

Yesod – Silence

By Alan Morinis

A. INTRODUCTION TO THE WEEK

Tomer Devorah says:

Needless to say, one should not speak obscenities, But, even if the words themselves are not sinful but pure, if they give rise to licentious thoughts, one must be on guard against them. These words bring to sin, even though they themselves are permissible.

Yesod means “foundation” and speaks to the place where the spiritual and the physical meet. Because we are human, we have base instincts, but because we are human, we also have spiritual aspirations. In order to reach up toward holiness, we need to develop ways to deal with our baser instincts so that even our the most mundane areas of our lives become infused with the spiritual. Speech can be used in a base way and it can also be a vehicle for spiritual ascent. Silence can be a tool to sanctify speech.

In Mussar thought, the *middah* of silence – *shtikah* – is connected to what is called in Hebrew *shmirat ha’lashon*, a term that literally means, “guarding the tongue.” The concern here is to take steps to ensure that our speech has a positive, and not a negative, impact. Our goal is to elevate our speech and silence is a tool that can help us ensure that our words are consonant with our highest aspirations.

The Book of Proverbs introduces the focus of restraint in speaking, saying: “In the multitude of words there is no lack of transgression; and one who restrains one’s lips is wise.”

The guideline in this area involves learning to hold yourself back from uttering unnecessary and especially potentially damaging speech. It is a Mussar practice simply to keep your mouth shut at certain times because words are powerful and sometimes the best thing you can do is simply to refrain from speaking.

The 16th century Mussar text *Orchot Tzaddikim* makes this point explicitly: “Just as there is a time to open and a time to close the door of a house, so should one close the doors of one’s mouth. Just as you would guard silver, gold, and pearls in your room, within a case, making one enclosure within another, do the same with your mouth.”

COUNT THE OMER

5782



These injunctions stand on the foundation of the tremendous respect that exists in Judaism for the power of words. Remember that in the story of the creation of the world itself, God brought everything into being only with words.¹ “And God *said*, let there be... and it was.” In the daily prayers, a prominent one, the one that begins the second section of the morning service, opens with the words “*Baruch she’amar*”— which calls on us to “bless the One who spoke.”²

Because Judaism holds speech to be so fundamental and so powerful, our ancestors gave careful attention to drawing the line between the sorts of speech that are creative and beneficial, and the kinds of speech that can do harm. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). Think of it as an ancestral form of gun control, only the hardware is mouth and tongue.

¹ “By the word of God, the heavens were made; and by the breath of God’s mouth, all of their host” (Psalms 33:6).

² the *Baruch Sh’amar* prayer.