



From Elevator Pitch to Elevated Speech

Dear Parents,

Erev Shabbos Parashas Bereishis 5780

Remember the old adage “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me?” It’s been a long time since that has been discredited, but the centrality of words and speech in our lives is still greatly underestimated. We live in a world of action, and don’t give proper respect to the power of speech.

At the very creation of man, as seen in this week’s *Parasha*, the distinguishing characteristic between mankind and the rest of the animal world was the *Nishmas Chayim* that *Hashem* implanted in man. The *Pasuk (Bereishis 2:7)* concludes that man became a “*Nefesh Chaya*”, which *Targum Onkelos* famously explains as a “*Ruach Memalela*” “*a speaking spirit.*” The feature that most strikingly demarcates man from animal is man’s power of speech.

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander zt’l, in *Sefer Mesillas Chaim B’Chinuch (p. 62)* points out that based upon *Onkelos’* explanation, speech is the essential component of man’s *Nefesh*, of his spirit. It then follows that improper speech is a reflection of an imperfection in a person’s spiritual essence. In fact, *Rav Friedlander* references a *Gemara* in the beginning of *Maseches Pesachim* that speaks of man’s obligation to speak in “*Loshon Nekiah*” – language that is clean and pure, and refined.

Rav Friedlander then declares how important it is to insist upon proper speech from children. Even if their speech does not include “dirty words,” it is important that their words reflect the *Torah* and *Tefilla* that they speak regularly and not be tainted by “street words,” even if they are not technically “foul language”. Our children must be held to a higher standard, because the words they use will help shape the people they become.

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The story is told of *Rav Shmuel Salant zt’l* who heard the shrill voice of his young daughter yelling nasty words inside their house. When he confronted her she related that a cat had entered their living room and she was trying to get him out, concluding, “it was only a cat.” Her father acknowledged that the object of her tirade might have been a cat, “but it was your mouth...”

Children have a tendency, *Rav Friedlander* explains, to experiment with words they suspect are improper because it creates a self-image of a “tough guy”, saying words that their peers are not ‘brave’ enough to utter. It may, to some extent in the child’s mind, define who he is. This is why it is so important to decisively stop our children from speaking in such a manner.

Refined, elevated speech is not confined to children. As in all circumstances where children are exploring the world around them to figure out their own path, the words they hear from adults, and most importantly their parents, are paramount. *Rav Friedlander* says “it goes without saying that we adults have to exercise great control over our words, as children absorb the words heard in their home, and internalize them to their own speech.”

In school, we have strict rules about the use of foul language, treating it in a manner similar to acting physically aggressive towards others. We let the children know that their mouth, lips and tongue are the tools they use to speak with *Hashem*, learn *Torah* and do *Mitzvos*. Just as a craftsman would not dull a delicate instrument by using it to dig a hole in the ground, so too must the children’s mouths remain sharp and powerful to fulfill their roles as *Bnei* and *Bnos Torah*. When speaking harshly and inappropriately and especially indecently, they are ruining their tools and dulling their power

Our children can grasp this idea! And yes, they do look to the adults to see if we are serious about the power of speech. Let us all redouble our resolve to use this precious gift that sets us apart from the animal kingdom to elevate ourselves and everyone around us, especially our precious children.

Best wishes for a wonderful *Shabbos*,

Rabbi Chaim Baumann

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