

chosen words

Personal Growth

The 48 Essential Qualities for Learning

If you want to acquire Torah, all you have to do is study. Right? Surprisingly, Pirkei Avos tells us that study is just one of 48 qualities necessary to successfully acquire Torah.

Among the others named in the Mishna are joy, modesty, slowness to anger, a good heart, and closeness with peers. According to Rav Chaim Volozhiner, you attain Torah in direct proportion to your efforts in developing these traits. Without them, Torah can't be fully grasped. Quality #10:

Limited Conversation

A top advertising copywriter has a talent. He can make millions of people take notice of his message, using the absolute minimum number of words. While his verbiage is limited, his reach is vast—if he chooses the right words. But even in everyday conversation, those who choose their words are heeded, and those who don't are sometimes ignored.

The Mishna, in recommending "miyut sicha," limited conversation, sees this economy of words as much more than a conversational art. It is a clear path to spiritual growth, unobstructed by the excess verbiage that spawns loshon hora, distracts from learning and blocks deep thinking.

But limiting conversation doesn't mean ending communication. In fact, it means just the opposite. It means mentally editing out words that are redundant, self-serving, derogatory, or just a waste of time. By paring away the excess, we speak words that really do communicate.

One famous 12-page letter,

written in a rambling style, started with this apology from the writer: "I had no time to be brief." And it's true; it takes time to think through what you want to say and boil it down to its essence. In doing so, we strengthen the connection between mind and tongue. We create "quality control" for our words, ensuring that they'll be among the small percentage that add something truly valuable to the world.

Adapted from a taped lecture by Rabbi Noach Weinberg, Rosh Yeshiva, Aish Hatorah

Effective Prayer

Save It for Best

Imagine a becher once owned by a tzaddik being used to serve orange juice at breakfast. Imagine the quill that has written a sefer Torah later being used to scrawl graffiti. Imagine a kallah wearing her wedding gown to go grocery shopping. Once something has been used for an exalted purpose, we are repelled by the idea of using it for the mundane, or worse yet, the profane.

One of the most exalted purposes of the tongue is prayer. Through the tongue's power, we pronounce the blessings of the tefillah, ac-

Torah Tools for Personal Growth

Inspiration

Ideas

Excellence

Success

Better Relationships

Even a Drop

The older sister is worried. Her younger brother's marriage doesn't look like it's going so well. Certainly, it seems he doesn't spend enough time with his wife. So, the big sister discusses her concerns with her other brother.

When we remember Miriam's tzoraas, we may not see any loshon hora lurking in her well-meaning conversation. Miriam's love for her brother was irrefutable, and her comments about Moshe could have been nothing but well intentioned. Yet, the moment she spoke, she was stricken with tzoraas.

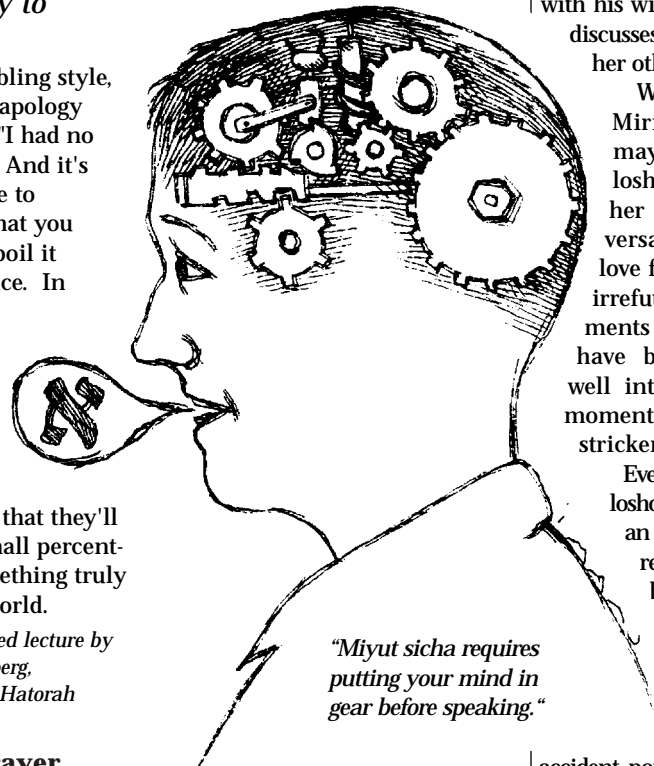
Even this tiny drop of loshon hora engendered an immediate physical reaction. That is because loshon hora is so potent a poison.

Whether it's ingested on purpose or a drop falls into the cake batter by

accident, poison always harms its victim. Whether loshon hora is stated with malice, or comes baked into the sweetest confection of love and concern, it still does its damage.

Family members are indeed supposed to care about each other's welfare and find ways to help each other. But we have to

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"Miyut sicha requires putting your mind in gear before speaking."



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Adapted from "Shmoneh Esrei," by Rabbi Avraham Chaim Feuer, with permission from Mesorah Publications

What Wasn't Said

The Torah tells us that a person suspected of having tzoraas, leprosy, was quarantined for one week—kept in isolation, away from family and friends. And because tzoraas was a punishment for loshon hora, the ordeal brought shame with it as well. But after one week, the person was reexamined, and at that time, if the kohen determined that the suspect discoloration wasn't tzoraas at all, the person would go free. Case closed.

So, it would seem that an innocent person had suffered; he had been shamed and separated from the community for seven days, all for nothing. The Imrei Emes explains that, in fact, it was not for nothing. This "false alarm" was a punishment in itself, not for forbidden words that had been spoken, but for positive words that had been left unspoken.

From this we learn the importance of "loshon tov," of using our power of speech to create good in the world. There's a vast difference between noticing the good in others and putting it into words. Sometimes we underestimate the impact of our compliment, our thank you, our quick "moral support" phone call. We think the world can get along fine without it.

But loshon tov is the fiber of Ahavas Yisrael. Sometimes the context is dramatic—empathy and comfort in troubled times, or mazel tovs upon a simchah. But often the context is commonplace—a hello and a smile in passing, a thank you for a small favor, a compliment on your child's behavior. All of this is just words, yet the words are profound acts of chessed as well. We are not allowed to leave them unspoken.

“Loshon tov is the fiber of Ahavas Yisrael.”

Shabbos Table Discussion:

Think of one instance in which "loshon tov" spoken to you made a difference in your outlook.

Adapted from a d'var Torah by Rabbi Nosson Nussbaum, Yeshivah Tiferes Torah, Lakewood, NJ

▼
 “In the process of making others feel good, you yourself live a good life.”

—Vilna Gaon
 ▲

Even a Drop

continued from front

beware; once a bit of loshon hora drops into the conversation, the poison will do its work. It is only a matter of time before it takes effect, creating hurt or anger within the family. Through the example of Miriam's tzoraas, the Torah tells us that when we're about to voice our helpful observations about those we love, we should guard against allowing even a drop of poison into the ingredients.

To Do: The next time you're about to discuss the problem of someone close to you, think first—does this satisfy the halachic requirements of "toeles," constructive speech?

Adapted from "Outlooks and Insights," by Rabbi Zev Leff, with permission from Mesorah Publications

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A Lesson on Wheels

Two young women rode a bus through Jerusalem, chatting about the latest events in their social circle. The engagement of a mutual acquaintance was among the news.

"It seems unlikely to me," said one girl.

"Why's that?"

"Well, from what I understand, she's much more modern than he is. I'm surprised his family went for it."

A middle-aged woman sitting behind them tapped one girl on the shoulder.

"Excuse me," she said solemnly. "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. I'm the mother of that boy, and I'm so grateful that I found out about this while I still have a chance to put an end to the shidduch."

The bus stopped, and the older woman rose to get off. The girls were stricken. Their comments had only been casual observations. Neither of them really knew the couple well. They grabbed at the woman's coat, calling as she passed, "Wait! Listen, we..."

"I'm not really the boy's mother," said the woman, turning to look them in the eye. "But you know, I could have been."

Heard from Rebbitzin Yehudis Samet
 *Note: The deception, though well intended, wasn't halachically permissible.

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Rav Naftoli Jaeger, shlita, Rabbinical Editorial Supervisor

Michael Rothschild, Director

*6 Melnick Drive
 Monsey, NY 10952*

Chosen Words
 Editorial Supervisor: S. Appelbaum
 Writer: C. Nestlebaum
 Graphic Artist: H. Ort
 Illustrator: Giora Carmi

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 Letters to the Editor
 Chosen Words/CCHF
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