

Mordechai Malka

Rav and Av Beit Din of Elad

Chairman of the Worldwide Committee of
STa”M (Sifrei Torah, Tefillin, and Mezuzot)
Members of Chief Rabbinate of Israel



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Parashat Lech Lecha

The Skill of Speech

The *parasha* states (12:1), “And Hashem said to Avram, ‘Go from your land, from your birth place, and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’”

Question:

We must think about the wording of the *pasuk*. Why does Hashem need to speak at length and say, “your land,” “your birth place,” and “your father’s house?” Why did He not simply say, “Go to *Eretz Yisrael*,” and this would imply all of the above?

Way of the World

The way of the world is not to give enough importance to their words. They think that since it is ultimately only speech and not an actual action, they can therefore speak sharp words without giving thought to the feelings of their fellow. The same thing applies to words directed Heavenward. People think that they have no effect and are meaningless. However David HaMelech warns about stumbling with one’s tongue and speaking words that cause pain to another. Instead one should speak words of Torah, which are pure and refined. This is as he states in *Tehillim* (12:3-7), “Man speaks falsehoods to his fellow; they speak with a lip of smooth talk and an insincere heart; May Hashem severe all lips of smooth talk, a tongue which speaks haughtily; Those who have said, ‘Because of our tongues we will dominate; our lips are with us, who is a master over us? Because of stealing from the poor, because of the cry of the misfortunate. ‘Now I will rise,’ Hashem will say. ‘I will grant safety,’ he will say about him; The words of Hashem are pure words; like refined silver, clear to the word, refined seven fold.” Therefore the Torah teaches us *derech erez*, and just how important it is to pay attention to each and every word that leaves one’s mouth, whether for good or bad. Because man will be held accountable for each word that he says, and he can merit infinite reward for good words and the opposite if the words are negative ones.

Reward For Each Word

We will quote Rashi’s second explanation for the words, “That I will show you.” Rashi writes that Hashem did not immediately reveal to Avraham to which land he was sending him. This was in order to make the land beloved in Avraham’s eyes and to give him reward for each and every word. Similarly we find by the *Akeidat Yitzchak* that Hashem said to Avraham (*Bereishit* 22), “Your son, your only one, whom you love – Yitzchak.” Similarly, Hashem said (*Ibid.*), “On one of the mountains that I say to you.” Also to Yonah, Hashem said (*Yonah* 3), “Call out to her [- to Nineveh] the announcement that I will speak to you.” Rashi, commenting on the aforementioned *pasuk* from the *Akeidat Yitzchak*, writes that after Hashem told Avraham to offer up “your son,” Avraham said that he had two sons. When Hashem told him “your only one,” Avraham remarked that each was his mother’s only son. When Hashem said “whom you love,” Avraham said that he loved both his sons. That is when Hashem told him that he meant Yitzchak. Rashi explains that Hashem did not reveal this to Avraham earlier because he wished to give him reward for each word that He said to him. The explanation for this is as follows: Hashem wished to test Avraham Avinu, and he therefore spoke to him in an unclear manner. Hashem added one detail after another in order to answer Avraham’s questions. Why was this necessary? It is known that there is not a letter in the Torah which is superfluous, and every single crown on each letter is expounded upon. Therefore, the Midrash answers that Hashem wished to increase Avraham’s reward for each and every word. Hashem put Avraham in a situation where he would have to ask another question each moment. By doing so, he would receive reward for each word that he spoke in order to fulfill the mitzvah that Hashem commanded of him.

Reward For a Good Word – Even With Evil Intentions

Our *parashah* furthermore states (14:13), “And the fugitive came and told to Avram the *Ivri*.” Rashi cites a Midrash Rabbah which states that the fugitive refers to Og, who escaped the Generation of the Flood. He intended that Avraham be killed in battle and that he would take Sarah. However, Avraham did not die; on the contrary, he had additional success, and gained more renown.

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The Gemara in *Masechet Niddah* (61a) quotes the *pasuk* in *Bamidbar* (21:34), “And Hashem said to Moshe, ‘Do not fear.’” It is stated explicitly that Moshe feared Og. The Gemara asks that Sichon and Og were brothers, and both were mighty giants. Why was Moshe afraid of Og but not of Sichon? R’ Shimon bar Yochai answers that he was afraid that the merit of Avraham Avinu would come to his aid, for he had informed Avraham that Lot was captured as the *pasuk* states, “And the fugitive came and told to Avram the *Ivri*.” We see that Moshe did not fear Og because he was tall and mighty, as we know from the fact that Og was saved from the flood because he hung on to the ark. The Gemara also states that he lifted an entire mountain to throw it onto the entire Jewish Nation at one time. Moshe Rabbeinu was not afraid of any of this. Proof to this is from the Gemara’s statement that Og had a brother who was comparable to him in both height and strength whose name was Sichon, yet Moshe did not fear him. Rather, all of the fear was due to the fact that he had the merit of telling Avraham that Lot was captured. Let us think about the words of R’ Shimon bar Yochai for a moment: We are talking about saving the Jewish Nation from the threat of Og, and yet Moshe was afraid that Og’s one merit may come to his aid nevertheless. Yet when we look at Og’s one merit, we see from the Midrash that his entire intention in performing it was evil, and only so that he could take Sarah. But since Avraham was ultimately successful in his mission, Og gets credit for it. This is amazing – for such a merit, Og posed a risk of decimating the entire Jewish Nation? From this one can take *mussar* that for even one sentence that a person says, for even a number of words that leave his mouth – even if the intention is a wicked one – since it ultimately proved to be beneficial, he receives an endless amount of reward [see *Maayana Shel Torah* and *Lekach Tov, Parashat Lech Lecha*].

Punishment for Causing One to Stumble With His Words

However, on the hand, this also works to man’s detriment. The *parasha* relates that Avraham journeyed to *Eretz Yisrael*, yet when he arrived, he was met by famine, and he was forced to travel to Egypt. On the way, he told Sarah to tell the Egyptians that she was his sister, because he feared that they would kill him if they discovered that she was his wife. The Ramban writes that by doing so, Avraham committed a great sin by not placing his trust in Hashem, and out of fear of death, he caused his wife to stumble. On account of this, 400 years of exile in Egypt were decreed on the Jewish Nation. From the words of the Ramban we learn that because Avraham made his wife stumble and caused Pharaoh to be stricken, the Jewish Nation were forced to be exiled and suffer by the hands of the Egyptians, to atone for Avraham’s deed. You see from here just how much one can suffer on account of one sentence.

Avraham’s Punishment on Account of Four Words

It is furthermore stated in *Masechet Nedarim* (32a), “Said Rabbi Avahu in the name of Rabbi Eliezer: Why was Avraham punished by his children being enslaved in Egypt for 210 years?” The Gemara goes on to list several reasons. The final reason is on account of Avraham’s response when Hashem told him that his offspring would inherit the Land of Israel. Avraham asked (*Bereishit* 15), “How will I know that I am to inherit it?” Avraham’s asking for an assurance was considered incorrect by Hashem and for the words that he said, his offspring were punished with 400 years of slavery in Egypt [see Targum Yonatan ben Uziel].

Yosef was Punished with Two More Years in Prison Because of Two Words

Similarly it is stated in *Bereishit Rabbah* (*Miketz* 89:3) on the *pasuk* (*Tehillim* 40), “Praiseworthy is the man who places his trust in Hashem.” The Midrash states that this refers to Yosef. Due to his lofty level of faith in Hashem, since he asked the *sar hamashkim* to remember him and mention him to Pharaoh [זכרתני והזכרתני], he was punished with an additional two years in prison.

Story About the Rambam

Once, when the Rambam was in Morocco for Succot, he went out into the city square with his *daled minim*. At that same time, the king was walking in the city square, and he met the Rambam. When he saw the Rambam holding what appeared to be a bundle of vegetation, he asked him why he would do something so foolish as to walk in the square with a bundle of leaves. The Rambam answered that this is one of the Torah’s mitzvot that we have received in tradition from our forefathers, and it is a holy custom. However, the custom of throwing stones is a custom of fools. The king accepted the Rambam’s answer and was silent, continuing on his way. However, the

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king's advisors said, "Our master the king. The intention of the Rambam's words was to denigrate our custom of throwing stones in Mecca. This is what he said is a custom of fools." The king was immediately infuriated and ordered that the Rambam be brought to trial in order to punish him for disgracing the custom of the Islamic religion. When the Rambam heard this, he fled the land and was saved. You see from here to what extent a few words can decide man's fate. If this applies to a mortal kingdom, how much more so to the Heavenly Kingdom.

Story About R' Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev

To illustrate just how much one must be careful with his words and not cause pain to his fellow, we will relate a story about R' Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev. He considered all of the people in the town like his children, and he concerned himself with all of their needs. One time, one of the townspeople contracted his final illness, and his situation was dire. R' Levi Yitzchak went to visit him and found him crying and sighing. The Rav asked him why he was crying. He answered because he felt that these were his final hours, and even though he kept the mitzvot, but he did not learn Torah. He also did not have many outstanding deeds, and he feared what his lot would be in the World to Come. As was his way, R' Levi Yitzchak answered him, "Please relax, and put your mind at ease. I am now giving you my entire portion in the World to Come. The main thing is that you should be calm and not distressed." This truly calmed the man, and a few hours later he passed away. R' Levi Yitzchak's followers asked him how he could have given him his portion in the World to Come to calm him for the few remaining hours of his life? Could he not have calmed him another way? He replied that it was worthwhile to give up all of his share in the World to Come in order to save a Jew from a few moments of pain. All the more so, one must take care not to cause anguish to one's fellow by not being careful with his tongue.

Words of Mussar

We have learned from all that was stated above just how much an individual must be careful to guard his tongue so that he does not insult or offend another. All the more so, should he be careful not to say things that could be deemed in Heaven as sacrilegious, Heaven forbid. Because he will be punished for every word that he says. On the other hand, this is multiplied many times for a good word that man says. When man utilizes his words to bring gratification and comfort to his fellow and family and to uplift them, he receives tremendous reward for each word. This applies all the more so to his wife, because this increases love and unity between them. He should not mince words, because by doing so he is only hurting himself. Rather, each individual who knows that his words bring satisfaction to his friend – and all the more so to Hashem – he should speak excessively, and his reward will be increased very much. He should accustom himself to speaking words of Torah and to act wisely in refining his skill of speech.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rav Mordechai Malka