

These are the words that Moshe spoke. (1:1)

There is a telling (*Midrash Rabbah* 1:1) commentary at the beginning of this *parsha*. “Before Moshe received the Torah he said, *Lo ish devarim anochi*, ‘I am not a man of words’ (*Shemos* 4:10). Once he had received the Torah, however, his tongue was healed, and he started to speak: ‘These are the words that Moshe spoke.’” Torah heals; words of Torah transform the speaker. The power of speech distinguishes man from his animal counterpart. Hashem gave man life by blowing into him *nefesh chayah*, a living soul, which *Targum Onkelos* translates as *ruach mimalelah*, a speaking spirit. When a Jew speaks *divrei Torah*, words of Torah, he gives spiritual expression to an otherwise mundane act of communication. The *Sefas Emes* explains that *dibur*, speech, describes speech directed toward a listener, as opposed to *amirah*, saying, which means merely saying words. Moshe *Rabbeinu* did not lack vocal capacity. He spoke to Hashem. Until he received the Torah, however, he lacked the ability to put Hashem’s words into a language that a human audience could appreciate. Torah is the life force that heals. Thus, Moshe was able to convey Hashem’s Torah to an audience who would now appreciate it.

Perhaps we may supplement this. The Torah teaches us that there is a way to speak, and a way not to speak. The words that emerge from our mouths are an expression of the living spirit, essentially a *davar she’b’kedushah*, sacred expression. Once the Torah was given to us, our manner of verbal communication was altered, from the mundane to the sacred. Every word that we utter has unique, esoteric value. Speech is a defining human quality, a manifestation of the Divine breath of life which resonates within man, granting him living status. Torah is the engine that drives the sacredness of his words. Thus, we have multiple laws which address our speech, how we speak and what we say. The following story underscores the long-term negative ramifications which a few misplaced, senseless words can have.

An *avreich*, young *kollel* fellow, whom we will call *Reb Menachem*, came to *Horav Gamliel Rabinowitz, Shlita*, with a long list of troubles that were consuming his life. His wife and a few of his children were unwell. As a result, his house was not functioning. This put a strain on whatever income he had. He asked the *Rav* if perhaps his wife’s name (she was named for an aunt whose life was filled with misery) might be the reason for their inordinate troubles. Should he change his wife’s name? *Rav Gamliel* instructed him to go to *Horav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer, zl, Raavad* of *Yerushalayim*, to seek his sage advice.

They went to *Rav Fischer* who, after listening to the man’s tale of woe, replied, “Your problems stem from the fact that you once hurt someone’s feelings. This must be corrected before you may expect a resolution to your troubles.” *Reb Menachem* was floored. He could not remember ever hurting someone’s feelings. He just was not that type of person. He was sensitive to the needs and emotions of others. If the *Raavad* claimed that he was once deficient in this area, however, he would correct it. He began calling all his friends and acquaintances from *yeshiva gedolah*. He received negative responses. He had never hurt the feelings of any of them. He went back in time to his *mesivta* days. Tracking down members of his class was no easy feat. He had left *mesivta*

almost twelve years ago. Nonetheless, he needed to do this, so that he could get his life back. After exhausting every avenue, every name, he reminded himself that he had forgotten one boy in his class: *Reb* Baruch. He obtained his number and reached out to him, "Is it possible that, years ago, when we were in school I offended you?" "Actually, yes," replied *Reb* Baruch. "I am the one for whom you have been searching. You said something nasty to me, for which you never asked *mechilah*, forgiveness, and it would not make a difference, because I refuse to forgive you."

Hearing this, *Reb* Menachem began to beg, "What did I do? I will make amends. My life is sheer misery. Please, give me a chance to correct my misdeed." *Reb* Baruch finally shared with *Reb* Menachem the source of his pain, "Do you remember the joke about the forty-two stops?" When he heard this, *Reb* Menachem's mind began to work and slowly an image of what had occurred twelve years ago began to materialize in his mind. Baruch had an obesity problem – he was 150 pounds overweight. On *Shabbos*, *Parashas Masei*, which begins with a list of the forty-two encampments in which *Klal Yisrael* participated during their forty-year trek through the wilderness, Baruch was called to the Torah for an *aliyah*. His slow ascent to the *bimah* was very noticeable, and Menachem quipped, "Our ancestors took less time to go through all forty-two stops than it is taking you to walk up the *bimah*."

"Do you know what your little joke did to me?" Baruch asked. "It destroyed me! I knew that I had a weight problem, but no one had ever made fun of it – until you came along. It has been twelve years, and not a day passes that I do not feel the pain. I will never forgive you!"

Understandably, *Reb* Menachem begged and pleaded – to no avail. *Reb* Baruch's pain was palpable and, right or wrong, he refused to reconsider. Finally, he said, "I may say the words, 'I forgive you,' but it will mean nothing, because my heart is not in it." *Reb* Menachem returned to *Rav* Gamliel and related his quest for closure and the brick wall that he was presently up against. The *Rav* instructed him to offer the injured party a large sum of money to make amends and somehow assuage his hurt feelings. *Reb* Menachem did not have such a sum of money, but he went out and borrowed it from his friends. He brought the money to *Reb* Baruch who now said that he forgave him with his whole heart. Shortly thereafter, the troubles that had been a daily occurrence in *Reb* Menachem's home began to dissipate, until life returned to normalcy.

Since words are an expression of the Divine spirit within us, the pain that can emerge from their misuse is very real. How careful we must be with our *dibur*.