

ASERET: THE BIG TEN DECEMBER TOPIC

9: FALSE WITNESS: The Power of Speech



DEC



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PROJECT ASERET

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9: THE POWER OF SPEECH



introduction:

Human speech allows us, amongst other things, to collaborate, advocate, give comfort, but also to cause pain. We will explore the responsibility that comes with the unique power of speech.



texts: Human Speech as Unique

SOURCE ONE: *Genesis 2:7*, The Lord, God, formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

וַיִּצְרֶה אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֹפֶר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה

SOURCE TWO: *Onkelos Translation*, And the Lord, God, created man, dirt from the ground, and He blew into his nostrils a living soul, and it was for a speaking spirit in man.

תרגום אונקלוס על בראשית ב':ז'

וַיִּבְרָא ה' אֱלֹקִים יֵת אָדָם עֹפֶרָא מִן אַרְעָא וַיִּנְפַח בְּאַפּוּהִי נְשָׁמַתָּא דְחַיִּי וְהוּת בְּאָדָם לְרוּחַ מְמַלְלָא

SOURCE THREE: *Rashi*, A living soul: Cattle and beasts were also called living souls, but this one of man is the most alive of them all, because he was additionally given intelligence and speech.

לנפש חיה. אף בהמה וְחַיָּה נִקְרְאוּ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה, אֲךָ זֶה שֶׁל אָדָם חַיָּה שְׂבִיבָלָן, שְׁנִתּוּסַף בּוֹ דְעָה וְדַבּוּר

SOURCE FOUR: *Tanya, Chapter 38* In general [all things in this world] are divided into four categories: mineral, vegetable, animal and speaker

וְדָרַךְ כָּל־ל נַחֲלָקוֹת לְאַרְבַּע מַדְרָגוֹת: דּוּמָם, צוּמָח, חַי, מַדְבַּר



conversation:

- In what ways is human speech different from the sounds animals make when communicating? If so, in what ways is human speech unique?
- Why do the commentators feel it is important to include speech as part of the original creation of humanity?

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introduction:

The following texts illustrate a variety of ways in which speech can be powerful: Speech can be emotional, creative, spiritual and intellectual.



texts: Powers of Speech

This source about the Tower of Babel illustrates collaborative speech.

SOURCE ONE Genesis 11: 1, 3 Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard. Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar."

וַיְהִי כֹל־הָאָרֶץ שָׁפָה אֶחָד וְדַבָּרִים אֶחָדִים:
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ הִבֵּה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשִׂרְפָה וְתָהִי לָהֶם הַלְבֵנָה
לְאִבּוֹ וְהַחֲמֵר הִיָּה לָהֶם לְחֲמֵר

This text illustrates the emotional power of words.

SOURCE TWO: Joseph B. Soloveitchik, The Lonely Man of Faith, (commenting on Job 32:20) 'Let me speak, then, and get relief; Let me open my lips and reply.' For there is a redemptive quality for an agitated mind in the spoken word, and a tormented soul finds peace in confessing.

אֲדַבְרָה וַיְרוּח־לִי אֶפְתַּח שִׁפְתֵי וְאֶעֱנֶה

In the text below, the daughters of Zelophehad use words to advocate for themselves.

SOURCE THREE: Numbers 27: 1-4 The daughters of Zelophehad ... They stood before Moses ... and the whole assembly ... and they said, "Our father died in the wilderness ... and he has left no sons. Let not our father's name be lost to his family because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!"

וַתִּקְרַבְנָה בָּנוֹת צִלְפָּחַד ..וַתַּעֲמֹדְנָה לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה .. וְכָל־הָעֵדָה ...
לֵאמֹר ..אָבִינוּ מֵת בְּמִדְבָּר וְהוּא לֹא־הָיָה בְּתוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַנוֹעָדִים
עֲלֵיהֶם בְּעֵדַת־קֶרֶח כִּי־בְחָטְאוֹ מֵת וּבָנִים לֹא־הָיוּ לוֹ לָמָּה יִגָּרַע
שֵׁם־אָבִינוּ מִתּוֹךְ מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ כִּי אֵין לוֹ בֶּן תִּנָּה־לָנוּ אַתְּחִי
בְּתוֹךְ אַחֵי אָבִינוּ

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This source is an example of intellectual speech.

SOURCE FOUR: *Psalms 119*, O how I love Your Torah! It is my speech all day long.

מֵהֶ־אֶהְבֵּתִי תוֹרַתְךָ כָּל־הַיּוֹם הִיא שִׁיחִתִּי

SOURCE FIVE: *Numbers 20:11-12* When the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts."

And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them."

וַיִּרָם מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיַּךְ אֶת־הַסֶּלֶעַ בְּמַטֵּהוּ פַעַמַיִם וַיֵּצְאוּ מֵיִם רַבִּים וַתִּשֶׁת הָעֵדָה וּבְעֵינָם: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן יַעַן לֹא־הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת־הַקֶּהֱל הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נָתַתִּי לָהֶם



conversation:

- Identify the positive or negative consequence of each text above.
- What lesson about speech would the Israelites have learned if Moses had used speech to bring water from the rock?



introduction: P'shat, the Literal Understanding

Now that we have explored the complexity of human speech, let's focus on the specific *diber*:



texts:

BEING A FALSE WITNESS:

SOURCE ONE: *Exodus 20:13 (the Diber)* Do not testify against your neighbor as a false witness.

לֹא תַעֲנֶה בְּרַעַךְ עַד שֶׁקֶר

SOURCE TWO: *Rambam Sefer HaMitzvot Prohibitive Mitzvah 287* Do not testify falsely [in court], as it states, "Do not be a false witness."

שֶׁלֹא לְהַעִיד בְּשֶׁקֶר, שֶׁנֶאמַר "לֹא תַעֲנֶה בְּרַעַךְ עַד שֶׁקֶר" (שְׁמוֹת כ, יב)

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BEING A WORTHLESS WITNESS

SOURCE THREE: *Deuteronomy 5:17* (the Diber) Do not testify against your neighbor as a worthless witness.

וְלֹא תִעַנֶּה בְרֵעֲךָ עֵד שׁוֹא

SOURCE FOUR: *Chizkuni* This includes even true testimony, however, it is inadmissible in court, for example, he saw it alone, without a second witness, or the accused was not warned prior to his action.

אפילו עדות בחנם כגון ראהו יחידי או שנים בלא התראה



conversation:

- What is the difference between a false witness and a worthless witness?
- We have already been told that we should not lie. Why do we need a specific warning about being a reliable witness?



introduction: Yesod, the Underlying Principle

What are the implications of this *diber* for every day speech? The Sforino text expands the prohibition against being a witness in court to everyday speech, and breaks it down into two categories: *lashon harah* (disparaging comments which are TRUE) and *motzei shem rah* (disparaging comments which are FALSE). He saw in this *diber* the principal of not using speech for negative consequences. The third text talks about *rechilut*, specifically TALE BEARING as it applies to the listener.



texts:

SOURCE ONE: *Sforino on Exodus 20:13* Included in this *diber*, commandment, is *Lashon Hara*, speaking badly of others and *Motzi Shem Ra*, spreading damaging lies about others.

לא תענה ברעך עד שקר ובכלל זה הולך רכיל ומוציא שם רע, אף על פי
שעקרו על מעיד בבית דין

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SOURCETWO: *Talmud, Arachin 15b* The tongue kills three – the speaker, the listener, and the one spoken about. Rav Chama son of Rebbe Chanina said, which verse alludes to this? “Death and life are in the power of the tongue; And they that indulge it shall eat the fruit thereof. (Proverbs 18:21)”

לשון תליתאי קטיל תליתאי הורג למספרו ולמקבלו ולאומר
א"ר חמא ברבי חנינא מאי דכתיב (משלי יח, כא) מות וחיים
ביד לשון וכי יש יד ללשון לומר לך מה יד ממיתה אף לשון ממיתה

SOURCE THREE: *Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisroel Kagan, Introduction* **Rechilut** is specifically tale bearing. For example, “Guess what Sarah said about you.” (even if it isn't disparaging and it's true but causes the hearer to feel negative about the person).



conversation:

- “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Does this popular jingle resonate with the conclusions of the texts above? How does this apply to bullying?
- In what ways does the *diber* apply to the anonymous nature of internet communication?
- The sources above show sensitivity to the power of speech and how careful we should be with our words. Parts of our society has become very sensitive in this area. Some say we have gone overboard with “political correctness.” Do you agree or disagree?



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introduction: Lashon Hara L'toelet

Sometimes saying something negative is actually positive, for example, warning a friend not to do business with a crook. This is called *Lashon Hara L'toelet*, negative speech for positive consequence. Even so, the *Chofetz Chaim* cautions us to be careful when doing it.



texts:

SOURCE ONE: *Chofetz Chaim: Rabbi Yisroel Kagan* sites seven conditions:

1. You know it's true
2. You know it's bad
3. You tried to first speak to the person yourself (if that would work)
4. You aren't going to exaggerate
5. You have pure intentions for a positive purpose
6. The positive purpose cannot be achieved in another way
7. No more harm will come to them than it should.

SOURCE TWO: *Esther 2: 21-22* At that time, when Mordecai was sitting in the palace gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs who guarded the threshold, became angry, and plotted to kill King Ahasuerus. Mordecai learned of it and told it to Queen Esther; and Esther reported it to the king in Mordecai's name. The matter was investigated and found to be so, and the two were impaled on stakes. This was recorded in the book of annals at the insistence of the king.

בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וּמֵרֻדְכִי יָשָׁב בְּשַׁעַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ קִצָּף בְּגָתוֹ וַתִּרְשׁ שְׁנֵי־סָרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ
 מִשְׁמֵרֵי הַסֹּף וַיִּבְקֹשׁוּ לְשַׁלַּח יָד בַּמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֻׁרָשׁ: וַיִּזְדַּע הַדָּבָר לְמֵרֻדְכִי וַיִּגֵּד לְאַסְתֵּר
 הַמַּלְכָּה וַתֹּאמֶר אֲסִתֵּר לְמֶלֶךְ בְּשֵׁם מֵרֻדְכִי: וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַדָּבָר וַיִּמְצָא וַיִּתְּלוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם
 עַל־עֵץ וַיִּכְתֹּב בְּסֵפֶר דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים לְפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ

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SOURCE THREE: *The Journalist's Creed*

The Journalist's Creed was written by the first dean of the Missouri School of Journalism, Walter Williams. More than one century later, his declaration remains one of the clearest statements of the principles, values and standards of journalists throughout the world.

- I believe in the profession of journalism.
- I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of a lesser service than the public service is betrayal of this trust.
- I believe that clear thinking and clear statement, accuracy and fairness are fundamental to good journalism.
- I believe that a journalist should write only what he holds in his heart to be true.
- I believe that suppression of the news, for any consideration other than the welfare of society, is indefensible.
- I believe that no one should write as a journalist what he would not say as a gentleman; that bribery by one's own pocketbook is as much to be avoided as bribery by the pocketbook of another; that individual responsibility may not be escaped by pleading another's instructions or another's dividends.
- I believe that advertising, news and editorial columns should alike serve the best interests of readers; that a single standard of helpful truth and cleanness should prevail for all; that the supreme test of good journalism is the measure of its public service.
- I believe that the journalism which succeeds best — and best deserves success — fears God and honors Man; is stoutly independent, unmoved by pride of opinion or greed of power; constructive, tolerant but never careless, self-controlled, patient, always respectful of its readers but always unafraid, is quickly indignant at injustice; is unswayed by the appeal of privilege or the clamor of the mob; seeks to give every man a chance and, as far as law and honest wage and recognition of human brotherhood can make it so, an equal chance; is profoundly patriotic while sincerely promoting international good will and cementing world-comradeship; is a journalism of humanity, of and for today's world.



conversation:

- Have you ever been in a situation where you needed to employ *Lashon Hara L'toelet*? In your experience, did all seven of Rabbi Yisroel Kagan's conditions apply?
- Recently it has seemed that there is a free-for-all in politics and reporting. Some say this allows for truthful debate, others say it's not decent and sets a terrible precedent for society at large. What do you think?

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introduction: Lashon Hatov

If it is wrong to speak badly about people, is it a mitzvah to speak well about them? What is the power of *Lashon Hatov* (literally "good speech,")?



texts:

SOURCE ONE: *Talmud Ketuvot 16b* The Sages taught: How does one dance before the bride, (i.e., what does one recite while dancing at her wedding?) Beit Shammai says: "One recites praise of the bride as she is." And Beit Hillel says: One recites: "A fair and attractive bride." Beit Shammai said to Beit Hillel: "In a case where the bride was clearly unattractive, does one say with regard to her: 'A fair and attractive bride?'" The Torah states: 'Keep yourself from a false matter' (Exodus 23:7). Beit Hillel said to Beit Shammai: "According to your statement, with regard to one who acquired an inferior acquisition from the market, should another praise it and enhance its value in his eyes or condemn it and diminish its value in his eyes? Surely you must say that he should praise it and enhance its value in his eyes and refrain from causing him anguish." From here the Sages said: *A person's disposition should always be empathetic with others, and treat everyone courteously. In this case too, once the groom has married his bride, one praises her as being fair and attractive.*

תנו רבנן כיצד מרקדין לפני הכלה בית שמאי אומרים כלה כמות שהיא ובית הלל אומרים כלה נאה וחסודה אמרו להן ב"ש לב"ה הרי שהיתה חיגרת או סומא אומרי' לה כלה נאה וחסודה והתורה אמרה (שמות כג, ז) מדבר שקר תרחק אמרו להם ב"ה לב"ש לדבריכם מי שלקח מקח רע מן השוק ישבחנו בעיניו או יגננו בעיניו הוי אומר ישבחנו בעיניו מכאן אמרו חכמים לעולם תהא דעתו של אדם מעורבת עם הבריות

SOURCE TWO: *Genesis 50:21* (After Jacob died, the brothers feared Joseph's retribution. He said to them...) "So now do not fear. I will sustain you and your small children." And he comforted them and spoke to their hearts.

וְעַתָּה אֵל תִּירָאוּ אֲנִי אֶכְלֶלְכֶם וְאֶת טַפְּכֶם וַיְנַחֵם אוֹתָם וַיְדַבֵּר עַל לִבָּם

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SOURCE THREE: *Pirkei Avot* Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai had five students: Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkenos, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yosi the Priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh. He would recount their praises: Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkenos is a pit covered in plaster that does not lose a drop. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya – happy is the one who gave birth to him! Rabbi Yosi the Priest is pious. Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel fears sin. And Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh is an ever-strengthening fountain.

חַמְשָׁה תַלְמִידִים הָיוּ לוֹ לְרַבֵּן יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּי, וְאֵלוֹ הֵן, רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן הוֹרְקָנוֹס, וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן חַנְנְיָה, וְרַבִּי יוֹסִי הַכֹּהֵן, וְרַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן נְתַנְאֵל, וְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲרָה. הוּא הָיָה מוֹנֶה שְׂבָחוֹ. רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן הוֹרְקָנוֹס, בּוֹר סוּד שְׂאִינוֹ מֵאֶבֶד טָפָה. רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן חַנְנְיָה, אֲשֶׁרֵי יוֹלְדָתוֹ. רַבִּי יוֹסִי הַכֹּהֵן, חֲסִיד. רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן נְתַנְאֵל, יָרָא חֲטָא. וְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲרָה, מַעֲיֵן הַמְתַּגְבֵּר.



conversation:

- Which of the texts above is an example of reassuring speech? Which do you see as an example of comforting speech? Which shows the inspirational power of words?
- What effect do you think Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's words had on his students?
- How often do you think about how your words affect others?
- How can this dibe, "Do not be a false witness," serve as a Core Value in your life?



every day:

- Keep a log of your conversations for one day. What can you learn about the power of your words?
- Speak deliberately and intentionally once a day in order to make a positive impact on someone else.
- Compare one news story as reported by different news sources. How do the reports differ? In what ways are they the same?



supplemental materials:

- **ELI Talk: Words of the Righteous and People in Love:** We treat words as the most taken-for-granted commodity in the world, yet Judaism holds that words have the power to create and to destroy. Jonnie Schnytzer looks at how people in love know the weight of words just as the tzaddikim – the righteous – do.
- **A discussion of the concept of *Lashon Tov*:** Based on the Parshiot Tazria-Metzora.

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- **And From These Words, Torah Increases: Conversations With People You**

Disagree With: Billy Planer, the founder of *Etgar 36* – a Jewish youth program that introduces teens to the different sides of the issues of our day, wants all of us to use the Talmud as a model for how we have conversations with people who disagree with us. He proposes a very Jewish idea: No matter what side of the fence you sit on, find something in common and engage with people who are different from you. It is these conversations that will change the world – or at least yours.

- **Seduced By Eternity: Why I Love the Jewish Story:** Nessa Rapaport, a writer, a lover of language and stories, contemplates the story and narrative of the Jewish people.



additional information:

Besides the power of speech, it is easy to identify the values of truth and justice is this Diber as well. Think about the connection between the three - The power of speech, truth, and justice.



who's who in the texts:

Onkelos was a Roman national who converted to Judaism in Tannaic times. He authored a famous translation of the Torah known after his name.

Rashi: Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040 - 1105, Troyes, France) known by the acronym Rashi, was a medieval French rabbi and author of the most widely used commentary on the Talmud and Tanakh.

Tanya is an early work of Chasidic philosophy, by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad Hasidism, first published in 1797.

Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik was a leading American rabbi, talmudist, and modern Jewish philosopher. He died in Boston in 1993.

Chizkuni: Rabbi Chezekiah ben Manoah, known as the Chizkuni was a French rabbi. In memory of his father, who lost his right hand through his steadfastness in the faith, Hezekiah wrote a commentary on the Torah, it was printed at Venice in 1524.

Sforno: Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno was an Italian rabbi, Torah commentator, philosopher and physician. After acquiring in his native town a thorough knowledge of Hebrew, rabbinic literature, mathematics, and philosophy, he went to Rome to study medicine. He died in Bologna in 1550.

Chofetz Chaim: Rabbi Yisrael Kagan, known popularly as the Chofetz Chaim, was an influential rabbi of the Musar movement, a Halakhist, posek, and ethicist whose works continue to be widely influential in Jewish life. He died in Radin, Belarus in 1933

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was a Tanna, an important Jewish sage in the era of the Second Temple, and a primary contributor to the core text of Rabbinical Judaism, the Mishnah.

Personal Reflections... 

1. Human speech allows us to collaborate, advocate, and give comfort, How have you used the power of words in your social action project?

2. How has the power of words informed your individual projects?



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Chai Mitzvah was created as a way to engage adults, teens, and families in a Jewish journey throughout their lives. Combining texts to spark discussion, ritual, and social action, Chai Mitzvah provides the framework for a meaningful Jewish journey.

Project Aseret provides a new, powerful way to look at the Ten Commandments as Core Values – universal in nature and the bedrock of Jewish identity – containing profound and relevant principles and beliefs for both individual and communal life.

It is our hope that your Chai Mitzvah/Project Aseret experience will ignite deeper Jewish engagement and continued growth.