Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Yisro |

Your Words Matter

Sensitivity in Speech

When Yisro heard of the miracles Hakadosh Baruch Hu performed on behalf of klal Yisrael, his response was "vayichad." Rashi notes that this reaction can be interpreted to mean that Yisro was happy. The next explanation, which seems completely contrary to the first one, is that Yisro got the goosebumps. He was gripped by fear, absorbing the frightening events that plagued the Egyptians. To this, our Sages add that for ten generations after an individual converted to Judaism, one must not speak negatively about the nations in their presence. How the Torah cautions us about the importance of sensitivity in speech! Even if the Jews' salvation was a source of joy for Yisro, because there was also an element of fear the Torah demands of us not to share such information.

Sensitivity in speech is a virtue. It's one of those beautiful endeavors that rarely get noticed or acknowledged. When we speak with sensitivity to those around us we don't often get to realize its importance, just as as we don't realize the importance of fastening a seatbelt if we do so every time we're in transit, until we hear of the repercussions of someone who didn't, G-d forbid. Only once the damage of an insensitive comment is done do we get to see how critical sensitive speech is.

When we say something mean or hurtful, the most probable reason is not to hurt, only to gain leverage. We may be tempted to bring up something from the past, reminding another individual of their mistakes, in order to get our way. By harping on our victimhood, the other party ends up acquiescing to our demand or request. But just because we didn't mean to hurt does not detract from the wrong. See how far our Sages have instructed us to take every word we utter into account, to examine in carefully to ensure that it doesn't cause anyone even an iota of pain, our intention notwithstanding. Especially because the tactic of hurtful speech works to manipulate another individual into submission, we deduce how destructive it is. It means that it hurts the other party enough for them to give up.

I Didn't Mean You— But You Did

Being vigilant about sensitive speech is not only imperative when the speech is directed toward the other person. For example, when someone told you he booked a certain hall for his upcoming simcha or that he applied to a certain school for his children, even if the comment is not about him— only about the hall or school, think before you speak. Don't

assume the other person won't be offended by your comment and its implications.

This is certainly true in marriage, as well. When an individual makes a comment regarding their spouse's family, for example, although the comment is not directed toward the spouse per se, it's still personal enough and thus equally hurtful. The spouse could try hiding the insult by offering it indirectly, making believe that it's not personal, but it is. This opportunity for discerning commentary may come up in various different scenarios.

Often, in building a case against their spouse, people will tell me that they don't take such comments personally, so why should their spouse get offended. The fact that you don't take it personally, or deceive yourself into thinking that it doesn't touch you, doesn't make it true for the other person. On the contrary, precisely because you've realized that they're more sensitive, take extra care to protect their feelings. This is one of the reasons why, in addition to being obligated to love our fellow Jew, we have an added commandment to "love the convert." Because they're especially sensitive, loving them is even more important—certainly not less.

Even when insensitive speech is unintentional, it's still not a reason to engage in it. When Moshe spoke about the Exodus he certainly had no intention of hurting Yisro. Still, the Torah cautions us against such talk. We should never assume that it's no big deal, that the other person will be strong enough to accept it. If walking on eggshells is what it takes to keep someone feeling safe, even something that seems trivial and not directly related to the person should not be said.

In the passage where the Torah teaches us about the kashrus of animals, the Torah famously goes out of its way, so to speak, in order not to use words that are not proper. We can never be vigilant enough with our speech. And if you said something in the past that was hurtful, don't justify your wrongdoing. At least learn from your experience and internalize the damage that was done. It's not about them needing to learn to be less sensitive; it's about us needing to learn to be more sensitive.

Here's another important point regarding sensitive speech. It's not always about



what you say but also how you say it. The things we say in a friendly manner, with a genuine smile, send a message of security and trust. When we say those same words with a smirk, a snarky tone of voice, or hurtful gestures, we've said something entirely different.

When you're careful with your speech, you may not be getting a medal for not hurting someone, but taking the other person's feelings seriously will go a long way in subtly deepening your relationship.

That Sensitive Child

Despite their smaller size and their powerlessness to protect themselves, children are human beings in every sense of the word. They deserve to be treated with utmost sensitivity and respect. This is especially true for children who are officially "difficult," which is generally the keyword for highly sensitive. Even if it appears that the only way that works to get a child to listen is through hurting them, don't do it. Don't underestimate how much damage is done when adults are insensitive to a child, even if they think it's the only way to put him in his place. Especially when the child is sensitive and fragile, hold back. Explore other means of discipline, but never go down the route of insensitivity. Keep in mind that the end doesn't justify the means and that the damage that insensitive remarks causes will need to be dealt with long after the parent feels that he achieved the benefit of having the child do what he wanted.

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-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: I'm investing so much effort in bringing myself to a better place. I'm making progress daily, but I'm still so far away from my goal. I believe it's coming closer, but I don't see it. How can I keep myself from getting discouraged?

Answer: Since you don't mention in which area you're trying to succeed, I will address your question in general terms.

One of the simple ideas that are important to remember when we try to reach a goal is not to judge ourselves, whether we've reached the goal or not. Rather, when we invest ourselves in understanding the importance of doing what's right, we can pat ourselves on our back for every bit of our effort. With such a mindset, when we get to the end of the day or week, we can say to ourselves, "Wow, today I did what was right." This alone brings a deep sense of fulfillment, which motivates us to keep putting in more effort. Of course, all the small steps add up, but as long as our focus in on doing what's right and not as much on the results we get less discouraged and continue on until we actually reach our goal.

This is a crucial point in parenting as well. Often, when children are learning something or performing certain deeds with their eye on the prize, they feel discouraged that they're not reaching their goal. It's critical for us, as parents, not to give our child the feeling that reaching the goal is the hatzlacha. Instead, for every time he does the right thing or invests more effort, we should tell him, "You did it again today? Wow! Another good day went by!" The child should get the message that even if it doesn't work out in the end, his efforts and diligence are commended.

This is the ideal approach to both our own work in progress and that of our children.

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