

*Less Talking*¹

Understanding the Holiness of Our Power of Speech

One of the 48 *kinyanim* (modes of acquisition) to acquire the Torah is “less talking” (*mi’ut sichah*). This is not simply to talk less, but a power in our soul to control how we speak.

As the Ramban writes, one should think before he talks. When we think before we talk, it will deepen the quality of the words coming out of our mouth.

We all have the power to speak to Hashem. Most people aren’t revealing this power and are instead using their speech to have mundane conversations with others. When people don’t value their power of speech and chat with others mindlessly, even when they talk to Hashem, they cannot talk to Him properly, because they have impaired their faculty of speech.

Rav Shimon bar Yochai stated that had he been by *Har Sinai*, he would have asked Hashem to be created with two mouths—one mouth to speak holiness, and another mouth to speak about mundane things. He wanted a mouth that would only speak holiness.

When a person is used to idle chatter with others, he won’t be able to talk to Hashem from the depths of his heart, even if he tries very hard to.

Since “less speech” is one of the 48 ways to acquire the Torah, let us try to understand the depth of this matter well.

Two Kinds of Conversations We Have

Every day, we have to speak with others. But there are two kinds of people in the world. People who live superficially have emptier kinds of conversations, while those who live more internally have more meaningful kinds of conversations.

For example, if a man is a *Talmid Chochom*, or if a woman is a righteous person, and he/she is asked for the time, he/she doesn’t just tell the person the time. The internal kind of person is thinking, “I am telling this person the time so that I can help him.” A superficial kind of person just tells a person the time, but an internal kind of person doesn’t just tell him the time—he wants to bestow kindness toward another as he’s telling him the time.

¹ This *drasha*, part of a series on the *kinyanim* of Torah mentioned in *Pirkei Avos*, is included in this volume due to its relevance to a theme mentioned here, the exile and redemption of our speech.

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Another example is when we put our children to sleep, and we tell them, “Good night.” Most people just say “Good night” without any meaning to it. An internal kind of person, when he says “Good night” to his child, does so with the intention that his child should really have a good night. He says, “Good night” to his child with a true feeling of love for the child.

There is an amazing story with the Alter of Slobodka *zt”l*. One of his students saw the Alter *zt”l* standing at his window, saying “Good morning, good morning, good morning.” The student saw that no one was passing by, yet the Alter was saying “Good morning, good morning, good morning.”

The student, perplexed, went over to the Alter and asked him what is going on. The Alter answered him something that was so simple, yet so profound: “When we say, ‘Good morning,’ do we have to see the person? If we see him and smile at him, that’s even better, but in my mind, I am thinking about the people I know and wishing each one, ‘Good morning.’”

How did the Alter *zt”l* reach such a high level? It was because when he said “Good morning” to others, he did so out of a true desire that the person should have a good morning. He awakened his love for others.

We can give many more examples, but the lesson is always the same.

Examining Our Conversations

How many words a day do we say? We say thousands of words a day. Is there even one of these words that is truthful...?

How much are we talking from an inner place in ourselves?

On Yom Kippur, we *daven Shemoneh Esrei* five times a day. Most people are too drained by the time *Mincha* comes, and they don’t have the energy anymore to talk to Hashem from the depth of their heart. (They do manage to push themselves at *Ne’ilah*, because they know it’s when the judgment is sealed, so they force themselves to open their hearts.) But if we would get used to talking more genuinely throughout the rest of the year, speaking from a deeper place like on Yom Kippur, our whole life would change, and we would find it much easier to *daven* all day on Yom Kippur!

As a person learns to speak from a deeper place within, he finds that he can’t speak as much. The value of *mi’ut sicha*, less speech, is not just saying less words, but changing the whole nature of speech, speaking from a deeper place and resultingly less.

Let us return now to what we were discussing before, when a parent is putting his/her child to sleep, and tells the child, “Good night.” If it’s just being said in a mechanical way, the child will not feel the love. The child will only feel the love in the “Good night” if she is saying it from the heart, from a feeling of love for the child. Then, “words from the heart enter the heart.” In this way, not only the parents will change, but their

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children will change, too. But nowadays, when people speak on the phone for hours, while driving or doing other tasks, there's very little quality to their speech. As the quantity rises, the quality falls.

Redemption from Our Cellphones

The *sefarim hakedoshim* say that the word “*Mashiach*” comes from the word “*mesiach*” (“talking,” both words sharing the letters מיש). In today's times, perhaps we can explain that “*Mashiach*” is so called because our speech is in serious need of redemption, due to the way that this holy faculty is so abused.

When *Chazal* spoke of *mi'ut sicha*, that was always true, but it is vital nowadays.

Imagine what our life would look like without a cellphone. We would be disconnected from the world and have utter quiet. Is anyone prepared to live such a kind of life?

Anyone who understands the dismal situation going on today concerning our spirituality can understand that the ability of speech is in serious need of redemption. When *Mashiach* comes to redeem us, he will essentially be coming to redeem us from our cellphones!

It is clear that everyone needs to be redeemed from his cellphone. It is also clear that if there is anyone who doesn't have a cellphone, for that alone, he will merit to greet *Mashiach*.

It is not by chance that cellphones have taken over so much. It's part of Hashem's plan, but it is to deepen the *galus* (exile). How much has our world changed in recent years? It's not even a world, it's a place of destruction. Though these devices do have redeeming features, they cause much more harm than good. (If someone knows how to use a cellphone only for good reasons and never for bad, then he's very pure.)

It must first be understood that our situation is the opposite of *mi'ut sicha*, and we need to change that. Once it is clear that this places us deeply in exile, a person must be determined to disconnect himself somewhat from this downfall, to be more connected to a place of redemption, a deeper place of speech.

15 Minutes a Day of No Phones On

A person should want to speak from a deeper place, a place of redemption. Practically speaking, you should start by setting aside 15 minutes every day in which you turn off our cellphone. Or you can do it during the last few hours on Friday afternoon, when you're making Shabbos preparations. Look at your cellphone as an enemy that is trying to harm you from properly entering Shabbos. Then you should expand the time of separation more and more. When disconnected, feel like you've stepped away from the world.

Reflecting About Our Times

Let's do the following reflection: Which kind of lifestyle is better, ours or the way of those from a hundred years ago? Wasn't life in those times in Europe of a much higher, more inward quality?

Although we live in the current generation, and we can't live in the past, we must try to connect somewhat to the previous generations. We must try to connect ourselves somewhat to the way our ancestors lived. This will connect your soul to a clearer, purer world. This should be your yearning. When separating from this world, feel connected to a different world, to a purer time period.

The current generation definitely has some advantages over the previous generations. We are definitely making spiritual progress in certain ways. But in general, the spiritual level of the generation is only falling more and more. Anyone who lives in this current generation will naturally go down with it, like being in a car going downhill without brakes. To escape from this otherwise inevitable result, we need to detach somewhat from the current generation, but also to make sure we are growing spiritually. We can't only detach, because it's impossible to do so fully, so we also need to focus on our growth. We need both methods—growing and detaching somewhat from the current falling generation.

We should make for ourselves a private kind of life in which we detach from this current generation, while at the same time living in this generation and growing in it.

Is there anyone who can attest that he grew spiritually because of his cellphone? Does anyone feel that he has become better in the last five years? The world today looks totally different from even five years ago. Who knows how much the world will fall further in the next two or three years? How can we fall asleep at night? It should give us no rest. We should be afraid that we are only going down with the generation, and we should make sure that we are growing higher. One should fear the coming spiritual falls. But fear alone won't help; we have to make changes that will protect us.

Cellphones became popular very instantly. As soon as they came out, most everyone ran to buy them, thinking that this was the best invention ever. It never dawned on us when we eagerly ran to buy them that it would bring us down so much with the generation. And the future condition of our spirituality only looks bleaker.

We must develop a whole new kind of life, a life of holiness. Anyone who wants to live a true kind of life should make sure that he is not falling with the generation. The *mi'ut sicha* we have discussed now addresses the fall thus far, but we don't know what the future challenges will be. Looking forward, we need to have a plan of constant growth, as real to us as eating every day, and we will need to have some measure of detachment from the surroundings. We need to take upon ourselves resolutions to grow in order to counter the trend of spiritual descent in this generation. It must be the kind of resolution that will change our entire life. Even in previous generations, people had to take on resolutions to change their life. How much more so does it apply to our own generation, which is worse and getting worse.

Firstly, we need to grow, and secondly, we need to have some detachment from the current generation, so we won't just go along with the fall. But we shouldn't be gripped by fear. We need to live with joy, trusting that Hashem will help us. And we shouldn't feel any deprivation or fear from the fact that we are cutting ourselves off from our cellphones; we should instead be aware that we will be giving ourselves a happier kind of life if we do so.

I hope you understand the significance of this matter. This problem of abused speech is not just another random problem going on in today's times; it is the essence of all the problems in this generation.

May we all merit to grow each day and to yearn for a more spiritual kind of life, and then we will be able to transform the reality of Hashem into the very reality that we experience in our life. If someone doesn't value his power of speech and follows the trend of the generation, he won't be able to talk with Hashem or feel him. May we be privileged to see *Mashiach*, who will redeem us and perfect our power of speech with Hashem so that we can become connected to Him.

Q & A with the Rav

Q1: *How much time in the day do we need to set aside to detach from this generation?*

A: 15 minutes of a day is the bare minimum.

Q2: *What should we do about other gadgets besides for cellphones?*

A: Cellphones are just one example; we used this example because it is the most common. In addition, what you can do is to set aside time every day to be alone and detach from all gadgets. There are people, though, who set aside time for *hisbodedus* every day, but they also play with their phones while they are at it...

Q3: *How do you deal with a child who is having a hard time detaching from a gadget?*

A: The common denominator between all people is that everyone must detach from the current pull of the generation. But each child is unique, and the expectation should depend on the level of that child.

Q4: *When we try to speak from a deeper place, does that only apply to saying words of Torah, or even in mundane matters?*

A: Even mundane matters should be spoken in a deeper and more truthful way. For example, some people easily say falsehoods. How does this happen? If a person would put more thought into his words, it would be hard to lie. But if a person puts no thought into his speech, he may come to say the first thing that pops into his head, which is the most superficial form of speech

Q5: *During the time of the day we detach from cellphones, what should you do if you have to take a call to help someone, like if your parents are calling you?*

A: Do you pick up your cellphone for your parents while you're *davening Shemoneh Esrei*? Do you pick up the phone for your parents at 2 a.m. when you're sleeping...?

Q6: *If we want to encourage someone who didn't hear this derasha, what can we tell him?*

A: He needs to understand the depth of the issue, not that he should turn off the phone because someone said he should.

Q7: *What do you tell someone who's not interested in growing and improving?*

A: This is the question of all questions. I assume that you are not asking about yourself, but about someone in your own household. The only thing you can do is daven and cry to Hashem for that person.

Q8: *Is there such a thing as detaching too much from the world?*

A: Yes, it is definitely bad to detach when it is overdone. But 15 minutes of detachment every day is necessary for every person, and you don't need to be on a high level to do it. If someone can't detach for just 15 minutes, he has a spiritual illness in his soul!

In general, whenever we work to improve ourselves, there is always a danger of overdoing something. We cannot pressure ourselves too much. Most people need to improve only in small steps and cannot handle high jumps in their level. Take on a small change, but then keep adding changes in that area until you have made a major change in your life.

Any change that makes you feel pressure about it (and you can't calm it) is not a healthy kind of change, and it will only be detrimental. This is a very subtle issue; we must always *daven* and cry about it to Hashem.

Q9: *Is there anything wrong with using a cellphone when shopping in a store?*

A: Not every conversation you have on a phone is bad. We are just saying that it is overdone a lot. But in fact, there could be a problem with this. If one goes to the store, and then his wife calls him about what else she needs, that may mean that they weren't thinking before he left the house. People rely too much on the ability to call, and they don't think first. Also, people often talk on a cellphone in public and people hear their private conversations. Sometimes, they even put the other person on speaker! This is a prime cause for the great breach in modesty in today's generation; people talk about private topics in public. You can be sitting on a bus and hear the person in front of you talking on a cellphone about his credit card purchases, the supper his wife will be making that day, and what he and his wife are fighting about....