



# MISHNAS CHAYIM

# משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת מצורע תשס"ח • Parshas Metzora 5768

## A TALENT FOR SPEAKING

People are so used to talking that we take this ability for granted. In truth, the power of speech is anything but ordinary; as we shall soon see, it is nothing short of magical. As this *parshah* continues last week's discussion of *tzara'as*—the affliction which, according to *Chazal*, is occasioned by *lashon hara*—it is worthwhile to ponder this faculty for a few moments.

The Mishnah in Arachin provides us with a most interesting statement concerning the power of words. After examining the Torah's laws dealing with maltreated maidens, wherein an abductor is fined 50 *selah*, and a slanderer is fined 100, the Mishnah (3:3) concludes:

נִמְצָא הָאוֹמֵר בְּפִיו יִתֵּר מִן הָעוֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֶׂה.

"We conclude that a verbal transgression is more severe than a physical act."

Why should that be? Shouldn't more weight be accorded to a full fledged physical action than a mere few words?

R' Naftali Amsterdam (cited in *Sama D'Chaye*, p.92) attributes the gravity of a verbal transgression to its impact on the soul. A sin committed through speech leaves a greater imprint on the soul than a physical transgression. Yet this idea itself begs explanation. Why is the soul affected more by words than by actions?

Perhaps the soul's extra sensitivity to verbal sins can be accounted for by the fact that speech is a spiritual activity, emanating from the soul itself. The *possuk* states (*Bereishis* 2:7), "And man was imbued with a living *nefesh*." The Targum translates this phrase as, "A spirit that *speaks*." As opposed to man's other physical capabilities, speech is a manifestation of

spiritual forces. As such, misuse of this tool will have an especially detrimental effect on its very source: the soul.

## SUPREME TALENT

The Chofetz Chaim (*Toras Habayis*, ch. 2, footnote), elaborating on this theme, makes the following remarkable observation:

Imagine if someone were charged with the following unusual assignment: he must complete various, relatively simple tasks within a limited time frame. For example, he has to: change a light bulb, turn the clocks back by an hour, set the thermostat, balance his checkbook, and install the new blinds; but he only has five minutes to fulfill this mission.

Each of these chores by itself is composed of various functions, including twisting, turning, computing, thinking, writing, lifting, etc. The successful completion of these tasks in the allotted time period (especially without the benefit of advance notice and preparation) is well nigh impossible. Only with intense training and rehearsals over an extended period of time could a person even come close to achieving the goal.

Yet, this is exactly what transpires each time we speak. Consonants are formed through the offices of any one of the five parts of a person's speech apparatus: lips, palate, tongue, throat, and teeth. For example, the word '*vayedaber*' is composed of five letters: *vav*, *yud*, *dalet*, *bais*, and *resh*, which emanate from various parts of the mouth. The *vav* is formed by the lips, the *yud* by the palate, the *dalet* by the tongue, the *bais* by the lips, and the *resh* by the teeth. This means that when uttering the word '*vayedaber*', a person must perform at least five *complex* tasks in quick succession. He must first press his lips together with the correct amount of pressure, while expelling

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his breath through them and causing them to vibrate just enough to produce the 'vvv' sound. After completing task number one, he must immediately ease up on the lips, and direct his breath to hit off the palate with the proper force to enunciate the *yud*.

Keep in mind that we're not even halfway through the word yet. Similarly complex and precise maneuvers are required for the *dalet*, *bais*, and *resh*. Yet, even a child can execute all of these complicated procedures in a fraction of a second. Go up to anyone at all, and ask them to say '*vayedaber*'; they can oblige on the spot.

How is this monumental feat accomplished so quickly and effortlessly? For all of the intricate maneuvers and processes that comprise an utterance, not even a modicum of concentration is required! Actually, people are able to rattle off whole paragraphs of verbiage in record time, without giving the matter a second thought! It's almost as if the tongue operates automatically, with a mind of its own....

Upon completing this reflection, the Chofetz Chaim concludes that speech is indeed a 'supernatural' ability. Tasks performed by the other limbs, such as shoveling snow or sewing a button, are products of a person's physical abilities, whose aptitude is limited. The power of speech, on the other hand, is a spiritual ability, emanating from a person's immortal soul; unfettered by physical limitations, people can exercise this ability with supernatural capability.

### GUARD YOUR MOST VALUABLE POSSESSIONS

This amazing gift comes with a serious challenge, however. The Maharal (*Nesivos Olam, Nesiv Halashon, ch. 1*) spells out the difference between avoiding regular transgressions, and avoiding verbal ones. Refraining from sins connected to a physical act—eating forbidden foods, for example—is a relatively simple matter: just don't do it. In order to perform the act of eating, one must arouse his limbs to perform the tasks which facilitate this activity. He must walk into the restaurant, pick up the food, etc.

To avoid this *aveirah*, one needs merely to exercise control and decide to leave his limbs dormant for the time being.

Transgressions such as *lashon hara*, however, are an entirely different matter. As stated before, the tongue works almost automatically, with a mind of its own. What this means is that left to its own devices, the tongue *will* speak *lashon hara*. A mouth on auto pilot is a mouth with *lots* to say; not all of it complimentary.

Recognition of the 'self propelling' nature of speech is crucial to successful *shmiras halashon*. Basing himself on the words of the Maharal, R' Yeruchem Olshin makes the following observation: Whereas other sins can be avoided by passively abstaining, *shmiras halashon* requires real *shmirah*—proactive vigilance. Only by taking active measures, such as consistent study of the laws of *lashon hara*, will a person be able to properly regulate this remarkable device.

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