

# MATTOS

## THE SCIENCE OF SPEECH

The majority of *parashas Mattos* describes the war with Midian, the divisions of the spoils, and the territorial requests of the tribes Reuven and Gad. However, the first chapter begins with a completely unrelated topic. The opening verses discuss the complex matter of *nedarim* (vows) and *shevu'os* (oaths):

Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel, saying: This is the matter that Hashem has commanded. If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do.<sup>1</sup>

These verses introduce the novel concept of a person's power to alter reality with verbal pronouncements. A *neder* or *shevu'ab* enables a person to change the *halachic* status of an object by prohibiting himself from doing something that is ordinarily permissible. A *shevu'ab* may even include declaring oneself obligated to perform a certain act. This section also describes the extent to which a woman's father and husband can impact the validity of her vows. The legal implications of this passage comprise a very complicated subject in the realm of *halachah* (Jewish law).

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<sup>1</sup> *Bamidbar* 30:2-3.

When the Torah introduces a new topic, the usual formula is written: “And Hashem said to Moshe...” *Parashas Mattos*, however, deviates from the norm, as it begins, “Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes...” The text also adds the atypical introductory phrase, “This is the matter that Hashem has commanded...” These textual nuances illustrate the two ways in which this *parashah* was transmitted differently than other *parshiyos*.

First, most of the Torah was taught by Moshe himself directly to the entire Jewish People. In this case, however, Moshe taught this *parashah* only to the leaders, and they in turn were responsible for transmitting the information to their respective tribes. This variation is alluded to by the name of the *parashah* – *Mattos* (tribes). Second, although Moshe received the Torah from Hashem in a concise format, he typically conveyed the laws to the people in a more elaborate manner. When presenting the section about *nedarim* to the tribe leaders, however, Moshe communicated it in the precise, condensed form that he learned directly from God.

This deviation from the textual norm raises the following questions worthy of analysis: Why in this case did Moshe teach the laws of *nedarim* only to the tribal leaders and not to the Jewish People as a whole? For what reason did Moshe constrain his teaching style for this *parashah*, repeating Hashem’s teachings word for word in their original succinct version? Why did Moshe opt to not provide explanatory details in this instance?

Similarly, the placement of this passage merits analytic study for both textual and seasonal context reasons. Given that *parashas Mattos* mainly discusses the battle with Midian and laws regarding the impending conquest of the Land, legal specifics regarding *nedarim* seem to be an unrelated introduction. How is the topic of vows consistent with the general theme of *parashas Mattos*? How

does the topic of *nedarim* fit within the broader framework of *Sefer Bamidbar*? Parashas *Mattos* is generally read during the Three Weeks. How is the central message of the laws of *nedarim* especially appropriate for this season? What deeper lessons can we learn from this very first part of the *parashah*?

## Speaking Soul

The *halachic* details of *nedarim* are complex and the philosophical implications are profound. Every person has the ability to invoke a *neder* and as such, the words of any individual exert authority in the realm of Jewish law. This authority is universal; it is in no way dependent upon a person's *halachic* training or Torah knowledge. With a simple pronouncement, a layperson may verbally enact a self-imposed prohibition, the violation of which could result in a court-ordered punishment. The concept of a *neder* demonstrates the awe-inspiring power of speech.

Recognizing that the text relating to vows and oaths is saturated with legal minutiae, its underlying theme reveals the potency of the spoken word. That inherent power is the reason why, according to Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch, the Torah introduces this subject in such a concise manner.<sup>2</sup> As mentioned above, Moshe taught the section about *nedarim* to the tribe leaders in the same succinct style he heard from Hashem. Moshe used Hashem's precise words and format in order to avoid deviating from the meaning in any way. He wanted nothing to be lost in translation, so to speak. A more elaborative teaching method was too risky for this topic; any additional explanation potentially could have left margin for error. The manner in which this

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<sup>2</sup> *A Voice in the Darkness*, p. 260.

*parashah* was transmitted demonstrates how careful we must be about the possibility of invoking *nedarim* and, in fact, in all speech-related areas.

The potency of speech becomes a less astonishing concept when one recognizes its mystical origin. As mentioned, an individual's education bears no relevance to his ability to execute a *neder*. The reason for this is that the faculty of speech is not a learned skill, but rather an inborn gift from Hashem. The Torah describes the creation of Adam *HaRishon* as follows: “*Vayipach be’apav nishmas chaim* (And He blew into his nostrils the soul of life) *vayehi ha’adam lenefesh chayah* (and man became a living being).”<sup>3</sup> How can we understand the anthropomorphic imagery of God blowing? The physical act of “blowing” is propelling air from inside to outside the body. Perhaps this phrasing is a metaphor representing Hashem taking a mystical aspect from “inside” Himself and instilling it into Adam. Thus, when Hashem “blew” a *nishmas chaim* into Adam, He infused into man a spark of Godliness, which made him come alive.

*Targum Onkelos* interprets the expression “*nefesh chayah* (living being)” as “speaking spirit.”<sup>4</sup> This interpretation illustrates that essentially, the ability to speak is what renders the human soul a “living” being. The human soul, with its power of speech, is a spark of holiness inherited directly from God. Verbal language is the instrument with which human beings wield their spiritual influence in the world. Speech is a distinguishing feature of human identity. All of creation is divided into categories, and the highest category is labeled “*medaber* (speaker).” Our ability to speak defines us as the highest form of creation.

<sup>3</sup> *Bereishis* 2:7

<sup>4</sup> *Targum Onkelos* on *Bereishis* 2:7.

Interestingly, the phrase “*nefesh chayah* (living being)” is also used in the Torah to describe the animal kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Bearing this in mind, the previously cited *pasuk*, “*Vayipach be’apav nishmas chaim, vayebi ha’adam lenefesh chayah*,” appears to restate the word “*ha’adam*” unnecessarily, when it is easily inferred from context. Noting this seeming redundancy, Rashi explains that “*ha’adam*” is repeated to emphasize that people are more alive, in a sense, than other *nefashos chayos* (living creatures) because they are capable of utilizing intelligent speech.<sup>6</sup>

Science has taught us that human beings are not the only creatures capable of communicating. Many types of animals converse with each other using different sounds or body signals. Nevertheless, animal communication is merely a physical survival technique. Their “language” is primitive, instinctual, and quite limited. By contrast, human speech is virtually limitless and highly sophisticated. Humans are capable of articulating abstract thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Human language is much more than simply a mode of social or needs-related communication. Quoting the Toldos Yaakov Yosef, Rabbi Moshe Reiss underscores that speech is “the quill of the soul.” Human language is capable of expressing that which is hidden in the heart.<sup>7</sup>

## Verbalization and Actualization

Sophisticated speech, exclusive to human beings, is the instrument of a Godly soul. It is incumbent upon us to recognize

<sup>5</sup> See *Bereishis* 1:20, 1:21, 1:24, 1:30.

<sup>6</sup> Rashi on *Bereishis* 2:7.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Moshe Reiss, *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 402.

this spiritual power, explains Rabbi Reiss.<sup>8</sup> The inherent sanctity of speech results in breathtaking ramifications – every single word we utter makes a lasting impression. In fact, the *Sefer HaChinuch* notes that speech is the manner in which a person participates in the spiritual realms that affect our world.<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew word *dibbur* (speech) also means leading and controlling, as in the verse, “*yadber amim tachteinu* (He will lead nations beneath us).”<sup>10</sup> Through the medium of speech, we connect our deepest spiritual essence to the physical world around us.<sup>11</sup> With words, people are able to transform abstract ideas into a tangible reality.

Spoken words are the tools of all creation. Hashem formed the entire universe through His speech. “God said, ‘Let there be light!’ And there was light.”<sup>12</sup> This imagery of God speaking demonstrates the grand creative power of the spoken word. In Hebrew, *davar* means both “word” and “thing.” Every aspect of creation is a Divine word crystallized into a physical reality.<sup>13</sup> In this same way, our spoken words have the ability to profoundly shape and impact all aspects of our existence.

The concept of *nedarim* implies that every spoken word makes an indelible impact on all aspects of the world in which we live. The verse states: “*Lo yacheil devaro* (He shall not desecrate his word); *kechol hayotzei mipiv ya’aseh* (according to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do).”<sup>14</sup> The simple meaning is that a person must fulfill his spoken vows. The Rashbam interprets the

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Sefer HaChinuch, mitzvah 70.*

<sup>10</sup> *Tehillim 47:4.*

<sup>11</sup> See *Torah Tapestries, Vayikra, parashas Tazria.*

<sup>12</sup> *Bereshtis 1:3.*

<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *Worldmask*, p. 89.

<sup>14</sup> *Bamidbar 30:2-3.*

Hebrew word “*yacheil*” as “wait,” so that the phrase literally translates, “He shall not make his word wait.”<sup>15</sup> A person should not hesitate in upholding his vow. Rashi, however, interprets “*yacheil*” as “profane,” explaining: “*Lo ya’aseh devarav chullin* (He shall not make his words profane).”<sup>16</sup>

Rabbi Reiss elaborates on Rashi’s commentary, stressing the importance of always maintaining the sanctity of our speech.<sup>17</sup> The spoken word is inherently holy and makes an indelible impression in the spiritual realms. “*Lo ya’aseh devarav chullin*” – we should never consider our conversations to be “*chol*,” to be superficial or inconsequential. Nothing we say is insignificant.

Evidence of the power of speech is manifest in several areas, one of which is the realm of Jewish law. As discussed earlier in this analysis, the spoken word carries with it tremendous significance in *halachah*. As we mentioned, the introductory portion of the *parashah* illustrates that human speech has the astonishing capacity to alter *halachic* status. Any person, regardless of education or position, can transform an object or action from “permissible” to “forbidden” with a spoken word. No matter how simple the verbal declaration, a *nedar* formulates an authentic Torah prohibition. Rabbi Reiss emphasizes the remarkable implications of this idea: laypeople are empowered to enact laws for themselves that share equal authority with those laws explicitly written in the Torah.<sup>18</sup> Our words are so powerful that the Torah itself enforces our self-imposed restrictions of *nedarim*.

Sometimes human words are so potent that Hashem endorses them directly. Our Sages state: “The *tzaddik* decrees and the

<sup>15</sup> Rashbam on *Bamidbar* 30:2.

<sup>16</sup> Rashi on *Bamidbar* 30:3.

<sup>17</sup> *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 402.

<sup>18</sup> *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 404.

Holy One, Blessed is He, fulfills.”<sup>19</sup> On the surface, this statement seems almost heretical, implying God’s obedience to human command. How can we explain this statement within a Torah-true framework?

The words of a wholly righteous person have a unique influence on reality. A *tzaddik* has reached such a high level of spiritual purity and sophistication that his verbal blessings and requests become physically manifest. Rabbi Reiss cites the famous incident during Yehoshua’s conquest of the southern part of Canaan: “Then Yehoshua spoke to Hashem... ‘O Sun, stand still at Givon, and moon, in the valley of Ayalon.’”<sup>20</sup> Incredibly, when Yehoshua ordered the sun to stand still, Hashem commanded the sun to obey Yehoshua’s words. Yehoshua’s spiritual stature was so great that Hashem altered the laws of nature to uphold his spoken words.

This concept sheds some light on the custom of seeking the blessings and advice of *tzaddikim*. When a *tzaddik* speaks, his words can potentially influence reality in both the creative and the reactive sense. The *Gemara* asserts the converse of this as well. “The Holy One, Blessed is He decrees, and the *tzaddik* nullifies.”<sup>21</sup> Just as a *tzaddik* has the power to enact a Heavenly decree, he also has the power to annul one. Hashem not only enforces a *tzaddik*’s word, He often acquiesces to a *tzaddik*’s request to actually alter an existing condition. Rabbi Reiss emphasizes that our Sages’ statement does not imply human opposition to God’s will. Rather, within the foundation of creation, Hashem designated certain virtuous Jewish leaders as having the power to exert influence on the unfolding of history. Although it appears that the *tzaddik*’s

<sup>19</sup> *Kesuvos* 103b.

<sup>20</sup> *Yehoshua* 1:12.

<sup>21</sup> *Mo’ed Katan* 16a.



word has the authority to overturn God's word, in reality, the will of a *tzaddik* is in perfect alignment with Divine will. Hashem Himself has empowered the *tzaddik* to speak and adjust reality according to His master plan.

All of us can actually manipulate reality through our prayers. In fact, our Sages state, “*Le’olam al tebi birkas bedyot kalah be’inecha* (Never make light of the blessing of a common man).”<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the words of a *tzaddik* are evidently more potent than those of an ordinary person. Why is this so? Obviously, the average individual cannot stop the sun or overturn a Heavenly decree. A *tzaddik* however has achieved a state of spiritual perfection, one in which his whole being is a vessel for holiness. All of his physical faculties, including his speech, serve as channels of the Divine will. Every word is a thoughtful expression and execution of pure Godliness.

The significance of untainted, sanctified speech can also be found in the very same *pasuk* that we cited above: “*Lo yacheil devaro; kechol hayotzei mipiv ya’aseh*.”<sup>23</sup> Rabbi Chaim Vital expounds: *Lo yacheil devaro* – When a person is vigilant about not desecrating his speech with any trace of slander or falsehood, then *kechol hayotzei mipiv ya’aseh* – everything he says, Hashem will do!<sup>24</sup>

## Inspect Our Dialect: Weighty Words

While most of us are not on the level of *tzaddikim*, we are nevertheless certainly capable of shaping the palpable and positive

<sup>22</sup> *Megillah* 15a.

<sup>23</sup> *Bamidbar* 30:2-3.

<sup>24</sup> *Eitz HaDa’as Tov*, as quoted in *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 405.

effects of our words. When we purify our daily speech, Hashem responds in a more revealed way. Exercising caution in everyday speech actually fortifies our *berachos*, *tefillos*, and *divrei Torah* (words of Torah) and makes them more effective.

Even seemingly ordinary, prosaic conversations bear tremendous weight. Therefore, we must be attentive to all matters of dialogue, however informal or banal. Rabbi Reiss illustrates that in the course of daily conversations, people often make casual resolutions.<sup>25</sup> *I will clean up as soon I get home. I am going to that class. I will meet you at three o'clock.* These kinds of statements are not legally binding; they do not qualify as *nedarim*. Nevertheless, we are required to fulfill informal promises on ethical grounds. Our verbal pronouncements, even those made unintentionally, obligate us to follow through with action. Therefore, when making casual remarks about our plans, it is customary to add, “*Bli neder* (without a vow).” This phrase qualifies that a verbalized, planned undertaking does not carry with it the legal weight of a vow. By saying “*bli neder*,” the speaker acknowledges that every statement requires commitment. In general, it is appropriate to avoid resolutions that one may not be able to implement.

Rabbi Yehuda Kabsa notes that once the *pasuk* states, “*lo yacheil devaro*,” the second part of the *pasuk*, “*kechol hayotzei mipiv ya’aseh*,” seems to restate the same idea in different terms.<sup>26</sup> Why the redundancy? The *Shelah* expounds that the second phrase is general ethical instruction. “*Kechol hayotzei mipiv ya’aseh*” implies that a person must stand by his promises, both big and small.

Although this passage about *nedarim* appears to be an incongruous introduction to *parashas Mattos*, upholding one’s pledge is actually a recurring theme throughout the *parashah*.

<sup>25</sup> *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 404.

<sup>26</sup> *VaYomer Yehudah*, p. 267-268.

In a later chapter, the tribes of Reuven and Gad requested permission to settle the territory on the east bank of the *Yarden* River, as opposed to crossing into the main land of *Eretz Yisrael* with the rest of the tribes. In order to prove their loyalty to their brethren, they promised to take a leading role in the battles to conquer the land. When Moshe accepted their request, he concluded: “*Vehayotzei mipichem ta’asu* (And what has come from your mouth shall you do).”<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Kabsa explains that Moshe echoed the same ethical instruction regarding *nedarim*: “*kechol hayotzei mipiv ya’aseh*.” Be cautious in making grandiose resolutions! Of course, Reuven and Gad were obligated to fight for the people in the manner they declared. But Moshe explained, even admonished, that their commitment should extend more broadly: *Vehayotzei mipichem ta’asu*. They were obligated to match their actions to their words not only in regard to the fighting, but in every situation as well.

The severity of neglecting verbal promises is raised by our Sages, who compare doing so to the sins of the *Dor HaMabul* (generation of the Flood) and the *Dor Haflagah* (generation of “the scattered,” the generation that built the tower of Babel): “He who punished the generation of the Flood and the generation of the scattered, whose tongues were confused, He will punish the one who does not keep his promise.”<sup>28</sup> This is an alarming comparison. The people in Noach’s time participated in extremely immoral behavior, such as thievery, idolatry, and illicit relations. Equally shameful was the heretical behavior of the *Dor Haflagah*, which planned an outright rebellion against Hashem. It is quite remarkable that our Sages consider neglecting a promise equally deserving

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<sup>27</sup> *Bamidbar* 32:24.

<sup>28</sup> *Bava Metzji’a* 44a.

of the Divine retribution meted out to the Flood and “scattered” generations!

Apparently, abrogating a verbal commitment is a grievous act. Not standing by one’s word undermines and sabotages the meaning of what we say. The spoken word is the medium of creation and actualization. Our words, then, obligate us to execute that new reality.

Verbal articulation means committing to an action. Quoting the *Imrei Emes*, Rabbi Reiss cites the following example.<sup>29</sup> The beginning of *parashas Mattos* teaches us that a husband has the authority to annul his wife’s vow. A scenario is described in which a husband invalidates his wife’s *neder* without her knowledge, and she later transgresses the conditions of her *neder*. The *pasuk* includes the phrase “*VeHashbem yislach la* (And Hashem will forgive her).”<sup>30</sup> For what does she require forgiveness? Her *neder* had been revoked! The *Imrei Emes* explains that since the act itself was technically no longer prohibited to her, her repentance must be needed for a different error. She was unaware that her *neder* had been nullified; after uttering a vow, she completely disregarded it. Thus, her violation was making her original words meaningless and hollow. It is for going back on her word, so to speak, that she requires forgiveness.

With a deepened understanding of the potency of our daily conversations, we return to one of the original questions we raised earlier. Why does Moshe teach the laws of *nedarim* only to the tribal leaders and not to the rest of the people? Why is this detail further emphasized by the name of the *parashah* – *Mattos* – which alludes to the heads of the tribes? Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch adds

<sup>29</sup> *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 405.

<sup>30</sup> *Bamidbar* 30:13.

emphasis to the point by saying that only outstanding Torah scholars are capable of comprehending Hashem's concise version of the laws of *nedarim*; they in turn, can teach it accurately to the people.<sup>31</sup>

As mentioned above, we turn to *tzaddikim* for guidance because they have achieved the ultimate level of spiritual actualization. Only great Jewish leaders, whose every word is an expression of the Divine will, can fully grasp the extraordinary power of the tongue. In addition, Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Dunner explains that these *pesukim* are explicitly directed toward the tribal heads.<sup>32</sup> A leadership position by nature necessitates delivering verbal public addresses. Therefore, tribal leaders in particular must be extra cautious with their words and extremely vigilant in delivering on their promises.

Neglecting promises is only one way of degrading the meaning of words. Another destructive mechanism that defiles our speech is lying. Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus points out that falsehood is an inborn human instinct.<sup>33</sup> The *Midrash* relates that when Hashem created human beings, He “consulted” with His array of Attributes: “Truth said, ‘Let Him not create man, for he will be full of deceit.’”<sup>34</sup> While we might consider ourselves moral people who avoid telling blatant lies, Rabbi Pincus explains that deceit manifests itself in many forms. The category of falsehood includes little “white lies” that we consider harmless, half-truths that we relegate to the “mostly true” category, exaggerations that support our perspectives, and unsupported generalizations that we state with unjustified confidence. These are all ways in which we

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<sup>31</sup> *A Voice in the Darkness*, p. 261.

<sup>32</sup> *Mikdash HaLevi*, p. 502.

<sup>33</sup> *Tiferes Shimshon*, p. 338-339.

<sup>34</sup> *Bereishis Rabbah* 8.

unintentionally debase our speech and damage our words, thereby transgressing “*lo yacheil devaro*.” The Torah requires a high level of verbal refinement and obligates us to eliminate any trace of inaccuracy in our words.

Rabbi Dunner notes that among all the laws in the Torah, only those of *nedarim* become obligatory a full year before a person reaches the age of *bar/bas mitzvah*; all other laws become obligatory only upon reaching legal maturity.<sup>35</sup> This responsibility is so fundamental that our children need to grasp the severity of lies from the youngest possible age. Because deceit is an integral, almost innate aspect of human nature, we must habituate both ourselves and our children to speak absolute truth. This includes guiding children not to exaggerate when describing a situation and helping them differentiate between how “it seemed to them” and how “it really occurred.” Our children’s earliest education must include learning how to be completely honest in an unbiased manner and to be disciplined in truthful self-expression.

Along these lines, we can find another reason why these laws were taught to the *rashei hamattos* (heads of the tribes). In our verse, a *mateb* literally means a “tribe,” but in a different context, the term translates as “staff” or “stick.” When Leah’s son Zevulun was named, the *pasuk* states: “God has given me a *zeved tov*.”<sup>36</sup> The Ramban expounds that the unusual term “*zeved*” is an acronym for “*zeh bad* (this branch).”<sup>37</sup> The Ramban elaborates further that the word *bad* symbolically refers to *badei atzei shittim* (poles of acacia wood), the wooden staves that were used to carry the Ark.<sup>38</sup> Our

<sup>35</sup> *Mikdash HaLevi*, p. 503.

<sup>36</sup> *Bereishis* 30:20.

<sup>37</sup> Ramban on *Bereishis* 30:20, interpreting Leah’s statement as, “This is a good branch.”

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, referring to *Shemos* 25:13.

children are compared to the *badim*, the branches of our family tree. Moshe taught the laws of *nedarim* to the “*rashei hamattos*,” the heads of families. The underlying message is that every generation of parents – the heads of each nuclear family – must educate their children, the branches, regarding the importance of truthful speech.

## Verbal Abuse: Swords and Words

If disregard of promises and laxity with regard to falsehood are considered abuses of speech, how much more so is this true in regard to intentional derogatory conversations! The Torah outlines numerous detailed *halachos* for all forms of negative speech, such as *lashon hara* (lit. evil language), *motzi shem ra* (libel), and *rechilus* (tale-bearing). Using words as weapons is severely forbidden, as are disparaging words that exploit the potency of language for a deliberately destructive purpose. Rabbi Chaim Berlin related that Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer (a famous student of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter) once came to Rabbi Berlin in a dream.<sup>39</sup> Rabbi Blazer revealed that all of the judgments in *Olam HaBa* (the World to Come) are difficult, but those of speech-related transgressions engender the harshest judgments of all.

Why is negative speech treated so severely by Torah law? What is it about speech-specific infractions that warrant acute punishment?

The damage inflicted on others by derogatory talk is irreparable. Consider how difficult it is to truly forgive a person who has spoken disparagingly about you. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to ignore a negative report that we hear about someone else.

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<sup>39</sup> As related in *A Voice in the Darkness*, p. 262.

Spoken words can never really be revoked, even through a public apology or withdrawal of a statement. The far-reaching ripple effect created by all forms of *lashon bara* is permanent; no amount of regret or repentance can ever fully mend the damage. This concept explains why our Sages state that we are judged for every single conversation we utter.<sup>40</sup> Our speech is under strict Heavenly surveillance because its effect is indelible.

If we are intellectually aware that the tongue can be a lethal weapon, why are the laws of *shmiras halashon* mindlessly violated on a regular basis? Human beings speak all day long. As discussed above, a person is called a “*medaber* (speaker).” We were born to speak. Consider how easily negative words “roll off the tongue” and how capable we are of using our speech destructively. We often don’t even realize the full extent of the harmful repercussions of our words.

Although speech is an inherited ability, proper speech is a science. We must educate ourselves in all the details of *shmiras halashon* so that we can distinguish between words that are forbidden and those that are permitted. Moreover, we must practice the skills of thoughtful and purposeful speaking. The more we become cognizant of the power of the tongue, the more likely it is that we will remember to hesitate and think before we speak.

Speaking in a negative or harmful manner is especially reprehensible because it defiles our extraordinary God-given ability. Although the faculty of speech was granted to all human beings, only the Jewish People employ speech as the means by which to fulfill their unique role in the world. This concept is a theme that appears throughout *parashas Mattos*. A reflection of this idea may be found in the description of the battle against Midian: “*V’e’es*

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<sup>40</sup> *Chagigah* 5b.



*Bilaam ben Be'or bargu becharev* (And Bilaam son of Be'or they killed with the sword).<sup>41</sup> The detail “with the sword” appears superfluous. What is the significance of the method that the Jewish army used to kill Bilaam? Rashi expounds that the verse highlights “with the sword” because it is an uncharacteristic battle tactic for Jewish People.<sup>42</sup> In reality, our strongest weapon is our power of speech. Rashi states: “[Bilaam] came against Israel and exchanged his craft with [Israel’s] craft, since [Israel] is saved only with its mouth, through its prayer and supplication.”<sup>43</sup> Bilaam was killed by the sword because he had expropriated the weapon of the Jews – speech.

By saying this, Rashi clarifies that this detail of the sword as the weapon that killed Bilaam connects directly to Yitzchak’s *berachos* to Yaakov and Eisav. Yaakov was blessed to live by his words, whereas Eisav was destined to live by the sword – “*ve'al charbecha tichyeh* (by the sword will you live).”<sup>44</sup> Bilaam tried to employ the Jewish weapon of words when he attempted to destroy Israel with curses. Therefore, Hashem turned the blessing full circle and instead, Bilaam was killed with his own natural power – “by the sword.”

Elaborating on Rashi’s comment, the Chofetz Chaim notes that speaking is our specialty.<sup>45</sup> In the same way that an artisan uses specialized tools to complete his handiwork, the Jewish People use their mouths in their “craft.” Employing the spoken word for the service of God is the Jewish field of expertise. A craftsman carefully guards and protects his tools; after all,

<sup>41</sup> *Bamidbar* 31:8.

<sup>42</sup> Rashi on *Bamidbar* 31:8, quoting *Tanchuma*.

<sup>43</sup> Rashi on *Bamidbar* 31:8.

<sup>44</sup> *Bereishis* 27:40.

<sup>45</sup> As quoted in *VaYomer Yehudab*, p. 268.

his livelihood depends on them! Similarly, we must preserve the sanctity of our words because they are “the tools of our trade.” Our lives depend on how we use our words. As Shlomo *HaMelech* stated, “Life and death are in the hands of the tongue.”<sup>46</sup>

Not only must we preserve this special implement, but we must also utilize it proactively for positive purposes. The Jewish People are uniquely skilled in using speech to infuse *kedushah* into the material world. Again, speaking generates a new reality. According to the Chofetz Chaim, the Jewish art of holy speech can create lofty worlds and heavenly angels.<sup>47</sup> The Slonimer Rebbe quotes Rabbeinu Yonah, who asserts that one who sanctifies his mouth makes his mouth like a *keli sharet* (Temple vessel).<sup>48</sup> Offerings placed into a *keli sharet* acquire the new status of *kadosh* (holy, sanctified, designated). The Slonimer Rebbe explains Rabbeinu Yonah’s comparison as follows: just as a *keli sharet* can transform secular into sacred, a pure mouth can create a new reality of sanctity. In this light, he expounds on the verse cited above, “*Lo yacheil devaro kechol hayotzei mipiv ya’aseh.*” We must be vigilant to avoid profaning our speech, because *kechol hayotzei mipiv ya’aseh*. “He will do” refers to a *malach*, who actualizes our speech. Every word we utter, both positive and negative, creates an angel that turns our words into a reality!

This concept sheds light on the prohibition relating to cursing a deaf person.<sup>49</sup> Although a deaf person cannot hear insulting words, a spoken curse still generates a destructive angel that can

<sup>46</sup> *Mishlei* 18:21.

<sup>47</sup> *VaYomer Yehuda*, p. 268.

<sup>48</sup> *Nesivos Shalom, Bamidbar*, p. 195.

<sup>49</sup> *Vayikra* 19:14.

inflict serious damage. The saying, “*Al tiftach peh lasatan*,”<sup>50</sup> loosely translated as “Don’t tempt fate,” reinforces this idea. Just mentioning something negative can cause it to happen. One of the many examples given in *Tanach* is the statement of the *Dor Haflagab*: “Come, let us build us a city... lest we be dispersed across the whole earth.”<sup>51</sup> In the end, that is exactly what happened to them!

It is the faculty of speech, more than any other physical function, which is uniquely designed to be a utensil for sanctification. Hashem bestowed upon us the gift of speech together with the freedom to channel its usage. We alone, however, determine whether our words are destructive or creative, whether we generate negative or positive angels. Our most essential service of God is through the medium of the mouth. It is the *keli sharet* of speaking through which we connect to Hashem by the act of saying *berachos*, *tefillos*, and *divrei Torah*.

Talking is the tool through which a Jew fulfills his unique purpose in the world. The Slonimer Rebbe expounds on the opening verse in *parashas Balak*:<sup>52</sup> “*Vayar Balak ben Tzippor es kol asher asah Yisrael La’Emori* (And Balak son of Tzippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites).”<sup>53</sup> The word “*la’Emori*” may be interpreted homiletically as coming from the Hebrew root word “*emor*” (talk). Thus, the verse may be understood as follows: “Balak saw all that Hashem created – only so that Israel may speak to Me.” The only purpose for which Hashem endowed us with speech is so that we may utter His praises. We are therefore obligated to use our mouths to speak exclusively for the lofty purpose intended by Hashem.

<sup>50</sup> *Berachos* 19.

<sup>51</sup> *Bereishis* 11:4.

<sup>52</sup> *Nesivos Shalom, Bamidbar*, p. 195.

<sup>53</sup> *Bamidbar* 22:2.

## Spectacular Vernacular

Our ability to use our speech for beneficial purposes is not limited to *tefillah* and Torah. Not only are our mouths the medium for *mitzvos bein Adam laMakom* (between man and God), but also for *mitzvos bein Adam lachavero* (between people).

By way of illustration, consider the puzzling statement of the *Gemara* that the Holy Blessed One does not begrudge anything, not even “*sechar sichah na’ab* (the reward for pleasant conversation).”<sup>54</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld explains that “*sichah na’ab*” is not referring to speech that fulfils any particular *mitzvah*. Rather, it refers to ordinary conversation.<sup>55</sup> How can we understand the concept of Hashem rewarding people for ordinary conversations? With all we have learned above about the recognition of the sanctity of speech, we know now that even secular interpersonal dialogue is significant.

Jewish morality is founded on the idea of emulating Hashem’s attributes. Although Hashem is exceedingly exalted and beyond the scope of human comprehension, we can perceive how His Presence is manifest in our world. For example, we can recognize Hashem’s kindness. Therefore, just as Hashem treats us with generosity and kindness, we must treat others in that same manner. Similarly, we can appreciate that Hashem expresses this kindness by sustaining the entire world. We say in *Shemoneh Esreh*: “*Mechalkeil chaim bechesed* (He sustains life with kindness).” Hashem upholds the world’s existence by providing a constant Divine life force. We too must emulate this life-giving quality.

How do we go about giving life to those around us? Realistically, if one is not a doctor, how often does one encounter

<sup>54</sup> *Nazir* 23b.

<sup>55</sup> *Rabbi Freifeld Speaks*, p. 38-40.

opportunities to save someone else's life? Equally important to sustaining someone physically is sustaining someone spiritually and emotionally. Consider once more that Hashem breathed life into *Adam HaRishon*, thereby creating a Godly soul that can speak. Rabbi Freifeld explains that in this same way, we can literally revive others with words of kindness. *Sichab na'ah* includes both proactive and reactive conversation. Greeting others warmly is not a simple social nicety, but rather, according to the above *gemara*, a deed worthy of reward. A genuine "hello" demonstrates recognition of another's worth and builds another's self-esteem. Similarly, thoughtful verbal responses indicate sensitivity to another's feelings, thereby validating him or her.

A teacher once told a story about a student who attended his class regularly. One day, the student approached the teacher after class. The teacher assumed the student had a question about the subject matter discussed that day. Instead, however, the student said, "For the past few weeks, I have been wearing this blue shirt very often." The teacher, finding the remark rather odd, asked, "And why have you been wearing it so much?" The student replied, "A few weeks ago, you said this blue shirt looked nice on me. It really made me feel good when you said that. Now, every time I put on this shirt, it makes me feel good. I really enjoy wearing it, so I wear it often."

The story illustrates that even a casual compliment has the power to build another person's confidence and create good feelings. The teacher's offhand comment about a blue shirt "breathed life" into this student and gave him emotional sustenance. This teacher's words were used for the lofty purposes intended by Hashem when He breathed life into Adam, creating a Godly soul that can speak.

## Concluding Commentary

Understanding the mystical origin of our ability to speak deepens the meaning of the verse “Life and death are in the hands of the tongue.”<sup>56</sup> Human speech is so powerful that it can be used to build or destroy. Rabbi Daniel Ochayon points out that the power of speech is a recurring topic not only in *parashas Mattos*, but also in all of *Sefer Bamidbar*.<sup>57</sup> Consider some of the major historical events contained in this *sefer*. In *parashas Beha’aloscha*, Miriam speaks *lashon hara* about Moshe. The spies offer a derogatory report about the Land in *parashas Shelach*. In *parashas Balak*, Bilaam attempts to curse *Bnei Yisrael* and overpower the strength of their prayers. While the details of each of the events differ, these incidents share the common theme that words are potent. Speech is the expression of a person’s spiritual capabilities, both creative and destructive.

The central message of *parashas Mattos* regarding the power of speech is most fitting for the time-period during which it is read – the Three Weeks. This is the season during which we mourn the destruction of the *Beis HaMikdash*. We contemplate the sins that resulted in this divine retribution and aim to make amends in this area of transgression. *Sinas chinam* (baseless hatred) expressed through *lashon hara* was a central cause of the loss of the *Beis HaMikdash*.<sup>58</sup> This *parashah* and its passage about *nedarim* emphasize how cautiously we must guard our tongues from negative speech.

Our mission during this time-period is to remedy baseless hatred with *ahavas chinam* (baseless, or unconditional, love). Positive

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<sup>56</sup> *Mishlei* 18:21.

<sup>57</sup> *Ohr Daniel*, p. 495.

<sup>58</sup> *A Voice in the Darkness*, p. 263.

speech is the most effective way to foster brotherly love and unity. To rebuild the *Beis HaMikdash*, we must undertake the task of building each other up using words of encouragement and friendship. We can use our *kli sharet* to create positive angels all around us, who will bring immense *kedushah* into this world. May we use our God-given gift of speech to draw ourselves closer to Hashem and to each other, in order to bring about the full and complete redemption.