourishment to killers living in cities of refuge, which tempered their reasons for praying for the High Priest's death. This teaches us the power of speech, the influence that a word can have, either for good or for bad. We must use this sacred power to our advantage and only utter sanctified and permitted words. That will be our reward. Amen. may it be so.

GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

The Prohibition Against Lashon Harah

It is forbidden to recount something negative, even if what we say is true. In the language of the Sages, such speech is universally termed Lashon Harah. If a story also contains lies about someone (which would make him even more despised in people's eyes), it is called Motzi Shem Rah, for which the punishment is far greater. This is also part of what is known as rechilus ("talebearing"), as it is written: "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people" (Leviticus 19:16).

The Torah enacted a special prohibition in this regard, but there also exist numerous prohibitions and injunctions that are transgressed by a person who utters a single word of Lashon Harah. In fact there are so many prohibitions connected to a single word of Lashon Harah that we must all pay great attention to what we say.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

A Covenant is Sealed With the Lips

It is written, “According to all that proceeds from his mouth, he shall do” (Numbers 30:3).

Many people do not understand the true value of speech, nor what a word can accomplish. The ability to speak, which the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to man, has enormous power, well beyond what we normally think. The power of speech is not expressed by simply speaking. Indeed, speech has the ability to actually modify nature and change reality. The Gemara (Moed Katan 18a) states that one of the reasons that Isaac was not sacrificed and returned home safely was because of what Abraham had said earlier: “I and the lad will go yonder, and we will worship and return to you” (Genesis 22:5). These words, which left the sanctified mouth of Abraham, helped Isaac return safe and sound, without any harm done, in order to teach us the power of words.

We find another such example in this week’s parsha concerning vows. The Torah gave man the power to take an everyday object and infuse it with holiness. This object then becomes prohibited to everyone, for nobody has the right to make use of it at that point; it becomes entirely devoted to Hashem. Even if someone devotes a simple stone to Heaven, he is thereby transforming a coarse rock into a sacred object. From this we see just how speech has the ability to change reality.

To examine the formidable power of speech, we shall cite an astonishing incident described in the book *Ohr Elchanan*. A boy from the Baranovitch yeshiva was walking in the streets of town on the night of Shushan Purim. While on his way, he encountered a group of young thugs, individuals whose moral conduct was atrocious. The boy told them that their insolence ran counter to the ways of Torah, and then he continued on his way to the yeshiva. Later on these young thugs entered the yeshiva’s main hall (which at that point was humming with the sounds of Torah emanating from its numerous young students) to find the boy who had reprimanded them. Upon seeing these thugs, the yeshiva students became frightened. All of a sudden the silhouette of the Rosh Yeshiva, the gaon Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman (may G-d avenge his blood), was seen entering the hall. When the Rosh Yeshiva noticed these corrupt youngsters, he immediately ordered them, in an authoritative tone, to leave the yeshiva. One of them, an especially brazen youngster, approached Rabbi Elchanan and said to him, “Without hands!” Rabbi Elchanan replied, “You, without hands.” A few days later, the entire town was seized with fright, for the hands of the youngster in question had become paralyzed. He had truly become “without hands.”

We can clearly see the power of a Jew’s words from this astonishing story. If we succeed in maintaining the perfect sanctify of our words – by refraining from speaking Lashon Harah, lying, and so on – we too will merit seeing how each word emerging from a sanctified mouth will have an effect on the entire world.

The Mouth is a Vessel of Holiness

It is written, “When a man vows a vow to the L-RD” (Numbers 30:3).

Rabbi Avraham of Sochatchov said that we may explain how a person can, through the power of speech, turn a material object into one of holiness by means of a vow. In his book *Shaarei Teshuvah*, Rabbeinu Yona said that when a person guards his tongue from uttering forbidden words, it becomes a vessel of holiness. Now just as such a vessel sanctifies the gift offered by its giver, the words that emerge from the mouth of a person who fulfills the mitzvah of “he shall not profane his word” (Numbers 30:3), and who utters nothing profane, are also capable of transforming a material object into something holy.

The Chazon Ish Seeks to Release a Man from His Vow – Twice!

It is written, “When a man vows a vow to the L-RD” (Numbers 30:3).

A man visited the Chazon Ish in order to be released from a vow that

he had made. At the time, another talmid chacham was in the room with the Chazon Ish, and so he asked the man to find a third person to form a competent Beit Din that could annul his vow. The man went out into the street and asked an individual to come inside. Now this was a simple individual, having no special Torah knowledge. The three men sat down, and with the two others present, the Chazon Ish released the man from his vow. When the session was over and the third individual left the room, the Chazon Ish said that the whole process was for nothing, since the simple fellow who had been called in at the last minute did not possess sufficient knowledge of Halachah. It was therefore impossible to use him for releasing the man from his vow. It was only because the Chazon Ish did not want to embarrass the fellow that he made it seem as if he had accepted his participation. The Chazon Ish once again asked for a third man to be called in, one who knew the Halachot of vows thoroughly enough to be part of a competent Beit Din.

Just to What Point Should Gratitude Extend?

It is written, “Take vengeance for the Children of Israel” (Numbers 31:2).

Commenting on verse 3, Rashi states: “Although he [Moses] heard that his demise depended on the matter, he joyfully implemented it without delay.” Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz Zatzal asks the following question: The Torah explicitly states that although Moses received this order, he was not the one who went out to war. Instead, he sent Pinchas. The Sages explain that since Moses had lived among the Midianites, it was not right that he should go out to war against them, in accordance with the adage: “Do not throw a stone into the well from which you drank.” Now this is very odd, for Moses had received a direct order from Hashem to take vengeance on the Midianites! How could he consign this command to secondary status for reasons of gratitude and proper conduct? From here we learn that the duty to show gratitude was taken into account in Hashem’s command, according to the same principle employed in all Torah interpretations. When Moses heard the order to “take vengeance for the Children of Israel,” the duty of showing gratitude for Midian pushed him to interpret this command as an order to name an agent to act in his stead, not to go out and fight the Midianites himself.

A Good Way to Succeed: Annuling Everything that Happened Before

It is written, “Eileh [These are] the journeys of the Children of Israel” (Numbers 33:1).

Rashi states, “Wherever the word eileh [these are] is used, it annuls that which preceded it” (Rashi on Exodus 21:1). The expression, “These are the journeys” demonstrates the path that all servants of G-d should follow in this world. Each day we must annul everything that we did the day before, and we must feel that we have not yet fulfilled mitzvot as we should. We must take it upon ourselves to constantly improve our deeds and our service of G-d.

Thus it is written in the Psalms, “Whoever is wise, let him note these things” (Psalms 107:43). A wise person will be sure to constantly reinforce this concept of Eileh in his mind, meaning that he will annul everything that happened before and never tell himself, “I’ve served Hashem to perfection.”

Where Are You Coming From? Where Are You Going?

It is written, “Moses wrote their departures according to their journeys by the order of the L-RD, and these were their journeys according to their departures” (Numbers 33:2).

Why does Scripture first mention “their departures according to their journeys,” and then “their journeys according to their departures”?

We may explain this with a parable:

A boy lost his mother, and his father later remarried, but to a woman who caused the boy great anguish. When the boy grew up, he was offered an honorable shidduch with the daughter of a talmid chacham. His father

The Laws of Kashering Utensils

hastened to accept, for was he delighted that his son was finally going to leave home – where the man’s second wife made life hard for him – to marry a girl from an outstanding family. Thus father and son left home and took to the road, on their way to meet the family of the bride-to-be. At one point along the way, the son asked the driver, “How many miles have we already traveled?” The father, however, asked the driver: “How many miles are we from our destination?” The son was surprised by his father’s question, for he seemed only interested in the distance that separated them from his future in-laws, not how far they had already traveled. The father explained to his son, “I know your future in-laws. I’m aware of their greatness and nobility, and I’m anxious to see them. That’s why I’m interested in knowing how much further we have to travel before we get there. You, however, don’t know them. What’s more is that my wife has caused you great anguish, and you’re anxious to get as far from her as possible. That’s why you want to know how far we’ve already traveled.”

This gives us an explanation for our verse, for Moses understood the greatness of the Holy Land and was anxious to see it in all its glory. That is why to him the “departures” were nothing more than “journeys.” The Children of Israel, however, were unaware of the greatness of Eretz Israel, and all they wanted was to get as far away as possible from Egypt, where they had been reduced to slavery. Thus to them, their “journeys” were “departures” – departures from the place they had escaped.

There is Nothing that is Not Alluded to in the Torah

It is written, “You shall designate cities for yourselves, cities of refuge shall they be for you, and a murderer shall flee there” (Numbers 35:11).

The word “murderer” appears 17 times in the passage dealing with the cities of refuge. We may say that this corresponds to the 17 times we find a deliberate murderer recorded in Tanach, and almost each one of these individuals were punished by death. They are: 1) Cain, who killed his brother Abel; 2) Abimelech, the son of Gideon, who killed his 70 brothers; 3) Saul, who killed the residents of Nob, the town of priests; 4) the Amalek convert who killed Saul; 5-6) Baanah and Rechaba, who killed Ishbosheth; 7) Joab, who killed Abner and Amasa; 8) Absalom, who killed his brother Amnon; 9) Ahab, who killed Naboth; 10) Jezebel, who killed the prophets of Hashem; 11) Jehoram, who killed his brothers; 12) Jehoash (also called Joash), who killed the prophet Zechariah; 13-14) Jozacar and Jehozabad, palace servants, who killed Jehoash; 15) Manasseh, who killed the prophet Isaiah; 16) Jehoiakim, who killed the prophet Uriah; and 17) Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, who killed Gedalia the son of Ahikam.

– Taamei Mikra

Three Things That a Person Does Not Control

It is written, “Your servants took a census of the men in our hand, and not a man among us is missing” (Numbers 31:49).

According to the Sages, “Not a man among is missing” means that none were missing due to “indulgence in sin” (Yevamot 61a). Using the same approach, what is the meaning of the expression “in our hand”?

In Midrash Tanhuma, our Sages say that a person’s eyes, ears, and nose are not under his control, since a person can see, hear, and smell things without meaning to. This is why the successful return of thousands of warriors highlighted the fact that they were not affected by any sin. Instead, they were influenced only by what was “in our hand,” meaning the bodily members that are under a person’s control. However the eye, ear, and nose – which are not under a person’s control – gained the upper hand and caused them to sin. Thus they actually needed atonement, for as our Sages said, they were rebuked for having sinned with their eyes (Shabbat 64a-b).

– Meshech Chochma

It is written, “Only the gold and the silver, the copper, the iron, the tin, and the lead – everything that comes into the fire – you shall pass through the fire and it will be purified” (Numbers 31:22).

Elazar the priest commanded those who returned from battle to take all the utensils they had acquired and to kasher them, for they previously belonged to the Midianites and had absorbed forbidden food. Due to this impurity, they had to be kashered and immersed in a mikveh.

From here the Sages learn all the laws relating to the kashering of utensils. One law derived from this verse is mentioned by Rashi. He states that our Sages explained the words “only the gold” to mean that we must remove the rust from a utensil before kashering it. This is in order to obtain “only” the metal itself, without any residue remaining on the vessel that would prevent water from contacting its entire surface. It is not without reason that the Torah teaches us to first clean a vessel and remove its rust, and only afterwards to kasher it in the same way that it absorbed forbidden food. Hence vessels that were used for cooking over a flame were kashered with fire, and those that were used to boil water were kashered with boiling water (Avodah Zarah 75a).

All this teaches us, by allusion, the proper approach that a person must adopt if he wants to repent and leave his detrimental ways behind. To purify his soul, he must first erase all filth and rid himself of the impurity caused by sin. This first begins by a person “departing from evil” – he must not be like someone who tries to purify himself in a mikveh while still holding on to an unclean object. Only once this initial step is taken can a person rectify his deeds and continually strengthen himself in the service of the Creator. Becoming purified of sin occurs primarily through the intermediary of Torah study, which cleanses a person of all negative character traits. The Chida wrote that there are four degrees of teshuvah (repentance), degrees that we learn from the kashering of utensils: 1) New utensils purchased from a non-Jew must be immersed in a mikveh; 2) If a non-Jew has used a utensil even once, it must be kashered with boiling water; 3) If a non-Jew has used a utensil over a flame, it must be kashered with fire; and 4) Earthenware utensils cannot be kashered; they must be broken in order to become pure.

All the laws relating to kashering allude to the things that a person must do when he wants to repent of his wicked deeds. In fact the body is a vessel that contains a soul, and just as a vessel purchased from a non-Jew must be immersed in a mikveh, so too is it necessary for a person who transgressed positive mitzvot to purify himself through repentance and remorse. In this way his deeds will be rectified.

Kashering utensils with boiling water alludes to the transgressions of a person who sinned because of “heat,” meaning the evil inclination. For sins of this kind, a person must fast and repent to remove the impurity of sin from his body, impurity that has attached itself to him.

There is, however, a sin that is so serious that it cannot be rectified. This is the desecration of Hashem’s Name, a sin whose only remedy is death. This is similar to the case of an earthenware utensil, which must be broken in order to become pure. Similarly, the redemption of an individual who desecrated Hashem’s Name is death, which destroys the body.

– Chomat Anach, Eicha

A TRUE STORY

Tempting Fate

It is written, “According to all that proceeds from his mouth, he shall do” (Numbers 30:3).

Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, the Rosh Yeshiva of Baranovitch, once encountered a Jew who lived in the city and asked him to do a favor for a certain individual. However the man refused, explaining that he “didn’t have the energy.” At a later time Rabbi Elchanan again encountered this Jew. This time, however, he noticed that the man was completely exhausted, having no energy whatsoever.

When the man described his misfortunes to Rabbi Elchanan and asked him why this had happened, he replied: “You brought this upon yourself with your own mouth. If you recall, when I asked you to do a favor for somebody, you refused by saying that you ‘didn’t have the energy.’ Thus the words of your mouth were fulfilled in Heaven, and you were brought to a state where all your energy has vanished.”

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi – The Arizal

Our teacher Rabbi Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi, the son of Rabbi Shlomo, was born in the holy city of Jerusalem in the year 5294. He studied with the gaon Rabbi Betzalel Ashkenazi, the author of Shita Mekubetzet, and after his father died he went to live in Egypt with his mother and wealthy uncle, Rabbi Mordechai Francis. Although he married the daughter of his uncle, during the entire week he would isolate himself by the banks of the Nile, returning home only for Shabbat.

The Arizal elevated himself in the study of Kabbalah and the hidden Torah. He had many disciples, holy and pure individuals who came to learn Kabbalah from him. It was because of the Arizal that they reached the heights of holiness.

At the age of 23, the prophet Eliyahu appeared to the Arizal and told him that his days on earth were drawing to a close. He was therefore told to leave for Eretz Israel. There he would find Rabbi Chaim Vital, who would become his disciple in the revealed and hidden Torah. Thus the Arizal left for Israel and settled in Sefat, the city of kabbalists, where he lived for about a year and a half. By the power of his sanctity and the holy spirit that dwelled within him, the Arizal knew where to locate the tombs of the Tannaim and Amoraim in Galilee, which up to that time had remained hidden. The Arizal’s soul ascended to Heaven on Av 5, 5332, and he was buried in Sefat. He wrote extraordinary works on Kabbalah, which to this very day are a treasure trove for kabbalists who draw their understanding from his secret wisdom. May the merit of the Arizal protect us all.

A MATTER OF EDUCATION

Spiritual Wars May Also Affect the Innocent

In the war against Midian, Moses issued sharp criticisms to the officers of the army and ordered them to kill all the Midianite males, including infants, as well as every woman who had been intimate with a man. With regards to the women, Moses gave a reason for his order, saying that they were liable to commit a loathsome deed before Hashem and provoke a plague among the Jewish people. Nevertheless, Moses did not command them to kill just the women who had made Israel sin, but to kill every woman who had been intimate with a man.

This is what happens in wartime, as combatants try to eliminate their enemies and whoever is on their side. It is not just individuals who are personally known to be enemy combatants that are killed, for it is impossible to specifically identify every enemy and the degree to which they act as such. Even though war certainly harms people that we regard as innocent, it would be still worse to refrain from engaging in war on their account. The wars of Israel are not only waged against enemies of flesh and blood, but against spiritual enemies as well. The males of Midian represent, in a general way, all the “warriors” who have the power to stop or intensify a spiritual battle in Israel. The females who were intimate with men represent the spiritual enemy itself. The life and liberties of man have a sacred value, to the point that almost the entire Torah yields in cases of mortal danger. However when we are dealing with a threat to spiritual perfection, that threat must be eradicated without compromise. In such a case, Israel must be ready to sacrifice even the value of a human life, just as it would in a war for physical survival. In order to eliminate evil in such cases, it is sometimes necessary for the innocent to get hurt. True, we must act with love and by peaceful means, and in our days there is no longer a Beit Din with the same authority as the one that convened in the Lishkat HaGazit. However we must not tolerate obvious harm being inflicted upon morality because of rules of politeness and proper conduct. We must often remove harmful influences from our neighborhoods, and in our days this is necessary to do even if some people will suffer as a result. All the same, since the slightest mistake in such situations is liable to unjustly harm others, we must not act without being guided by a spiritual teacher. We must follow his directives without adding to them, for by exacerbating conflicts “for the sake of Heaven,” we may be creating even more problems.

EISHET CHAYIL

The Laws of Modesty in the Workplace

Men and women who work together should not talk about subjects that do not relate directly to their work (such as politics and the like), and they should not even try to make other employees more Torah observant. All conversations related to work should be said with restraint, without any indication of companionship or personal closeness. We must also avoid getting involved in frivolous or lighthearted conversations. We should address people not by their first name or a nickname, but solely by their family name. When a manager wants to congratulate an employee for working hard, he may tell the employee that he or she has worked well. However he is absolutely forbidden to add personal remarks, especially words of flattery, which would constitute a serious sin.