



Use Your Words
Torah Reflections on Parashat Mattot
Numbers 30:2 – 36:13

July 19, 2014 21 Tammuz, 5774

Jewish tradition has a rich perspective on the power of speech. Words convey our thoughts and feelings and devotional intentions; words can be the vehicle for blessing and bestowing honor upon one another; words can be the instruments of great hurt and destruction. Contracts can be sealed or broken; relationships reinforced or betrayed; armies goaded or calmed based on the choice and tone of our utterances. In the Creation narrative of Genesis, the world comes into being through the agency of divine speech. The writings of the Chofetz Chayim (the late 19th – early 20th century scholar Israel Meyer Kagan) illustrate how so much of a person's experience and reputation in the world can be damaged or destroyed through hurtful, deceitful, or slanderous speech. Talking, and refraining from talking, are among the most profound human actions.

This week's Torah reading begins with the *mitzvah* of keeping a vow. We are instructed to "do according to all that proceeds out of [our] mouth" (Numbers 30:3) when we have sworn an oath. The act of giving our word, or invoking the name of the Divine, is meant to "bind one's soul with a bond." Making a promise to another person, to ourselves, or to God can be a way of giving ourselves the additional strength and motivation to "keep our word" and follow through, for good. The specter of breaking such a vow—knowing the personal and moral consequences—may help keep us from straying in the face of temptation or distraction. The awareness of those consequences can also keep us from making vows and promises lightly, and from setting up expectations of ourselves or others that may not be met.

Most of us can easily remember a time when we felt disappointed, even emotionally crushed, when someone else failed to keep a vow, broke a promise, shattered our expectations, or simply forgot to meet us at an appointed time. These are sobering reminders of how we need to be careful about what comes out of our mouths.

Rebbe Nahman of Bratzlav once said, "If you have the power to destroy, you also have the power to repair." Likewise we recognize that our speech can be used both to curse and to bless, to hurt and to forgive. We are instructed to choose life and blessing, in order that our lives and those around us may be filled with blessing.

In times of illness, loss, or transition, we may be especially vulnerable to the words and tone of speech of people around us, including family, friends, familiar caregivers and total strangers. We may also have less energy to articulate our own needs and desires, to give voice to our gratitude and praise, to encourage, or to channel or vent our anger in healthy and constructive ways.

If you know someone who is in a vulnerable place right now, think about how your words might touch them. What is the impact of your physical proximity, of your eye contact or your “focus” on the phone or your written words? How do you convey your empathy, your love and support, your earnest concern, or your willingness to listen and learn? How are your words and your intentions received? What do you most want to express?

If you are in a vulnerable place, you can take note of how the content and manner of your conversations affect you. You might think about what you appreciate—from the good wishes to the information-sharing to the social conversation—or what you would like to change for the better (if you have some “say” in the matter). What do you most want to hear, or say?

All of us can reflect—perhaps even aloud—on how we can use our many daily conversations as opportunities to bring more blessing and healing to one another.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to the divine within each of us, supporting life and holiness, and bringing greater and greater peace.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Natan Fenner, BCC of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties). More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.

