

“If a tzaraas affliction will be in a person.” (13:9)

The laws of *tzaraas*, a spiritual malady which manifests itself in a physical illness which mimics leprosy, is the result of “speech problems.” People who do not use their God-given tongues appropriately, such that they disparage and slander, are visited with *tzaraas*. Volumes have been written addressing the sin of *lashon hara*, evil speech. What about *lashon tov*, good speech, positive speech, words that heal and soothe? The power of speech is a special gift that we must learn to appreciate. A good word can lift a spirit and save a life. How often do we regret not saying the right thing? A kind word at the right moment can make a world of difference in someone’s life. A secular author once wrote, “The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone.” What a powerful statement! How often do we regret not saying something nice – to our mate, our child, our friend, our student, our parent? While it is necessary to focus on the effects and consequences of *lashon hara*, it is equally important not to ignore the positive effects of *lashon tov*.

In this country, referring to an individual by his first name is commonplace. The prefix “Mr.” and “Reb” have long disappeared from a society where respect, etiquette and refinement are considered archaic. We do not realize that by referring to someone with the prefix “Reb,” we are adding a sense of respect and dignity to his name – and, for some people, this is very important.

Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, z.l., the Kamenitzer *Mashgiach* of *Eretz Yisrael*, left a legacy of respect for every human being. The paragon of humility, he made every person feel that he was great. I write this as a personal testimony to the few times that he came to my home. He did not enter as an esteemed *Rosh Yeshiva*, which he certainly was. He spoke meekly, with refinement and modesty, inquiring about my work. He always made it a point to speak to my wife. He was an individual who embodied everything *Chazal* teach us about the qualities and attributes of a Torah leader.

During the *shivah*, seven-day mourning period, after his sudden passing, the common man, the “regular Jew,” came forth to articulate his praise. One such individual who came emphasized *Rav Stern*’s ability to use the right word at the right time. He said, “You think that he was only your father. Well, he was also my father. The only one in my entire life who called me “Reb” Yaakov was your father. No one ever addressed me with the respectable title of “Reb” except him. He would listen to my *chiddushim*, novellae, and then tell me, *Ihr zogt gut*, “You are saying a good thought.” Indeed, one *Shabbos* someone came over to me and said, “*Rav Moshe Aharon* told me a *chiddush* in your name.”

This is the definition of real humility: accepting all people, listening to all people and speaking respectfully to all people. The one simple title of “Reb,” added to this person’s name, changed his life! It gave him stature, knowing that a *gadol*, Torah giant, appreciated him. It is incredible how easy it is to help another person and equally shocking how few of us act upon it. In the *Talmud Bava Basra* 9:2, *Chazal* teach us that one who gives a *pruta*, penny, to a poor man receives six

blessings, while one who cheers him up receives eleven blessings. *Rav Moshe Aharon* derived from here that encouraging another person is greater than giving him money. A beggar will regrettably not become wealthy from the few pennies he receives, but a few well-chosen words of encouragement have the power to elevate him from a life of poverty and dejection.

Very often I hear the excuse, “But I do not know what to say.” Knowing the right words to say to the sick, bereaved, the downtrodden, is difficult. Even seasoned professionals, at times, are at a loss for the right words. In truth, I think it is just being there, a smile, a reassurance, an offer of assistance is all that is needed. People who are ill want to know that they are not alone. People who are bereaved need reassurance. People that are broken need to be encouraged. Long visits do more for the visitor than the visited. It is just being there that counts.

I recently read about *Horav Yitzchak Yeruchem Diskin, z.l.*, the *avi yesomim*, father of orphans, who founded the famous Diskin Orphanage in Yerushalayim. He had a special way of dealing with his unfortunate charges. It is related that just before he moved into the orphanage’s new building, he began to weep uncontrollably. He explained, “A shoemaker tends to be careless with shoes, and a book-binder frequently is careless with holy books. Who knows if I, too, will treat orphans with less feeling if I have to deal with them all day long?”

Once, a couple of young orphan girls were staying with him, since the orphanage was filled to capacity. His wife personally cared for the young girls. One time, *Rav Yitzchak Yeruchem* noticed that one of the girls began to sob after his wife bathed her. Concerned, he asked his wife, “Perhaps you were careless and allowed some soap to get into her eyes?” His wife looked at him with shock, “I am so careful to make sure this would never happen.” Finally, he went over to the little girl and asked, “Why do you cry after your bath? Is my wife not taking proper care of you?”

“No, no *Rebbe!*” the child cried. “The *Rebbetzin* is so kind and gentle. My mother, *alehah ha’shalom*, may she rest in peace, did not watch over me with such care as the *Rebbetzin*. It is just that my mother used to kiss my head after my bath, and each time I remember this, I begin to cry.” All the child needed was a kiss – not a speech, a pat on the shoulder – not a lecture, a smile – not a harangue.

Lashon hara can destroy a life. Yet, words, if used correctly, can also create happiness and sustain life. We have only to look around, extend ourselves to those around us, and we will see the difference a good word can make.