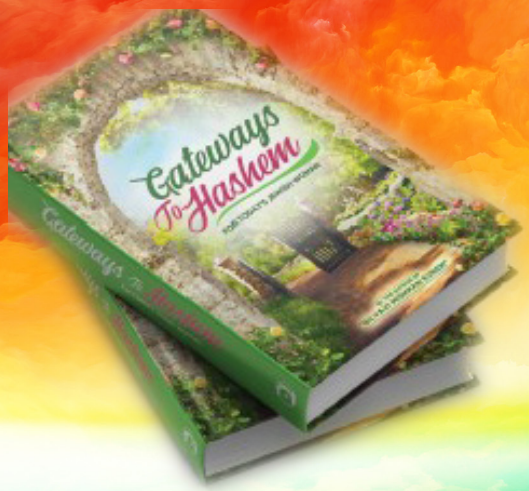
WOMAN'S POWER OF SPEECH

FROM THE SEFER

GATEWAYS TO HASHEM
FOR TODAY'S JEWISH WOMAN



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The Power Of Speech In The Month Of Nissan

The special ability in the month of Nissan is identified as the power of speech/"*sichah."*[1] The power of speech is mainly utilized by women; as our *Chazal* say, the women took ninety percent of speech, while the men only took ten percent.[2] In addition, *Chazal* state that in the merit of the righteous women, the Jewish nation merited to be redeemed from Egypt[3]. Therefore, let us see how a woman can use the power of speech in the month of Nissan and be of the righteous women in whose merit the Jewish people will be redeemed.

With the help of Hashem, let us learn how we can utilize the soul's power of speech.

Three Kinds Of Talking

It is brought in the *sefarim hakedoshim*[4] that there are generally three kinds of speech:

1) Talking for the sake of a *mitzvah* i.e. *davening,* or speaking with someone in order to help him; 2) Talking about matters that are not about a *mitzvah,* but are nonetheless necessary: such as talking about matters that we need to take care of. 3) Talking about things that are unnecessary.

Man Is A Creature Of Speech

A person is called "*medaber*"/a social creature. The Torah calls man a '*nefesh chayah'* /living spirit, which is interpreted by *Targum Onkelos* to mean "*ruach memalelah*" – a "talking spirit." Speech personifies man. Thus, speech is clearly an ability in man that can be used for holiness.

Analyzing Our Conversations

Let us think about the following: How much time in a 24 hour day do we spend talking?

Once we are thinking about that, then these thoughts need to follow: What are the nature of our conversations? Are we talking about things that are a *mitzvah* to talk about? Are we talking about things that we need to take care of? Or are we engaging in idle chatter?

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1 Sefer Yetzirah 5:4

2 Talmud Bavli Kiddushin 49b

3 Talmud Bavli Sotah 11b

4 Sefer Shevet Mussar

Reflecting on this helps us become aware of how we are conversing. Being that there are three kinds of speech (*mitzvah*, necessary, and unnecessary), we need to first identify these three kinds of speech in our own conversations. Most people, upon making this reflection, will discover that the majority of their conversations are not necessary.

When our power of speech is being used for unnecessary conversations, we should be aware that our power of *'medaber'* which defines man, is being used for lower and unholy purposes. In fact, many of us will discover that our speech is mostly being used to speak about things that are forbidden – such as *lashon hora*/gossip and *rechilus*/slander and *motzi shem ra*/spreading false and derogatory information about others. This is even more degrading to the power of *'medaber'* which personifies man.

Thus, the first thing we have to become aware of is to realize that most of our conversations are not utilizing the true and intended purpose of speech.

Two Kinds Of Unnecessary Speech

When it comes to speaking about unnecessary matters, there are actually two kinds.

One example of idle speech is when people meet up with one another and then proceed to talk about meaningless things. For example, when two friends meet each other in the store or on the bus, or in the street, or if a bunch of people are sitting together and chatting; they will speak about various unimportant topics.

Another example of idle speech is when a person finds himself alone, like when he is alone in the house. He wants to relieve his loneliness, so he picks up the phone and calls a friend. This is a more idle kind of speech, because here, the person *seeks* the conversation and initiates the idle conversation.

In the first example of idle speech, the person encounters a situation in which he ends up talking pointlessly. It can happen when he's with his family or when he meets up with people and he finds himself having pointless conversations. In the second example of idle speech, the person actively seeks a conversation with another; he deliberately places himself in that situation. These two examples are not merely two different scenarios of idle speech that can happen. They are two completely different reasons for unnecessary speech.

Why Do People Like To Chat?

Let's analyze the first example of idle speech: when a person meets others and ends up chatting with them about pointless matters.

Certainly, when a person is around other people, he should talk to them, because it is '*derech eretz'*/good manners to do so. People become uncomfortable when they are with a person who is not engaging in a conversation. It's considered rude and unpleasant to be completely silent around others; therefore, it is only proper that we allow ourselves to engage in conversation.

However, most of the time, we are not talking to others simply out of '*derech eretz'* for them. It's because we simply enjoy talking! There's a certain pleasure in talking. Just as we enjoy food, so do we enjoy talking. Thus, the deeper reason of why people like to engage in idle chatter is because there is a certain pleasure in talking with others.

On a deeper level, ever since the sin of Adam, there has been pleasure in talking simply for the sake of talking, due to the negative effect of the snake on mankind. *Chazal* state that all of the animals asked the snake, "What pleasure do you have in speaking *lashon hora*?"[5] (For it spoke *lashon hora* to Adam and Chavah). This implies that although there is no pleasure in speaking *lashon hora*, there is pleasure in talking itself.

Talking In Order To Relieve Boredom and Inner Emptiness

In the second example of idle speech, one seeks a conversation with others because she is bored and feels empty inside, so she wants to relieve his feeling of boredom and loneliness, through chatting with others.

When a person gets anxious due to the loneliness and emptiness that she is feeling, she will seek to fill it through external means. One of these ways is through chatting with others. In this way, she takes his mind off her troubles.

Chazal say that "A worry in the heart of man should be spoken to others."[6] When a person is worried or upset about something, he should speak to others about it in order to be able to relieve his anxiety. Even if a person isn't worried about anything particular but is just feeling bored inside, as well as a general lack of happiness, she feels a need to speak with others in order to take away this feeling of inner emptiness and boredom. The problem with this, though, is that it causes her to become removed from her own inner world, as she exits herself and gets involved with whatever is outside of her, via all of the conversation and chatting.

We have explained thus far that there are a couple of motivating factors for talking to others: Because there is a pleasure in talking to others, and also because one experiences loneliness, boredom and emptiness, and one seeks to relieve this, through talking and chatting to others.

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5 Talmud Bavli Taanis 8a

6 Editor's Note: The term "man" in this verse does not only refer to man specifically, but to all people in general

In Summary

To clarify, let us summarize and add on some additional points, for clarification. There is a normal and healthy need of the soul to talk to others, but the problem is when we go beyond the normal amount of talking. There are two reasons why people speak unnecessarily: because there is pleasure in talking, or because a person wants to relieve his loneliness or boredom.

Sometimes, both factors are present when we talk. When a person meets others and ends up engaging in conversation with them, it is not always because he or she simply enjoys having a conversation; it can very well be because he or she feels bored. He feels tension when there is quietness between him and others, so he talks, in order to avoid that feeling of boredom. Let us again emphasize that there are three motivating reasons of why we talk. Sometimes we talk when it is a *mitzvah* to do so, sometimes we talk in order to take care of things that are necessary, and last sometimes when we talk our speech is unnecessary.

Defining 'Necessary' Speech

To clarify, 'necessary' speech doesn't mean that a person will only say things as long as it takes care of something important. We have a natural and healthy need to talk - this is also considered 'necessary' speech. It is a need of our soul. What we are coming to address here is that part of our speech that is used to talk about unnecessary topics. It is this part of our speech that we need to eliminate.

The Vilna *Gaon* says that the Torah is acquired through "less speech." This means that a little bit of talking beyond what we actually need ('schmoozing') is in fact a 'necessary' kind of talking, for our basic emotional needs. Therefore, our discussion here about 'unnecessary' speech is only concerning speech that we don't need; it does not apply to the basic amount of talking which we need in our life.

Elevating Our Speech

Thus, altogether, we have learned that there are really four kinds of speech:

(1) Talking for the purpose of a *mitzvah,* (2) Talking for something necessary that we need to take care of, (3) Pleasurable talking (which is necessary for our emotional health, but sometimes can be overdone), (4) Talking out of loneliness and boredom. Our *avodah* is to fix the third and fourth kinds of speech: when we talk unnecessarily and when we talk out of boredom. It is these two kinds of speech which need to be fixed.

When we analyze our unnecessary conversations, we will discover that both of these factors are usually present. The only issue is in the percentages: how much of the extra talking is being motivated by a pleasure to talk, and what percentage is coming from boredom?

Talking For Enjoyment

When a person talks simply because it's enjoyable (when it's more than the usual healthy need), this is like anything else we do that's enjoyable. People do things that are enjoyable, even if it's not purposeful. Even if nothing constructive comes from such talking, as long as the person is enjoying the conversation, he will continue for a very long time.

This kind of conversation is very common. A person goes to a wedding or a *simcha,* or he meets someone on a trip. He then gets into a lengthy conversation with that person; it can go from being two minutes to being several hours! And it is an entirely empty conversation, with nothing of purpose being discussed. Where does this stem from?

What we need to understand is that everything which Hashem created, He created for a purpose. The purpose of Creation is often not on one's mind. Usually, a person is concerned at that moment to do what he or she enjoys. To illustrate, a child enjoys anything that will give instant pleasure; when one plays games, he is doing so, so that he can enjoy the results. When he gets that enjoyment, it lasts momentarily and then he's onto the next thing he enjoys. There is a deep nature in man to always seek something pleasurable. Usually, this desire for pleasure manifests in one's speech.

The conversations that most people have are for the purpose of an enjoyable conversation and not about anything purposeful.

When a person reveals purpose in her life, she will begin to notice that there is no longer a need to have most of her conversations. She will realize that most conversations are empty and meaningless. The less a person is living with purpose, the more he or she engages in conversations that have no purpose. A person like this can chat for hours on end, about nothing important, and it won't even bother her that she is having such empty conversations. Even worse, when most conversations lack purposeful speech, often these conversations will lead to speaking about matters that are forbidden (i.e. *lashon hora*).

To summarize: the more a person lives with purpose in her life, the less she will be dominated by the pleasure of the moment. Her conversations will become more purposeful and 'to the point'. In contrast, the less a person lives with purpose, the more she is drawn to what's pleasurable right now, so she will find it difficult to pull away from an enjoyable conversation that has no purpose to it.

Thoughtless Talking

We explained that there is another motivation for talking unnecessarily: when a person gets used to talking without thinking at all about what he's saying. The Ramban says, "Think about the words (that you are about to say), before you release them from your mouth."[7] If we reflect, we can see that most conversations are thoughtless.

It is shocking to see, but it is very common: We can see people going on and on in their conversations, talking about topics that they have no knowledge of!

In the first kind of unnecessary talking that we discussed, one might talk about things that or she knows about, but it is simply a conversation that has no purpose to it. For example, a person meets someone and says, "I did such-and-such yesterday…Tomorrow, I plan to do such-and-such…My daughter did…My baby woke me up last night. I got up, then I walked around, then I had a drink, then I sat back down." Conversations like this are meaningless, but at least the person knows what he is talking about. In the current kind of conversation we are discussing, though, a person is having a lengthy conversation and offering his opinion about matters, when in reality he doesn't know what he's talking about. For example, he will give his opinion on politics, on how the principal should run his child's school, his views on *chinuch*/education, and on current events. It's very possible that he has absolutely no idea what he's talking about, yet he continues to express his views on such matters. Where does this stem from?

It is a result of living for the pleasure of the moment. Such an orientation doesn't allow a person to connect his thoughts with his speech. When a person doesn't think, he cannot talk properly; thus, when people don't think, their words sound thoughtless and meaningless. Of course, there is always some minimal thought that goes into how we speak, enough to carry a conversation, but the words will still be lacking a great degree of content. In most scenarios, the words will come out of his mouth quickly, with no involvement of thought beforehand.

There is another problem with thoughtless conversations: the quality of the conversations is often devoid of any real content. So the more a person puts thought into his or her conversations, as the Ramban writes, the more one will will talk with precision, and less words will be spoken. When a conversation has content and meaning to it, it's impossible for a person to talk too much, for the person's words will be limited to speak a certain necessary amount.

Let's summarize the two steps in elevating our conversations that we have spoken about until now. Most extraneous conversations that people have are motivated by two reasons. Either a person is engaging in idle chatter because he is missing a sense of purpose in her life, which then results in speaking many unnecessary words. Or, the conversations are thoughtless, because she is simply talking without thinking beforehand.

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7 Iggeres HaRamban

If we examine most of the conversations that go on in the world, we can see that these very conversations lack purpose to them.

How To Think Before You Talk

The more one thinks about how one can put more content into one's conversations, the more one will see an overhaul in one's conversations. You will suddenly discover an entirely new power of speech in your life.

Practically speaking, before one is about to have a conversation, she should think about what she will say. Let's say, for example, that she knows she will go to a certain place where she will meet up with people, and she knows that he will end up chatting there. She should prepare the conversation, what kind of subjects she will speak about and how, and what the purpose of the conversations will be. One should try doing this once a day, and this slowly gets a person used to speaking with thought and with purpose.

Understandably, along with this, a person also needs to lessen the amount of idle chatter in her conversations and to avoid speaking words that are thoughtless and purposeless.

On a deeper note, getting used to this enables a person to reach the holy power of "*sichah"*/conversation – to leave the *"peh ra*"/evil mouth that is hinted to in the word "*Pharoah,"* and to instead enter into the holy kind of "*sichah"* – to tell over the story of the exodus for the entire night of Pesach.

Don't Speak About Everything That Comes To Mind

There is also another fundamental point to consider: A person needs to get used to the idea of not always saying everything that comes to mind.

Just because a person has an opinion about something doesn't require him to say it. One should realize that there are things that one has little to no understanding of. So just because you see a bunch of people sitting together and discussing a certain topic does not require you to express your personal opinion about the subject being discussed.

A person needs to get used to talking only about things she is clear about. When a person limits her conversations to only speaking about matters that she is clear about, this will also lessen the amount of idle chatter in her conversations. When a person is used to talking a lot without any restraint to his speech, she will naturally talk about all kinds of subjects, as if she knows it all. This is more than just a habit that one acquires; it is human nature for a person to talk about all kinds of topics.

Hence it is very important for one to train oneself to only speak about matters that one knows about as opposed to speaking about all kinds of topics. As *Chazal* say, "Teach your tongue to say, "I don't know."[8] Following are the three steps we need in order to elevate our conversations: to seek purpose in our conversations, to think before we talk and to avoid speaking about things that we don't know about.

Conversations Caused By Boredom and Emptiness

Until now, we explained how to fix the first kind of idle chatter, which stems from a pleasure in talking. We explained the three steps we need in order to elevate our conversations.

But there is another kind of idle chatter we mentioned: when a person feels lonely, or empty, or bored, so she engages in conversation with another, to relieve her feeling of emptiness. Either she will go to a friend's house, or she will pick up the phone and call, or she will use some other means of communication that is available today.

This is a different kind of chatting than when two people meet and they get into a conversation. Here, the person actively seeks out a person to have a conversation with. It usually stems from inner emptiness and boredom. The first step to overcome this is for a person to become aware, in the first place, of the loneliness. When she's picking up the phone to call her friend, or as she's feeling the need to communicate, she should stop and ask herself: "Why do I want to talk to my friend now? Is there a real need for this, or is it just a desire I have?"

If a person realizes that it is more of a desire than a need, the next step is to analyze where this desire is coming from: Is it coming from a desire for the pleasure of talking, or is it coming from boredom? When one realizes that it is coming from boredom, she should become aware that the boredom is a sign of emptiness. If so, the communication with another that she wants is stemming from a need to fill her emptiness. But it is not really filling his emptiness – she is rather running away from it, by seeking a friend to get into a conversation with.

The first thing one must realize, then, is to become aware of one's situation. After that one can work on a solution, as we will soon say with the help of Hashem, but the very first and essential step must be that she becomes aware of this.

If one realizes that deep down she feels empty, she should know that this comes from a lack of satisfaction within herself. A person needs to learn how to solve his general feeling of emptiness in

8 Talmud Bavli Berachos 4a

life, but we are not addressing this here[9]. Here we are addressing how to solve conversations that stem from emptiness.

Chatting With A Friend Vs. Talking With Hashem

As we brought down from the words of the Vilna *Gaon*, every person has a normal and healthy need to converse with others. This is necessary for peace of mind. But most of our conversations are more than the normal amount of speech that we need in order to stay emotionally healthy. The question is, how much of our speech is necessary for our peace of mind and how much of it is unnecessary? We definitely need to chat, the only question is: how much?

The more a person lives an inner kind of life, the more her life will be one of deep thinking. She will live more with the Creator in her life, and will naturally talk to Hashem a lot more. When one person is alone and is used to talking to Hashem, "as one talks to his friend" (as the *Mesillas Yesharim* writes), she will find herself talking to Hashem a lot more. She can speak to Hashem verbally or even mentally. As a result, she will feel much less of a need to speak with people.

We must know, clearly, that the desire to talk is human nature. We all have it. Most people do not talk as much with Hashem as they talk with people. Talking to Hashem, for most people, is limited to the times of *davening,* but this is not nearly enough. A person often does not feel when he is *davening* that he is talking to Hashem; he thinks he is just saying words. Therefore, most people are not using their power of *sichah* properly, and instead, their power of *sichah* is turned outwards – empty chatter with others.

But the more a person is living inwardly, the more she is connected with her true self. This in turn connects her more to the Creator. Her power of *sichah*, for the most part, will be used towards Hashem. When she finds herself alone, instead of becoming bored and seeking a conversation with another, she will realize that being with herself means that she is with Hashem. When she feels a need to talk, she will mainly talk with Hashem. This doesn't mean that she can never talk to others. It is just that most of her speech will be spent on talking with Hashem.

The more a person is living inwardly, the more she trains himself to think. The first advantage from this is that she will find that she speaks less with others, because she is living more in the 'world of thought' than in a 'world of speech'.

To Speak To Hashem, Naturally

9 See the derasha called "The Void"; refer also to the pdf of "Reaching Your Essence", Chapter 2, "Searching For Satisfaction"

Additionally, one must understand the following important point. Human nature is that we like to talk and talk and talk. *Chazal* say that the women took nine out of ten measurements of speech. The only issue is what we do with all of this talking. It needs to be mainly channeled towards speaking with Hashem.

When two people meet, they can get into a conversation that can last for hours. If a Jew truly lives with Hashem in his life, he will speak to Him a lot, throughout the day. Speaking to Hashem is not limited to the three times a day that we *daven.* Nor is it limited to when we do *hisbodedus*/meditation. Talking to Hashem is meant for the entire day! It is time to speak with Hashem, naturally; to recognize that Hashem is the partner in your life, Whom you include in your whole life.

This will sound very foreign to certain people when they hear it. It might even sound strange and weird. But a person only reacts that way when she isn't used to living with the Creator in her life in a palpable sense. The more a person lives with Hashem in her life, in her heart, and in her thoughts – and she feels that she is actually with Hashem - the more natural it will become for her to talk to Hashem. Her power of *sichah* is then channeled towards its true Source.

This is the depth of the redemption from Egypt, when we were redeemed from Pharoah, from *"peh ra",* the "evil mouth", and we instead entered the holy kind of *sichah.* In the true way that a Jew lives life, he indeed speaks a lot – he speaks in prayer to Hashem and in addition, he speaks a lot with Hashem throughout the day.

Of course, this does not mean to imply that a husband should decrease the amount of time he talks with his wife, nor that a wife should talk less with her husband, or that the parents should speak less with their children. This cannot be done, because it is not *derech eretz,* and it is not a way to live. Life requires us to speak with our family members a lot. We are only addressing the many extraneous conversations that people have, which are not necessary. It all stems from a lack of sensing Hashem in one's life.

In Summary

To summarize, when it comes to unnecessary speech, we explained that there are two kinds.

There are conversations that stem from the pleasure to talk; in this, the way to improve is by training ourselves to speak with purpose. In the general sense, this means to live life with a sense of purpose, and on a more specific level, it means to speak with purpose: to infuse content into our conversations. It also includes thinking before we talk and to only talk about things that we know about.

The second kind of unnecessary speech is when a person engages in conversation because she is feeling bored or empty. The way we improve this is by speaking with Hashem whenever we find ourselves alone. When one gets used to talking to Hashem when one is alone, one's life will undergo a complete overhaul. She will feel like a totally new person, even newer than how a convert feels upon becoming a Jew. She will feel like she has left a narrowed kind of existence in which she was living disparate from the Creator, and that instead she has entered a world in which she lives together with Hashem, connected with Him.

Every person needs to get used to talking with Hashem, simply, and earnestly. Sometimes we talk to Him from the depths of our heart, and sometimes less. But in either situation, we need to train ourselves to always talk to Hashem, on a regular basis. We can talk to Hashem verbally or mentally.

Understandably, talking to Hashem needs to be done sensibly and only when it is not disrespectful to others to do so. The point is that a Jew needs to get used to living life this way, in which he or she lives with Hashem, and speaks with Him on a regular basis. One's nature of *sichah* is then turned towards the Creator.

This is the meaning behind the redemption from Egypt. May we merit with the help of Hashem to speak words of holiness, to tell over the story of the exodus, to speak to others properly, both in our family life as well as towards our friends, neighbors, and those we know. Even more so, may we merit that our power of speech mainly be used to speak with Hashem, to connect to Him completely – which will make our speech true and holy.

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