

“מוצא שפתיך תשמור”--Guard what comes out of your lips (Deut. 23:24), says the Torah in this week’s *parashah*. In the middle of the month of Elul, as we look toward self-improvement, the ways in which we use speech offer many of us fertile ground for growth. This instruction is couched within a verse about being careful when taking vows, but the Sfat Emet broadens the message, saying that the mouth needs special guarding, because what we say reveals our deepest selves. The very root of our lives is our inner breath, and we share it every time we speak (Sfat Emet 5:101). In fact, when our ancient ancestors read the the Bible, they translated the phrase “a living soul” as “a speaking spirit” (Onkelos, Gen. 2:7). The authentic voice brings truth and purpose into the world, and the reverse is also true: what we say and what we do reveal our inner truths and intentions.

The ability to reflect on our thinking and express it in abstract terms separates human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom. Our words have the potential to manifest holiness in a uniquely human way. And yet, so often we use words in ways that obscure our truest and best selves and shift our attention away from what is most important. Indeed, sometimes it is better to say nothing. The sages teach, “סייג לחכמה - שתיקה,” “Silence is a fence around wisdom” (*Avot* 3:17). We need quiet in order to hear the words that long to be spoken, the words that arise from deep within ourselves and others. In our hyperlinked world of constant communication, it takes dedicated effort to be still enough, to listen deeply enough, and to create space for important, life-giving words to emerge.

And so our *parashah* warns us to avoid speaking out of turn, referencing the scaly affliction Miriam incurs after she speaks about Moses’s wife. The Sfat Emet sees the difference between slavery and freedom in Miriam’s uncontrolled speech and her punishment of *tzara’at*. He says that we enslave ourselves by getting overly attached to the trappings of things, rather than paying attention to their essential purpose (5:98). In Miriam’s case, her loose tongue over Moshe’s marital relationship ensnares her. It curtails her relationship with her brother and impinges on her role as a community leader. Her entrapment takes physical form when she must remove herself from the community and join the camp of those who are afflicted like herself. We talk ourselves into tight places when we speak without thinking. Malicious speech enslaves our very souls, as it separates us from human relationships. By contrast, we experience freedom when we remove the clutter of idle and malicious speech and allow the pure voices of our souls to be heard.



In his book *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, Parker Palmer writes that “despite its toughness, the soul is shy” (p. 58). He describes what often happens in communal discourse as “a group of people who go crashing through the woods together, scaring the soul away. In spaces ranging from congregations to classrooms, we preach and teach, assert and argue, claim and proclaim, admonish and advise, and generally behave in ways that drive everything original and wild into hiding. Under these conditions,” he writes, “the intellect, emotions, will, and ego may emerge, but not the soul: we scare off all the soulful things, like respectful relationships, goodwill, and hope” (p. 59). We could do with so much more quiet than we allow ourselves.

There are large sections of *Mishna* and *Gemara* based on today’s *parashah*, including a tractate dealing with the laws of commerce and the many ways in which we must avoid wronging one another in our business dealings. After listing and unpacking those laws for their many contingencies, the Mishnah takes a fascinating turn and states, “Just as there is wronging in buying and selling, there also is wronging with words.” The *Mishna* is telling us that our speech can be criminal. The Mishnah then provides three examples of criminal speech: asking someone who repented from sin to tell you about their former misdeeds, asking the price of something you do not intend to purchase, and asking the child of converts about the deeds of their ancestors. And what makes those questions so terrible? The Mishnah says, “*ki gerim heyitem b’eretz mitzrayim*,” because you were strangers in the Land of Egypt. When we get to the core of our oppression in Egypt, we find that that the injustice was not the hard work imposed upon us, but the denial of our human dignity, and our take-away is to enjoin upon ourselves not to take advantage of the emotions of other people, as one of many ways that we make sure not to do to them what was done to us. It is so easy to take advantage of others’ emotions without even meaning to do so. Our interactions can become complicated very quickly when we fail to pause and consider our intentions.

The *Gemara* then adds another type of verbal wronging, and that is willful silence when it would be better to use words. Stay tuned for more about that during the High Holy Days--but for today, suffice it to say that the ethics of speaking and withholding speech are tricky, and it is easy to find ourselves in muddy waters through a careless utterance or a call unmade. I think that we all know this from the cluttered verbal interactions and uncomfortable silences we have experienced, yet it’s good to pause at this time of year and think about how that clutter complicates our lives.

A cure for the clutter, a gentle lure for the soul exists. It is found in the quiet space we create for one another, and for ourselves, too, when we take the time to listen, with



respect and with compassion, to the “speaking spirit” waiting to be heard. We need to give ourselves permission to pause during our interactions, because it is so easy to make the wrong decision about when to speak and when to say nothing. More broadly, at this point in Ellul, we need to make time to do the work of deep listening that the month of Ellul invites us to do.

Here are questions we might consider this week as we move closer to Rosh HaShanah:

- What would need to happen in order for me to say what I really feel?
- How can we help one another talk about what matters most to us?
- When do I let words cover up a silence that would be more beneficial?
- How can I cultivate relationships that allow for stretches of silence?
- How can I use silence to create space for deep listening--to myself and to others?

I pray that we can all take time in the coming weeks to listen closely to what we say and what we do not say, as a means of gaining insight into our deepest yearnings, and I pray, too, that we will make the time we need to heed that still, small voice which we can hear only when we listen gently, quietly, and lovingly.















