

Parshas Matos

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1. Understanding the Power of Speech

The Torah states, **“If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate (*chillul*) his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do.”** The Torah teaches us that one’s word is sacred and that if one makes a vow or an oath the ramifications of breaking it are severe. If one violates his oath, he is subject to the court-imposed penalty of lashes. We see from this that our speech is powerful and binding.

There are many mitzvos which require verbalization. For example the recitation of the Shema, the Amidah (daily prayer) and Birchas HaMazon (Grace after meals), all require verbalization in order to fulfill one’s obligation. If one only meditated on the Shema or did not verbalize the Amidah, he does not fulfill his obligation. If one wants to make a vow or an oath one also needs to articulate it in order for it to take affect. Just thinking a vow or an oath has no value whatsoever and therefore is not binding.

Regarding *Lashon Hara* (*Evil Speech*) and *Rechilus* (*Tale Bearing*) one usually violates it when criticizing others without constructive value. The Gemara in Tractate *Arachin* states, "The magnitude of the sin of one who speaks *Lashon Hara* is more serious than one who violates three cardinal sins." Meaning that there is a certain aspect of evil within *Lashon Hara* which is more serious. The Gemara in *Tractate Shavuos* tells us that if one violates his vows, a possible ramification of this transgression is that his wife and children could pass away. We see from this passage of the Gemara that the consequences could be tragic (G-d forbid). What is it about the power of speech that makes it so potent?

The human being is the only species that has the ability to speak and express its intellect. The Torah tells us that G-d said to His heavenly retinue, "Let us create Man in our image and form." It continues, "G-d blew into Man’s nostrils a Soul of Life, thus becoming a living creature." Targum Onkeles (Aramaic translation) explains that the meaning of "a living creature" is "a speaking spirit." We see from the Torah that Man’s ability to express himself through speech is only as a result of the infusion of a soul in his body. Therefore speech is an expression of our spirituality. The essence of the human being is a spirituality contained within a physical body.

Regarding vows, the Torah states, **“he shall not desecrate (*chillul*) his word.”** Evidently, the inference of the word “desecrate” indicates that there is an aspect of sacredness to one’s speech. Therefore violating one’s word is considered a desecration. Now we can understand that if one uses the power of speech inappropriately such as through *Lashon Hara* and *Rechilus*, or if one violates his vow or oath, there are dire consequences.

If the power of speech is an outgrowth of our spirituality then it is clear that it must be invested in areas of our spirituality. Therefore in order to fulfill our obligation of the Shema it is not sufficient to meditate on it but rather it must be declared. Verbal expression is needed in terms of affecting our spirituality and that of the world. As the Torah tells us, G-d created existence through verbal expression. It states, “G-d **said**, ‘Let there be light’” etc. The Mishna in *Pirkei Avos* tells us existence came about through the “Ten Utterances” of G-d.” Just as existence manifested itself only through the power of G-d’s speech, to be effective as spiritual beings we must express our obligations through the articulation of our speech.

Reb. Chaim of Volozhin z'tl in the Nefesh HaChaim explains that the word *Chillul* comes from the word *Challal* which means "void or vacuum." He explains that a *Chillul Hashem* is when we behave as if Hashem is absent from this existence. When one publicly violates Hashem's Will it is considered a *Chillul Hashem* because the person is conducting himself as if Hashem did not exist (G-d forbid). We see that the Torah uses the word *Chillul* regarding violating one's vow - "**he shall not desecrate (*chillul*) his word.**" It is possible that the Torah means that when one violates his vow it is also as if G-d does not exist for that person because violating his word is not recognizing that his power of speech emanates from his spirituality.

If a person would only understand the value of speech he would be more cognizant regarding its expenditure. One would pray differently and express himself in a more responsible manner if this was kept in mind.

2. By what Standard are We Judged?

The Torah states, "**Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered unto your people (Moshe will pass away).'**" Rashi cites Chazal who state that despite the fact that Moshe understood that he was going to pass away after fulfilling the commandment to destroy the Midianites, "he nevertheless performed the Mitzvah with joy and he did not delay." If Moshe had decided not to act immediately upon the dictate of Hashem, he would have extended his life.

The Midrash extols Moshe by stating, "we see the praiseworthiness of Moshe that his response was without delay." The inference of the Midrash is that the degree of clarity which Moshe achieved was even praiseworthy for a person at his level. Moshe's level of prophecy was one of a kind. As the Torah tells us "He prophesized in an awake state and not in a sleep-state as other prophets"; and G-d's communication with him was face to face (as one speaks to a peer). Despite this exceptional clarity and understanding, Moshe could have chosen to delay the battle to extend his own life. If this was Moshe's level of understanding, why do the Chazal tell us that his choice to go to battle is considered so praiseworthy?

The Torah states in the Portion of Shelach, "**Send for yourself men (spies).**" The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that "for yourself" means that it is in Moshe's best interest to send the spies. If the Jewish people had entered into the Land immediately, Moshe would have passed away. However, because of their lack of faith, the Jews believed the reports of the spies and did not enter the land as planned. As a result, Moshe's life was extended by thirty-nine years. During this period of time the Jews benefited greatly from his presence, influence and the continuous transmission of Torah. Because of Moshe's presence the Jewish people were brought to another level

It is stated in the Book of Devarim that the Jews will not engage in idolatry until after the passing of Moshe. However, Rashi in his commentary cites the Midrash which asks why the Jews became idolaters only after the passing of Moshe's student, Yehoshua Bin Nun, and not immediately after the passing of Moshe. The Midrash answers that we learn from this that as long as his disciple was alive it was as if Moshe's own influence was still present. The Talmud tells us that the face of Moshe is compared to the sun and the face of Yehoshua is compared to the moon. Meaning that although Yehoshua was qualified to be Moshe's successor and lead the Jews into the Promised Land, nevertheless, he was only a reflection of his Rebbe (as the moon reflects the light of the sun). Therefore Moshe's conflict could have been that since his continued presence would greatly enhance the spirituality of the Jewish people, he could justify delaying the war with the Midianites. However, he chose not to delay and he is therefore extolled for his decision.

Yehoshua Bin Nun led the Jewish people into the Land of Israel. Upon entry Hashem commanded him to conquer the land and divide it among the tribes. Yehoshua believed that after the land was divided and the Jews were settled in Israel that he would pass away. He therefore delayed dividing the land in order to extend his life. He did so because he understood that as long as he was alive the Jews would not engage in idol worship. The Midrash tells us that initially he was meant to live

120 years like his Rebbe, Moshe; however, because of his delay, Hashem shortened his life by ten years. It is understood that Yehoshua's delay in dividing the land was purely for the sake of Hashem, nevertheless because of it, he had ten years taken from his life.

The difficulty is if Chazal tell us that even for a person as great as Moshe Rabbeinu that his decision (not to delay) would have not been a claim against him – why was Yehoshua punished for his decision to delay? Why is he culpable for a decision that was considered “praiseworthy” ever for Moshe Rabbeinu? How do we understand this?

The answer is that there was no one with the clarity and understanding of Moshe Rabbeinu. Although the decision not to delay is considered commendable, nevertheless, once Moshe established the proper behavior and protocol in this given circumstance, he set a precedent to be followed without deviation. When Moshe went to war against the Midianites, he showed that one should not take into account what he personally considers as being in the best interest of the Jewish people. Rather one must follow the Will of Hashem. Hashem gives a Commandment, it should be fulfilled without delay despite the consequences that we may believe will follow. Yehoshua should have followed the precedent that Moshe Rabbeinu established as proper protocol. He should not have delayed regardless of how pure his intent may have been. Because of this failing, Hashem shortened his life.

There are many instances where we want to establish what is “right” or “wrong” vis-à-vis our own lives. We are very often conflicted and even convoluted in our thinking to the point of lacking any semblance of clarity. Regardless of our mindset, the Halachic standard (Law) has been set through precedents in virtually every situation. We must follow the Law regardless of what we think it should be. Although our intent may be pure and altruistic there is no room to compromise on the Torah Law. This is why the Mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) teaches us, “Make for yourself a Rav... (Mentor).” A Rav is a Torah personality who has a level of clarity because of his proficiency in Torah Law and is therefore able to advise people about their lives in a proper manner. If we follow this prescription of life, despite our limitation, we will be directed along the proper path.

3. We All Have a Responsibility to One Another

The Torah in the Portion of Masei tells us the laws regarding the person who murders inadvertently. If a person inadvertently kills in this manner, he is called a *rotzeach (inadvertent murderer)*; and after the Bais Din (the Court) rules that he is guilty, he must flee to hide in one of the Cities of Refuge. The rotzeach must remain in the City of Refuge until the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) passes away. However, until the time that the Kohen Gadol passes away, the family of the victim is permitted to take vengeance on the rotzeach (by killing him) if he is found outside the City of Refuge. Once the Kohen Gadol passes away, the rotzeach is permitted to leave the City of Refuge and the family of the victim is no longer permitted to avenge the death of the inadvertent victim.

The Gemara in *Tractate Makkos* asks – “What is the connection between the Kohen Gadol and the person who inadvertently kills his fellow?” If a person throws a rock into the forest and it accidentally kills someone or if he chops wood and it accidentally falls on another individual what is the culpability of the Kohen Gadol? The Gemara answers that if the Kohen Gadol would have prayed sufficiently such a tragedy would not have occurred. It is because the Kohen Gadol did not fulfill his obligation to sufficiently pray for the generation that he is held culpable for the accidental murder of another individual.

The Gemara presents a situation in which a person accidentally kills another individual prior to the appointment of the Kohen Gadol and the Bais Din judges him guilty only after the Kohen Gadol is appointed. Despite the fact that tragedy had taken place before the Kohen Gadol was appointed the halacha (law) is that the rotzeach must remain in the City of Refuge until the Kohen Gadol passes away. The Gemara asks – “Why is the Kohen Gadol culpable to any degree in this situation?” It answers because he should have prayed for a Bais Din ruling of “innocence” rather

than “guilt.” Since the rotzeach is found guilty, it must be that the Kohen Gadol did not fulfill his obligation in this situation. Had the Kohen Gadol prayed sufficiently, he would have averted the pain and tragedy of the rotzeach’s exile to the City of Refuge.

How could the Kohen Gadol have affected the ruling of the Bais Din? The Court rules based on the way they perceive Justice and this understanding comes to them from Hashem. Regardless of the actual facts of the rotzeach’s guilt or innocence, Rachamim (Mercy), which also comes from Hashem, could have averted the “guilty” verdict. However because the Kohen Gadol did not pray enough, the Attribute of Mercy was not evoked and the Bais Din issued a guilty verdict. If it had been otherwise, Hashem would have caused the Court to see reality in such a way that despite the incriminating evidence, the rotzeach would have been found innocent.

If a Jew sees his fellow in pain or experiencing difficulties and does not pray for him then perhaps he too has a certain degree of culpability for not trying to evoke Hashem’s Mercy. If another Jew is not connected to Judaism do we turn our back and say, “Thank G-d my family is doing well”? What about the entire Klal Yisroel? Each of our prayers could have a profound impact on all existence. If we do not pray for our fellow then perhaps the Mercy of Hashem will not be sufficiently evoked to assist him and G-d forbid we all stand to lose. Perhaps we all will be culpable for not praying sufficiently for Klal Yisroel, our community, or simply our fellow Jew. Of course the Kohen Gadol is the ultimate conduit for evoking the Mercy and Kindness of Hashem; however, all of us can have a tremendous effect on the Jewish people. The fact that we see that the needs of the Klal Yisroel are so great is an indication that we can all pray more, learn more Torah, and do more acts of kindness.

4. Seeing it clearly (FROM PARSHAS PINCHAS)

We find that the characteristic of zealotry is always identified with the tribe of Levi. At Sinai when Moshe wanted to purge the Jewish people of those who worshipped the Golden Calf, he asked “who is for Hashem shall come with me.” The Leviyim, although small in number, immediately rose to the occasion. Pinchas, who was zealous for Hashem, was a Levi. After Dinah, the daughter of Yaakov was raped, Shimon and Levi (her two brothers) avenged her defilement. When Levi was born, the Midrash tells us that Hashem sent the angel Gabriel to name Yaakov’s third son –“Levi.” This indicates his innate spirituality from conception. During the Second Temple Period when the Jews were being Hellenized by the Greeks and the Temple was defiled with idolatry, the family of Hashmanaim, (who were Kohanim of the tribe of Levi), rose up against the mighty Greeks to preserve the glory of Hashem and thus reestablished purity and Torah Judaism. The Midrash tells us that the Leviyim, at the time of the Egyptian bondage, would go out into the fields where the Jews were working and teach them about their ancestry and their heritage. The question is – why do the Leviyim possess the characteristic of zealotry more than all of the other tribes?

In the case of Pinchas, his zealotry emanated from his understanding and internalization (to the core of his being) of the chillul Hashem that was being perpetrated. Pinchas could not have reacted in this manner (jeopardizing his own life) unless he understood with absolute clarity the gravity of what was taking place. The only person who has the capacity to have that depth of understanding is one who is truly spiritual. This is why the Leviyim throughout history have always been associated with zealotry because they are the most spiritually attuned members of the Jewish people.

When the Leviyim saw and understood the spiritual devastation that was being brought upon the Jewish people by the Greeks, they reacted in the most vehement way and rallied the Jews to defeat the Greeks. Although the Greek armies outnumbered the handful of Hashmanaim, this was not a point of concern for them. They saw the spiritual extinction of the Jewish people at hand and reacted without regard to the risk. Only the Hashmanaim, who were of the tribe of Levi, had the capacity and understanding to appreciate the threat; thus they acted upon it.

The Torah tells us that the tribe of Levi did not receive a portion in the Land of Israel like the

other tribes. As the verse states, "Hashem is their portion." The Leviyim are the officiants of Hashem and their responsibilities are vis-à-vis the Mishkan (the Temple). The Rambam states at the end of the Laws of Shemitta and Yovel that every Jew has the ability to be classified as a member of the tribe of Levi. How is it possible that any Jew can join the tribe of Levi? The Rambam explains that if a Jew devotes his life to the pursuit Torah study then Hashem values him as a Levite. Hashem becomes his portion, thus he is provided for by Hashem because he has dedicated his life to the service of Hashem (as the Levi does).

The Gemara in *Tractate Taanis* states that if one sees a Torah sage becoming angry (when the Torah is being violated), it is the Torah that he possesses which causes him to become angry. As the verse states, "My (Hashem) words (Torah) are like fire." Rashi in his commentary explains that the Torah sage has a broadness and depth of understanding and therefore is more sensitive to the wrong which is being done. The average person who does not have the sensitivity of a Talmud Chacham (Torah Sage) does not react to the wrong in this manner because he does not have the capacity to sense the wrong to the same degree as the Torah sage.

The Levi, because of his innate spiritual dimension, has the natural capacity to perceive and internalize the world within the context of Torah. Therefore the Levi is motivated to action when the spiritual citadel is being breached.

Therefore there is a commonality between the Talmud Chacham and the Levi in that they both have a spiritual sensitivity which causes them to see when the standard of Torah Judaism is in jeopardy. Thus they respond to what has to be done without any consideration for themselves. The Gemara in *Tractate Menachos* says that a Jew can fulfill his basic obligation of studying Torah day and night by reciting the Shema of the morning and of the evening. A person whose only relevance to Torah study is in this manner may still fulfill his obligation; however, this alone is not enough to give him the positive affect of Torah or a depth of understanding and appreciation of spirituality. The person who dedicates his life to Torah study has the "fire of Torah" within him and therefore has a sense of clarity like the one that the Levi possesses.