

In this week's Torah reading, we find the *Mitzvah* to set aside *Arei Miklat* / Cities of Refuge for those who murder unintentionally. R' Avraham Yoffen z"l (1887-1970; *Rosh Yeshiva* of the Novardok Yeshiva in Bialystok, Poland; New York and Yerushalayim) observes:

The Torah surrounds a person with *Mitzvot* at every step of his life. We have *Tefilin*, *Tzitzit*, and *Mezuzah*, about which the *Gemara* (*Menachot* 43b) says, "One who is careful with them will not hurry to sin." Beyond that, we read (*Bemidbar* 23:10), "Who has counted the dust of Yaakov"--there is no limit to the *Mitzvot* one can perform with "dust," *i.e.*, the agricultural laws that relate to the earth, the ashes of *Parah Adumah*, and the dirt in the *Sotah*-water. A businessperson, too, has many laws he must observe to ensure that his dealings are honest.

Sometimes, however, a person slips, or an avalanche of circumstances knocks him off of his regular spiritual level. At such times, his routine of Torah study and prayer is turned on its head, and the world becomes a dark place for him. Even then, however, the Torah does not abandon him, just as someone who kills accidentally is not abandoned to the hand of the avenger. Rather, he is given a place to run for safety, and not just any place. The Cities of Refuge were also the cities of the *Levi'im*, the servants of *Hashem*, where the murderer will be in an environment that will lift him back up.

R' Yoffen adds: Every person has such "at-risk" moments, particularly during vacation periods, when he is away from his usual positive influences. Precisely in such times, a person must find ways to strengthen himself. (*Ha'mussar Ve'ha'da'at*)

Shabbat

"Hear *D'var* / the word of *Hashem*, House of *Yaakov* and all the families of the House of *Yisrael*." (*Yirmiyah* 2:4--the first verse of this week's *Haftarah*)

Midrash Aggadat Bereishit comments on this verse: *Hashem* says, "You neglected all of the *Dibrot* / Ten Commandments. Keep one *Davar* / thing (literally, 'word') and I will forgive you. What is that one thing? It is *Shabbat*, about which it says (*Yeshayah* 58:13), 'Honor it . . . by refraining from *Dabber davar* / speaking words.'" [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R' Yitzchak Menachem Weinberg *shlita* (*Tolna Rebbe* in Yerushalayim) asks: The quoted verse from *Yeshayah* does not refer to observing *Shabbat* in general. Rather, it refers to the prohibition on discussing mundane matters on *Shabbat* (see *Shabbat* 113a: "Your *Dibbur* / speech on *Shabbat* should be different from your *Dibbur* / speech on weekdays."). Why is that one detail of *Shabbat* observance so important that observing it will bring about forgiveness for other sins?

This teaches, answers the *Tolna Rebbe*, that there is a special holiness to our speech on *Shabbat*. The *Zohar* refers to the mouth as "royalty." This means, explains the *Tolna Rebbe*, that when we sanctify our mouths and do not speak improperly--rather, we speak words of Torah and prayer in holiness and purity--we influence our entire bodies and cause *Hashem's* goodness to flow to them. This will cause us to observe all *Mitzvot* more fully, which allows us to be forgiven.

The foregoing idea, notes the *Tolna Rebbe*, connects this week's *Haftarah* to our *Parashah*, which begins with the subject of not profaning one's word. The concept of speech appears several other times in this *Parashah*, as well. This idea also is appropriate for this time of year, for we are taught that the *Bet Hamikdash* was destroyed because of the misuse of speech that resulted from senseless hatred, as in the well-known story of *Kamtza* and *Bar Kamtza* (*Gittin* 55b). In that incident, speech was misused several times--first when *Bar Kamtza* was expelled from the party, again when the other guests failed to intervene, and a third time when *Bar Kamtza* informed (falsely) on the Jewish People.

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“Why do you dissuade the heart of *Bnei Yisrael* from crossing to the Land that *Hashem* has given them? This is what your fathers did, when I sent them from Kadesh-Barne’a to see the Land.” (32:7-8)

R’ Shlomo Alkabetz z”l (1505-1584; author of the Friday night hymn *Lecha Dodi*, among other works) asks: Why did Moshe mention the Spies? That generation had already been punished! Why not let bygones be bygones?

He answers: Moshe did not mean to say, “You are evil like the Spies.” Rather, he was telling the two tribes that wanted to remain on the East Bank of the Jordan, “Do not think that you will not influence others because you are a minority. Just ten men were able to influence the entire generation that preceded you to reject the Land.” (*Perushei U’drushei R’ Shlomo Alkabetz*)

“These are the journeys of *Bnei Yisrael* . . . Moshe wrote their goings forth according to their journeys at the bidding of *Hashem*, and these are their journeys according to their goings forth.” (33:1-2)

R’ Moshe Shick z”l (1805-1879; a leading rabbi and *Rosh Yeshiva* in Hungary) writes: Commentaries offer several reasons for why the Torah lists all of the way stations where *Bnei Yisrael* camped over 40 years. Another reason may be to teach a person *Mussar* / the proper way to refine oneself.

R’ Shick explains: Life is a journey. Every day and every year is another way station. At all times there are two paths that a person can choose: a good path and a bad path. In truth, though, a person is biased by his desires and temptations, and whichever path he chooses, he will tell himself that it is the good one. Therefore, *Pirkei Avot* (2:1) teaches: “Which is the proper path that person should choose for himself? Whatever is a credit to himself and earns him the esteem of fellow men.” If a person wants to know if he really is on a good path, says R’ Shick, he needs to acknowledge that he is biased and cannot decide for himself. Rather, he should look at whether he is earning the esteem of his fellow men.

R’ Shick continues: It is not enough to consider this question in the moment. In addition, a person must look back and examine his past: was it good or bad?

In this light, R’ Shick writes, we can understand a reversal in the wording of our verse: “Moshe wrote *Motza’aihem* / their goings forth *Le’mas’aihem* / according to their journeys at the bidding of *Hashem*”--first their “goings forth” and then their “journeys”--“and these are *Mas’aihem* / their journeys *Le’motza’aihem* / according to their goings forth”--first their “journeys” and then their “goings forth.” When Moshe looked back, he could see that from the time he went forth into the world, all his journeys were at the bidding of *Hashem*. He could be very proud of his life’s journey. Not so *Bnei Yisrael*, who tested and tried *Hashem* time-and-time-again over their 40 years in the desert. Their “journeys,” the times when they did obey *Hashem*, needed to atone for their “goings forth,” their many rebellions in the Nation’s younger years.

(*Maharam Shick Al Ha’Torah*)

“This is the thing that *Hashem* has commanded: ‘If a man takes a vow to *Hashem* or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth he shall do.’” (30:3)

R’ Yosef Shalom z”l (1630-1694; rabbi in Moravia) writes: R’ Eliyahu de Vidas (1518-1592; *Eretz Yisrael*) teaches in *Reishit Chochmah* that a thinking person should not make a vow to do or not do something for an extended period of time [for example, to *Daven* with a *Minyan* or learn a specific amount for an entire year], for the *Yetzer Ha’ra* will surely find ways to prevent him from fulfilling such a vow. Rather, if a person makes a vow, it should be for a short period of time--even a day or half a day. When he completes that vow, he can renew it for another short period.

R’ Yosef Shalom continues: In this vein, commentaries explain the *Mishnah* (*Avot* ch.1), “Say little and do a lot.” As soon as a person expresses a desire to do a good deed, the *Yetzer Ha’ra* hears and begins to scheme to stop him. But, if you say little, then you will be able to do a lot.

This, writes R’ Yosef Shalom, is the meaning of our verses as well: “This is the thing that *Hashem* has commanded”--this is His advice to you. “If a man takes a vow to *Hashem* or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself”--the listing of “vow,” “oath,” and “prohibition” teaches that a person should make multiple small commitments, not one large commitment. Then, “he will not desecrate his word.” Why? Because “according to whatever comes from his mouth he shall do”--“he,” the *Yetzer Ha’ra*, hears what comes from one’s mouth and he, the *Yetzer Ha’ra*, begins “to do”--to scheme against your good intentions.

Alternatively, R’ Yosef Shalom writes, the verse may be alluding to another teaching of the *Reishit Chochmah*--that when a person expresses an intent to do a good deed, he creates an angel. However, that angel is incomplete until the good deed is finished. Therefore, do not fail to follow through on your word, for your word has already begun “to do.”

(*Yad Avi Shalom*)

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The *Tolna Rebbe* concludes: Speech is what distinguishes man from animals, as we read (*Bereishit* 2:7), “Man became a living being,” which *Onkelos* translates: “Man became a speaking being.” Our obligation to be careful with our speech is that much greater on *Shabbat*. The Torah says regarding *Shabbat* (*Shmot* 23:12), “So that your ox and donkey may rest”--which teaches that a person is obligated to influence all of the lower forms of existence that he controls, including the animal soul within himself. Then his mouth will truly be royalty.

(*Chedveta D’ze’air Anpin: Matot* 2)