



A lesson from
Aleph Learning Institute

The Impact of Words!

Lesson 4//Series 4

A word is not merely a word

During the 49 days of the Sefirah count between Passover and the Holiday of Shavuot, it is traditional to read Pirkei Avot , “Ethics of Our Fathers, “ each Shabbat.

Pirkei Avot 2:4: **“Judge not your fellow man until you have stood in his place.”** In the book of Tanya ch.30, Rabbi Shnuer Zalman of Liadi, expounds upon this and explains that a person’s behavior must be viewed in the context of his character, life experiences, and opportunities. When one sees the bigger picture, it becomes easier to judge others in a favorable light. However, is it so bad to call a spade a spade? Are we meant to always turn a blind eye to the shortcomings of others? Pirkei Avot 1:6: **“Judge every man to the side of merit.”**

According to the 11th century Spanish Talmudist, Rabbi Yonah of Gerona (cousin of Nachmanidies) the two aforementioned Mishnayot are discussing two different scenarios:

1. Judging without all the facts: An action might be viewed as being offensive, but it is just as likely that the person meant well, or that we misunderstood precisely what took place. In this instance, we are advised to judge favorably and realize that there may be a perfectly reasonable explanation for the baffling behavior of another.
2. Judging with the proper facts: When there is no way to deny or deflect the truth, withdraw from passing judgment. A person is not meant to deny the truth or the facts and when we sadly witness negative behavior, we must admit what has occurred, yet refrain from passing judgment.

When one is viewed in a certain light by others, that individual begins to view themselves in that way as well. For example, teachers who “label” children can negatively effect students, and as a result, incremental harm is being inflicted subtly. Moreover, words that are spoken serve to reveal hidden traits that exist in the potential within a person. Words draw the character trait out into the world. Now if this is true when it comes to negative talk, the same process is set in motion when we speak positively of others. Highlighting one’s qualities, singing one’s praises, and complimenting good traits, serve to empower and magnify those good traits. And just as there is a negative commandment to abstain from negative talk, there is a commandment to engage in positive talk. It is included in the mitzvah to love your fellow as yourself. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah 6:3: Every person is commanded to love another Jew as himself, as the verse states, “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Therefore, one should speak his/her praise.

Verbally promoting positive traits assists the person to actually become better, since our words, infused with spiritual power, can raise someone to be a better person. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Likutei Sichot vol 27 comment: “ He speaks praise of his friend and does not speak disparagingly at all; the actual speech that praises, serves to reveal his praiseworthy qualities, which causes that the unsavory aspects of his character are weakened until they have totally disappeared.”

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Thank you!

Now we can understand the difference between “don’t judge” and “judge favorably.” “Don’t judge is an empathic position to withdraw from expressing a view. It is a passive response, i.e. “no comment”. “Judging favorably” is going ahead and making a positive difference, an active response to the situation. You are choosing to make a difference to seize upon some positive aspect that can be revealed. As a parent, let your children know that you love them, and as a spouse let your better half know that you love them.

The Rebbe, Rabbi M.M. Schneerson Likutei Sichot ibid: “Finding a positive spin is more than not placing blame. It actually reveals the merit of the individual, that he possesses lofty potential, which is necessary to overcome his difficult challenges. This is the inner meaning of judging others in a favorable light. The act of judging favorably serves to reveal his hidden, inner potential so that he can actually withstand the challenges and rid himself of his shortcomings.

Our sages tell us in Pirkei Avot, “With 10 utterances G-d created the world.” This is based upon the biblical account of creation, where G-d created the world by speech, “Let there be light.”

Due to his/her intrinsic connection with G-d, a Jew is empowered with this ability. We are not able to create worlds using the power of speech, but our speech is unique in that it can have lasting impact and can make a world of difference. With human beings, so long as a thought remains a thought, it has no impact on this world. Only once it is conveyed verbally does it enter the domain of this world and become accessible to others. A story is told about Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of The Code of Jewish law, who delved deeply into a subject for a prolonged period of time until he reached a proper understanding of the matter. Later, he overheard another scholar explaining the matter just as he understood it. He was “upset” until it was revealed to him by heaven that he had transmitted the teaching into the world, where it was now accessible to others.

Throughout Jewish literature, there are many laws that govern our speech, cautioning us against speaking idle chatter or evil slander. In the portion of Emor (do speak) in the Book of Leviticus, we are told to use proactive words to purify and positively effect our environment. One need not be timid to speak. On the contrary, use speech for good. Words that we utter are felt immediately. Speaking well of others has tangible impact, much more than we can imagine. Our words are infused with spiritual power that have the ability to augment the traits being discussed. This is how Lashon Hara (evil talk) harms the subject who is being talked about.

The power of our speech to effect real change is how we emulate G-d whose speech is creative action.

Dear Friend:

The warm days of summer are fast approaching. Pirkei Avot is also read by many throughout the summer on the long days of Shabbat. Since summer is a time when people let down their guard and let go on my many levels, the teachings of ETHICS are most apropos and necessary.

I hope this Lesson out of the Box will serve you well in the coming months and throughout the year.

Have an enjoyable and safe summer!

Sincerely,

Rochel Kaplan

Founder and Director, Aleph Learning Institute