

THE HOLINESS OF HUMANITY AND HEBREW

מכל הבהמה הטהורה תקח לך שבעה שבעה איש ואשתו ומן הבהמה אשר לא טהרה הוא שנים איש ואשתו¹

As נח was getting ready to enter the תיבה, he was instructed to bring along the animals, both those that are כשר, and both that are not. The פסוק indicates this commandment by using the לשון of טהורה and איננה טהורה. There is a famous question asked as to why הקב"ה doesn't contrast the כשר and non-כשר species using the more common opposite of טהור, i.e. טמא? Why say טהור and not טהור? The question is even strengthened when you look at the actual commandment of not eating non-כשר animals², where the פסוק does use the לשון of טמא! The answer I heard is based on the גמרא³ that one should always try to speak נקיה בלשון. The תורה doesn't have any extra words or letters, yet the גמרא points out that the תורה says איננה טהורה which is 12 letters, as opposed to טמא which is 4 letters, only to speak נקיה בלשון. To answer why the תורה said טמא by the הלכות of כשרות, there it was needed so we would get concrete instructions as to what we can and can't eat.

From this גמרא, we can learn the importance of clean speech, even when the alternative is not an inherently bad option. It then follows all the moreso that when the instinct would be to use foul language, that we overcome that instinct, and try to speak in a manner that is befitting for בני תורה. The גמרא⁴ says that the punishment for ניבול פה, vulgar language, is many troubles, including premature death and גזירות שמים against those who abuse their gift of speech. We have precedence for this kind of punishment throughout the תורה. When the מרגלים spoke הרע לשון against ישראל, they were punished in a "מגפה".⁵ The גמרא⁶ says that their tongues were stretched out into their belly buttons, and maggots were entering their body and eating them alive. This was מדה כנגד מדה, as they used their tongues to sin, so their death was brought about through their tongues. If you think about it, the punishments of ניבול פה aren't really punishments, but more of a natural consequence. What distinguishes man from beast is

¹ בראשית ז.ב.
² ויקרא יא.ד.
³ פסחים ג.
⁴ שבת לג.
⁵ במדבר יד.לז.
⁶ סוטה לה.

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that we are given the unique ability of speech. If we misuse that privilege, we are no better than the animals.

It is interesting to note that the תורה was written in what's called לשון הקודש. One may think it is called לשון הקודש because the holy words of the תורה were written in that language. However, something to think about is that if that is the case, then why did ה"קב specifically choose this language? Why not write the תורה in English, or any other language? Clearly, there is something inherent in the language itself that is not found in other languages. The רמב"ם⁷ points out that what makes לשון הקודש holy is that there are no words to describe disgusting things, such as genitalia, semen, or the act of conjugal relations. All of these concepts are subtly referenced through euphemisms, such as ביאה (literally translated as "a coming") and שכבת זרע (literally translated as "the layer of seed"). Only a language that doesn't blatantly use inappropriate terminology has the זכות of being the language that the תורה was written in, and that the world was created in.⁸ By corrupting the power of speech, we are in essence going against the purpose of Creation. Let us take this opportunity to reflect on the special merit we have to be able to invoke לשון הקודש every day in our תפילות, and make our לשון, whatever it may be, a לשון that is also קודש. Let us use our words in a clean manner, and only use them to help and uplift others, and not to disparage and hurt them.

⁷ מורה נבוכים ג.ח

⁸ עיין אבות ה.א.