

How to Better Speak With One Another

There are many Jewish teachings that instruct us how to speak to each another. Here are four that inspire and guide me throughout my day. [Visit our website for my 5778 Rosh Hashanah sermon – Keep Your Eye on the Ball: Our Words Matter.](#) With Shalom, Rabbi Mo Salth

A Prayer

This prayer, known as *Elohai N'tzor*, keeps me on track. It was added into the daily prayer liturgy in the ninth century CE. I try to read it each morning.

My God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile. To those who revile me, let my soul remain silent, my soul shall be to all like dust. Open my heart to Your Torah, let my soul hasten to do Your commandments. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable before You, O God, my Rock and my Redeemer.

אֱלֹהֵי נֹצֵר לְשׁוֹנֵי מֵרַע וּשְׁפָתַי מִדַּבֵּר מִרְמָה. וְלִמְקַלְלֵי נַפְשִׁי תִדּוּם וְנַפְשִׁי כְּעָפָר לְכָל תְּהִיָּה.
פְּתַח לִבִּי בְּתוֹרָתְךָ. וּבְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ תִּרְדֵּף נַפְשִׁי. יְהִי לְרִצּוֹן אֲמָרֵי פִי וְהִגִּיוֹן לִבִּי לְפָנֶיךָ. יי צוּרִי
וְגוֹאֲלִי.

Elohai, n'tzor l'shoni meira us'fatai midabeir mirmah, v'limkal'lai nafshi tidom, v'nafshi ke-afar lakol tih'yeh. P'tach libi b'Toratecha, uv'mitzvotecha tirdof nafshi. Yih'yu l'ratzon imrei fi v'hegyon libi l'fanecha, Adonai tzuri v'go-ali.

Here is a link to listen to our clergy and cantorial guests singing a musical version:

<https://youtu.be/yAZjOFP-Gs>

Giving Feedback

There are pages of commentary as to how to speak properly, honestly and respectfully with each other when giving feedback. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin warns of the dangers of letting conversation escalate to argument with both parties speaking harshly to each other.¹ At a Shavuot study session in May of 2017 I heard Rabbi Telushkin share the sage advice to bring to a disagreement only the specific issue at hand and not past incidents which may have occurred. Sticking to a specific event can help prevent an argument from escalating into a hostile battle.

Moses Maimonides, a 12th century sage, provides this lesson on giving feedback: “He who rebukes another...should administer the rebuke in private, speak to the offender gently and tenderly and point out that he is only speaking for the wrong-doer’s own good.”²

¹ Joseph Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal* (New York, Harper, 1996) p. 175

² *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deiot 6:7* and cited in <https://reformjudaism.org/mastering-art-rebuke>



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Refraining from Gossip

The Talmud tells us that gossip kills the one who gossips, the one who listens and the subject of the gossip. Judaism defines gossip as simply speaking about someone else. Rabbi Telushkin explains that there are different kinds of gossip: speaking positively and truthfully about another, speaking negatively and truthfully about another, and speaking lies and rumors about another. Judaism advises us to strongly avoid engaging in *all* these types of gossip.

The Talmud also acknowledges that it is almost impossible not to gossip at least once a day (Bava Batra 164b). Rabbi Telushkin encourages us to take care. We should limit the number of people with whom we gossip, limit the amount of time we spend talking about others and always be kind and fair.³

The Story of the Feathers

An old Chasidic tale tells the story of a wealthy Jewish man. As he nears the end of his life he explains to his rabbi that he wants to make amends to all those whom he has spoken ill. The rabbi instructs him to take a bag of feathers and put one feather at the doorway to the home of each person he has slandered.

The elderly man gets a bag of feathers and places a feather at the entrance to each person's home. Having completed the task he returns to the rabbi and asks: "what should I do next?" The rabbi tells him to return to each home and retrieve each feather.

When he goes to collect the feathers, he discovers the wind has blown them far away. He can't get them back. He realizes he cannot take back his hurtful words; he cannot undo the damage he has caused.

Perhaps a way to apply the lesson of this story is to follow the Twenty-Four-Hour Rule. When something has upset us and we feel the urge to say so, this modern-day rule recommends that we wait twenty four hours before speaking, emailing, texting or tweeting. We may want to write down what we would consider communicating as this may help us process our thoughts, but wait the twenty four hours before sending or saying it.

I hope these offerings are helpful. It is a daily practice to communicate kindly and effectively with one another. I want to hear from you and learn about the tools you use. Email me at salthm@censyn.org or connect with me on Facebook at www.facebook.com/mosalth.

³ Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, p. 45