



Behar – Word Power

The Torah contains numerous laws concerning appropriate speech. Many verses and texts discuss the laws of Lashon Hara and Rechilus, which are typically translated as gossip, talebearing, and slandering. In Parshas Behar, the Torah commands, 'וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אֶחָד אֶת עֵמִיתוֹ' And you should not wrong each other.' Rashi, quoting the Midrash, explains, "Here the Torah warned against the indiscretion of words, that one should not tease his friend."

Contrast the expression 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me', which has appeared in literature since the late 1800s. Parents and educators often express this to comfort children who have experienced verbal insults, encouraging them to cultivate resilience. After decades of usage, one must question whether this assertion is accurate. Are words incapable of causing harm?

The Effect of Verbal Abuse

Neuroscience Research indicates that verbal assaults can result in physical changes in the brains of children and young adults. Findings show that those who experience high levels of verbal aggression from their parents exhibit a decrease in grey matter volume within the left auditory cortex, and irregularities in a crucial language-processing pathway known as the left arcuate fasciculus.

The physical damage associated with verbal abuse is compounded by the psychological and emotional suffering it engenders. Children who endure ongoing verbal hostility live in a state of fear, which cultivates insecurity and hampers their coping abilities. The effects of this abuse are reflected in the increased prevalence of anxiety, depression, and aggression in adolescents and young adults. They learn that words can be powerful weapons, with the loudest and most confrontational voices often winning.

A Better Way

Human brains possess a natural tendency to seek out patterns. Neural pathways that influence behaviors, reactions, and cognitive functions are developed and strengthened through repetition. Thus, when children are raised in a verbally supportive atmosphere during their formative years, they are more likely to seek a pattern of positive verbal expression, enhancing their ability to regulate emotions effectively.

The Torah mandates that individuals must not harm others through their words. It provides a framework for cultivating emotionally healthy future generations, which begins with personal responsibility. This commandment applies to girls from the age of 12 and boys from the age of 13. A person accustomed to speaking in a way that does not hurt others lays the foundation necessary to become a parent who can model such behavior for their children.

Parshas Bechukosai – An Honest Look

The Parsha of Bechukosai outlines the repercussions that the Jewish Nation will face based on fulfilling or transgressing the laws of the Torah. These repercussions are often referred to as rewards and punishments. Rashi identifies seven sequential transgressions that will trigger these repercussions. Initially, an individual will refrain from studying, which will cause them to act contrary to the Torah's laws, leading to a disdain for those who adhere to the Torah. The fourth stage involves a contempt for Torah scholars, obstructing others from observing the Torah, rejecting its divine nature, and ultimately leading to a complete denial of Hashem.



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The Need to be Correct

The previously mentioned sequence of Rashi appears to be quite far-fetched. An individual who does not engage with mathematics is unlikely to become an accountant; however, this does not suggest that they will disdain accountants or ultimately reject the mathematical theories articulated by the great mathematicians of the past. Likewise, a lack of understanding of Torah laws might limit an individual's ability to observe some aspects of the Torah, it is difficult to understand why this would incite animosity towards those who adhere to the Torah's teachings and ultimately lead to a complete denial of Hashem. Is it conceivable that insufficient Torah study could thrust a person into such a spiritual abyss?

To respond to this question, it is crucial to understand that individuals desire to perceive their actions as correct. People inherently wish to maintain a positive self-image. The ability to solve mathematical problems does not fundamentally reflect an individual's way of life. However, adhering to the principles of the Torah does. The Torah is far more than a mere collection of rules; it serves as a comprehensive manual for living. When individuals fail to learn or engage with these principles, they are unlikely to follow the Torah's way of life effectively. Additionally, when others engage with the Torah's teachings, it can trigger discomfort in those who do not, leading them to assert that the other person is in error for adhering to the Torah. This pattern continues until it ultimately results in a denial of Hashem.

The Parshiyos Come Together

In Parshas Behar, we noted that our minds are inclined to identify and follow patterns. Establishing appropriate patterns enables individuals to foster the development of further appropriate behaviors. Nonetheless, this propensity may lead to a habitual existence, where one operates on autopilot without engaging in critical thought. Discerning individuals question their actions and the rationale behind their inaction. Are my actions genuinely right, or do they make me feel good? Furthermore, who or what defines what is considered good? Is it the individual, societal norms, or divine will?

Rashi's comments respond to these questions. The broad scope of human behavior, positive and negative actions, follows a sequential order. The first step is to familiarize oneself with the ethical principles. Individuals must be aware of what constitutes right and wrong. One must resist the temptation to engage in mindless routines. No individual is flawless, and there will be occasions when actions do not reflect one's knowledge. At this point, the key factor is to be honest and to recognize the action for what it is. A person who reacts defensively and attempts to justify their actions will advance to the subsequent step in the sequence, which is to develop a sense of disdain for those who fulfill the commandments appropriately. However, an individual who is honest with themselves, can accept their wrongdoing and is willing to amend their behavior, will value and respect those who act appropriately.

Life is made of patterns; choose wisely, and the pattern will be beautiful.

Have a wonderful Shabbos,

Binyomin Stolov



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