

9: FALSE WITNESS

The Power of Speech



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9: POWER OF SPEECH

For the Teacher



themes:

- Human speech is powerful. It can be emotional, creative, spiritual and intellectual. Speech is a tool we use to collaborate, advocate, and give comfort, but it can also cause pain. For all of these reasons, responsibility comes with the power of speech.
- The literal meaning of this Diber is “Do not be a false witness in court.”
- The underlying meaning expands the intent from being a reliable witness, to everyday speech.



activities:

- **Opening Activity – every picture tells a story.** Ask students to look at the photograph on the front cover of this booklet. What do they think is happening?

Working either individually or in groups, write a diary entry. Imagine you are the girl in the front of the photo, or one of the people in the back. Tell what happened on the day we see here.

Hold on to the diary entries. **After exploring this Diber, go back and see how each diary entry relates to one of the topics you’ve discussed** (For example: *rechilut* (tale bearing), *lashon harah* (disparaging comments which are TRUE), *motzei shem rah* (disparaging comments which are FALSE) *lashon harah l'toelet* (negative speech for positive consequence), *lashon hatov* (literally “good speech”).

- **An Experiment in Words:** A youth group wanted to see if positive words could have an impact on people, and were surprised at how quickly they found out. **Watch the video and then try a variation of the activity with your group.** Each student takes a turn standing in front of the chalkboard while the other members of the group write a positive word or phrase about them on the board behind their back. When the group is finished writing, the student turns around and sees what they have written. It will quickly become clear how positive of an impact words can have. You can change the *world* by changing your *words*.

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introduction:

Human speech allows us, amongst other things, to collaborate, advocate, and 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 עֹפָר 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'

וַבְּרָא ה' אֱלֹקִים יֵת אָדָם עֹפָרָא מִן אַרְעָא וַנִּפַּח 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 ותיה נקראו נפש חיה, אך זו של אדם חיה שבכלל, שנתוסף בו דעה ודבור

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

דרך כלל נחלקות לארבע מדרגות: דומם, צומח, חי, מדבר



conversation:

- In what ways is human speech different from the sounds animals make when communicating? What makes 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 כָּל־הָאָרֶץ שְׂפָה אַחַת וְדָבָרִים אַחַדִּים:
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ הִבֵּנוּ נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשִׂרְפָה וְתַהִי לָהֶם
הַלְבֵנָה לְאֲבָן וְהַחֲמֵר הִיָּה לָהֶם לְחֵמֶר

This text illustrates the emotional power of words.

SOURCE TWO: Joseph B. Soloveitchik, The Lonely Man of Faith, (commenting on Job 32:2) '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.

אֲדַבֶּרָה וְרוּחִי־לִי אֶפְתַּח שְׂפָתַי 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!"

וּתְקַרְבְּנָה בְּנוֹת צֶלְפַּחַד ..וּתַעֲמִדְנָה לְפָנַי מִשָּׁה .. וְכָל־הָעֵדָה ...
לֵאמֹר.. אָבִינוּ מֵת בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהוּא לֹא־הָיָה בְּתוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַנוֹעֲדִים
עֲלֵה' בְּעֵדוֹת־קִרְחַן כִּי־בִחָטְאוֹ מֵת וּבָנִים לֹא־הָיוּ לוֹ לָמָּה יִגְרַע
שֵׁם־אָבִינוּ מִתּוֹךְ מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ כִּי אֵין לוֹ בֵּן תִּנְהַלְנוּ אֶחָזָה
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.

מֵהֶאֱהַבְתִּי תוֹרַתְךָ כָּל־הַיּוֹם הִיא שִׁיחִתִּי

SOURCE FIVE: Numbers 20:11-12 and 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. But 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.”

וַיֹּרַם מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיַּךְ אֶת־הַסֶּלַע בְּמַטְהוֹ פַּעַמַּיִם וַיֵּצְאוּ מִים רַבִּים וַתִּשְׁתַּף הָעֵדָה וּבְעֵינָם: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן יַעַן לֹא־הֵאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת־הַקְּהָל 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?

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introduction: P'shat - Literal Meaning

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.

לא תענה ברעך עד שקר

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

שלא להעיד בשקר, שנאמר "לא תענה ברעך עד שקר"

BEING A WORTHLESS WITNESS

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

ולא תענה ברעך עד שוא

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?

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introduction: Yesod - Underlying Meaning

What are the implications of this Diber for every day speech? The Sforno 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 principle of not using speech for negative consequences. The third text talks about *rechilut*, specifically TALE BEARING that causes the listener to have negative feelings.



texts:

SOURCE ONE: *Sforno on Exodus 20:13* Included in this *diber*, commandment, is *Lashon Harah*, 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

SOURCE TWO: *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 ולאומרו
א"ר חמא ברבי חנינא מאי דכתיב
מות וחיים ביד לשון וכי יש יד ללשון (משלי יח, כא)

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. 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 Harah 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 Harah 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* cites 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 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 וּמֵרֶדְכִי יָשָׁב בְּשַׁעַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ קִצְףָּ בְּגִתָּן וְתֵרֶשׁ שְׁנֵי־סָרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ
 מִשְׁמָרֵי הַסֵּף וַיִּבְקְשׁוּ לְשַׁלַּח יָד בַּמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֻׁרָשׁ: וַיִּזְדַּע הַדָּבָר לְמֵרְדֳּכַי וַיַּגִּד לְאַסְתֵּר
 הַמַּלְכָּה וְתֵאמֶר אֲסִתֵּר לְמֶלֶךְ בְּשֵׁם מֵרְדֳּכַי: וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַדָּבָר וַיִּמְצָא וַיִּתְּלוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם
 עַל־עֵץ וַיִּכְתֹּב בְּסֵפֶר דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים לִפְנֵי 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 Harah 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 lame or blind, 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* “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 אֶכְלָל אֶתְכֶם 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.

חֲמִשָּׁה תַלְמִידִים הָיוּ לוֹ לְרַבֵּן יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּי, וְאֵלוֹ הֵם, רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן הוֹרְקָנוֹס,
וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן חֲנַנְיָה, וְרַבִּי יוֹסֵי הַכֹּהֵן, וְרַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן נִתְנָאֵל, וְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲרָף.
הוּא הָיָה מוֹנֶה שְׂבָחָן. רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן הוֹרְקָנוֹס, בּוֹר סוּד שְׂאִינוּ מְאִבֵּד טֶפֶה.
רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן חֲנַנְיָה, אֲשֶׁרֵי יוֹלְדָתוֹ. רַבִּי יוֹסֵי הַכֹּהֵן, חֲסִיד. רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן נִתְנָאֵל,
יְרָא חֲטָא. וְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲרָף, מַעֲיֵן הַמִּתְגַּבֵּר.



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 Diber, "Do not be a false witness," serve as a core value in your life?

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every day:

- Look back at your text conversations. 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?



additional information:

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



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supplemental materials:

- An Experiment in Words
- **And From These Words, Torah Increases: Conversations With People You Disagree With** Billy Planer, the founder of Etgar 36 – a Jewish youth program that personally introduces teens to the different sides of the issues of our day, wants to push all of us to use the Talmud as a model for how we can have conversations with people who disagree with us. He proposes a counter-cultural but very Jewish idea: it is possible no matter what side of the fence you sit on to 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.
- **A discussion of the concept of Lashon Tov** based on the Parshiot Tazria-Metzora.

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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 (1104 - 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 Tanach.

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. Born in Pruzhany, Belarus in 1903, 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 which was printed in 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.

9: POWER OF SPEECH

notes

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.

