

Parashat Tazria-Metzora

Our Speech Builds Heaven and Earth



Dear Rebbetzin,

We hear so much about the seriousness of the sin of *lashon hara* (evil speech). Is it true that through speaking *lashon hara* one may transgress 31 commandments: 14 positive and 17 negative? I find it really hard to never speak badly about others, but afterwards I feel guilty about transgressing so many Torah prohibitions. Can you please share some Torah nuggets with me that will strengthen me in guarding my tongue?

Devorah Harrington (name changed)

Dear Devorah,

It is very good that you seek *chizuk* (strengthening yourself) in guarding your tongue. This mitzvah is indeed central in the Torah. As you write, there are 31 Torah commandments regarding evil speech, and with just a few words, a person could easily transgress several of both 'do's' and 'don't's.' The reason why speech is so important in the Torah is because it is the ability to speak that defines human beings. Through our speech, we distinguish ourselves from the animals. In the creation of Adam, it states, "The human being became a living spirit" (*Bereishit* 2:7). Targum Unkelos translates this phrase to Aramaic: "*V'havet b'Adam l'Ruach Mamlela*" which means, "and Adam became a speaking spirit." King David extols, "Who is the man that desires life and loves his days to see good, guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit" (*Tehillim* 34:13). Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, who revived the concern for guarding our tongue in modern times, received the nickname Chafetz Chaim (the title of his book on the topic) which means "Desirer of Life." He explains that since speech is the tool of our craft with which we perfect ourselves, we need to pay special attention not to mess up our precious tools with which we express ourselves in Torah and Tefilah (prayer).

The Tool of Our Craft

Whereas Bilam's tool was supposed to be his sword (*Bamidbar* 31:8), the distinctive tool of the Jewish people is our power of speech. Rashi explains that Bilam came against Israel exchanging his craft (the sword) for their craft (the mouth) – for Israel conquers only through prayer and petition... However, the craft of the gentiles is the sword, as it is states, "By your sword you shall live" (*Bereishit* 27:40), (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 22:23). The power of speech was given to the Jewish people, to encounter the awe-inspiring King of Kings through Torah and *Tefilah* to bless, thank, praise and glorify Him. Just as an artisan is unable to produce vessels worthy of the king without his special craftsman's tools, or with broken and destroyed tools, likewise, we are unable to produce beautiful words of Torah and Tefilah with a mouth and tongue that has been defiled through evil speech. Only the artisan, whose tools are perfect and good, properly sharpened and shined, will be able to produce arts and crafts of the highest caliber. Through words of holiness, which we speak in this world before Hashem, we can create upper worlds as well as holy angels, who will afterwards become advocates for our souls. These higher worlds, created by means of Torah and Mitzvot, are dependent on the power of speech with which Hashem created the world. Hashem made us partners with Him in the continuous creation of the worlds through our power of speech. This is our great craftsman's tool, through which we may can build heaven and earth, as it states, "I have put my words in your mouth, and I have covered you in the shadow of my hand, that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the

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earth and say to Zion, you are my people” (*Yesha’yahu* 51:16). (The Chafetz Chaim, *The Gate of Commemoration, Chapter 10, the greatness of Guarding the Tongue through which one sanctifies speech*).

Rather than Judging Others, Find the Same Shortcoming in Yourself and Repent

In order to avoid evil speech we need to accustom ourselves to stop judging others unfavorably. Often when we notice misgivings in others, it is because we ourselves have a share in this same shortcoming. If it happened that we saw or heard about someone else’s sin, we need to realize that we may have a tinge of that sin ourselves. This should motivate us to rectify ourselves. Scripture states that the remedy for this is to “guard the tongue.” Although it is really hard to overcome the urge to speak *lashon hara* as it states in the Talmud, “We all fall prey to a tinge of *lashon hara*” (*Baba Batra* 165a). Still, we need work on ourselves, and rather than disparage the other person, realize that Hashem made us see and notice this sin in order to remove ourselves from the evil and rectify ourselves to become good. Through this repentance, also the sinner will repent, because through unifying with him, we can include him in our repentance, since we are all one person. Then we will cause him to be included in “*and do good*” that he will transform the evil to good and achieve the character trait of “*seek peace and pursue it*” (*Tehillim* 34:15); (Toldot Ya’acov Yosef, in the name of the Ba’al Shem Tov, *Parashat Lech Lecha*). Even if we already began to speak *lashon hara* and we feel that everything is lost, just as when we begin to eat cookies, we may feel we that it is too late to stop. This is not so. For every single word that we could have added but avoided, a supernal light is created. This is even so if we already spoke 100 words of *lashon hara*, but overcame the urge to speak one more word. The Vilna Gaon teaches, “Every single moment a person averts his mouth he merits the hidden light, which is so great that no angel or any creature can even imagine.”