

Seudat Shlishit – Shabbat Matot-Maasei 5784 – August 3, 2024

Maimonides Kehillah

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It used to be that people heard the words of another person when they spoke face-to-face. Or maybe, a person would give a speech to a group of people (as we are doing right now) in a one-to-many format. Until the advent of audio over radio in the 1920s, oral expression was a “you have to be nearby” communication protocol.

However, in the last hundred years, the increase in our ability to hear what other people have to say has exploded. The development of the internet and the parallel development of handheld, wireless computing devices now offers us a torrent of options to listen to what people have to say, whether they be intra-family conversations, news feeds, podcasts, or “Zoom” calls. It’s a bombardment.

If you ask Google how many words the average person speaks in a day, you may get an estimate of about 16,000. This translates to nearly 6,000,000 words per year.

In this presidential election year, we have already been and will be exposed to incredible volumes of campaign words, whether they be from candidates, their strategists, or from the vast array of political pundits who analyze and comment on every day’s newest event or challenge. We are inundated with words from all sides. What opinions do we form? What words do we speak?

Comes our parsha how to manage and exercise our oral expression, Matot. The Torah tells us that when a person makes a commitment in the form of a vow or an oath – lo yachel d’varo - k’chol hayotzay mipiv yaaseh, roughly translated as “one should not break his pledge; according to what one says, shall one do.” The pasuk is telling us that words matter and that we must take what we say to others and to Hashem through Torah study and Tefilah seriously.

In fact, there is a reciprocal relationship between our use of speech and HaShem. The Sfas Emes reminds us that when the first human was created – VaYipach B’Apav Nishmat Chayim – “and HaShem blew into the human’s nostrils the breath of life”. Humankind thus exhales some of that breath when speaking, some of the residual kedushah that HaShem initially breathed into us!

The Sfas Emes points out that the Mitzvah of reciting Shma twice each day along with other Berachos and Tefilos has the unmistakable effect of drawing us closer to HaShem. What is Kavannah during davening if not being mindful of what we are saying when we daven or when we learn. The more seriously we take our davening and learning, nearly all of it via oral expression, the more sacred our speech and the deeper our connection to the Ein Sof. The choice is ours. The commitment to be committed to these activities is ours.

Rashi takes the word “Yachel” and reminds us that it derives from the word Challel which is to make secular or profane. Thus, the famous dictum – lo yaaseh devarav chullin – one must not utilize one’s speech for profane purposes but rather to elevate and raise, not to lower and tear down. So much of the rhetoric we hear in the news these days takes of the form of the latter rather than the former.

The Slonimer Rebbe asks three questions on this pasuk: why doesn’t the Torah just write “lo yaavor al dvaro” do we really need the extra emphasis on “chillul”? Secondly, isn’t the phrase “k’chol

hayotzay mipiv yaaseh” duplicative? And finally, how does a neder, spoken orally, change the essence of an object or an action? It’s only words! For example, if we say that that a chullin animal should be a korban, that the essence of the object changes in terms of status? The object itself, through words alone, becomes a sacred object!

Rabbeynu Yonah on Pirkey Avos (1:17) explains that when a person sanctifies their speech, their mouth becomes similar to a “kli sharais”. So just as a kil sharais can sanctify minchah flour placed within it and become kodesh, so a verbal statement of a Jew can transform an object or action from secular to sacred.

What is unique about the mouth as an organ is underscored by the pasuk in Yeshayahu – “Am zu yatzarti li – tehilati yesapayru” – I (says HaShem) have formed this nation for Me, they will recite my praises. We are in this world to react to the divine all around us. We recite tehhilot and tishbachot every day stating our gratitude to HaShem for all the blessings given to us. Thus, the tool that we use to recite these praises, our mouth, becomes a sacred vessel in fulfilling one of the underpinnings of creation, that of recognizing and praising HaShem. Our mouth facilitates our Avodas HaShem, through Tefillah and Talmud Torah, and in the way we converse with others.

So when the Torah uses the phrase of “lo yachel dvaro”, it is teaching us that notwithstanding the power of a neder to change the status of an object or action and that once we have made that commitment, we must strive to respect that commitment, there is another aspect of “lo yachel dvaro” that is not to secularize or profane what we say or mean by the words we use. If our mouths are likened to a “kli sharais” then we are enjoined from misusing that sacred tool in secular or profane ways.

Today, we find ourselves in the period of the three weeks, between Shiva Asar B’Tammuz and Tisha B’Av. It is so very appropriate that we read the section of the Torah during this time of the year as one of the key issues identified with this period of the year in our history was “sinat chinam” – baseless hatred, some of which was occasioned by the way Jews spoke to one another or about each other. If we are privileged to absorb and internalize the lessons of “lo yachel dvaro” during this time of year, perhaps, just perhaps, we can help to make our world a better, kinder, and gentler place.

Finally, the Navi Yeshayahu reminds us that on Shabbos – v’chibadeto may-asos derachecha, mimtzo cheftzecha v’dabair davar” – and you must dignify the Shabbos by refraining from doing your normal weekday activities, from looking to your affairs, and striking bargains/oral agreements. Comes the famous Gemara in Shabbos 113b: shelo yehay dibur shel Shabbos k’dibur shel chol – that your manner of speech on Shabbos shall not be like your speech during the week.

Asks the Kobrin Rav, what kind of “dibbur” are we discussing in this Gemara? If we are referring to devarim betaylim, one can’t speak words of that type even during the week! This is based on the pasuk – v’dibarta bam and not dvarim betaylim. He suggests that the dibbur refers to Torah and tefilla. Thus, the Torah and Tefilla of Shabbos should not be the same as how we recite it during the week. It must be on a higher level. The Mechaber writes in OC, 51:8 – “Ayn omrim hazemiro bimrutza ki im b’nachas” – that we should try not to say Pesukay D’Zimrah hurriedly but rather at a pleasant pace.

May it be so that our Pesukay D'Zimrah, our Tehillos and Tishbachos on Shabbos be qualitatively better than those we recite during the week and may our kavanna in our recitation of Tefila and our learning of Torah during these three weeks be a siman of our earnest wish to live to see the "binyan bais hamiqdash" in our days and a geulah shlayma for all of klal Yisrael.

By the way, this dvar torah was about 1,250 words in length. Gut Shabbos.