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## Sabbatical and trust in God

The story is told of a European Jew at the turn of the century who, tired of the constant grind of poverty, determined to solve his plight by playing the lottery. Fearing that what he was doing was not exactly "kosher," the fellow went to his rabbi and asked approval for the plan. He explained that his actions would do nothing more than provide the Almighty with the opportunity to send him some well-needed money. Moreover, the fellow said, he had complete trust that God would answer him.

"How many tickets are you buying?" asked the rabbi. "Three" said the man. "One should be enough for God", was the rabbi's laconic reply.

The concept of *bitachon* - "trust in God" - plays a critical role in Jewish thought. Just as a person should strive to observe the Mitzvot, he or she

should also try to develop *bitachon*, a consciousness that God is actively involved in our lives. In fact, the acquisition of this "God awareness" is so vital that some commentators explain this as the true goal of Torah observance.

While true acquisition of *bitachon* can be a tremendously liberating experience, it is also very hard to achieve. We live in a world where our daily routine and the "natural course of events" actually may lead us to **forget** about God. How many of us limit our lottery purchases to one ticket?!

In striking fashion, this week's Torah portion addresses this issue. Much of the Parsha is devoted to a description of laws concerning the sabbatical year ("*shmita*") that takes place in Israel every seventh year. In Biblical times, debts were cancelled on the *shmita* year, and servants were set free.

Even today, farm land is not to be worked during the *shmita* year. Throughout the entire Land of Israel, no Jewish farmer should plow or plant. This hiatus not only helps improve the quality of the soil, but provides the Jewish People with more free time to study Torah.

This system of *shmita*, however, would seem to create one great problem: a lack of food! Concerning this issue, however, God assures us not to worry:

*"Perhaps you will say, 'What will we eat in the seventh year for we cannot sow nor gather our crop?' I (God) will command my blessing upon the sixth year and it will bring forth (enough) produce for three years." (Leviticus 25:20-21)*

The Chazon Ish (20th century Israel) explains that while this does not guarantee that every individual will receive a triple crop, it does mean that collectively the Jewish People's land will yield crops in far greater abundance than would be "natural." In this way, we are reminded that it is God who is the force behind the natural order, and when He so chooses He dispenses in proportions far beyond "natural."

In this sense, the *shmita* year parallels the Sabbath, whose major function is also to remind us that it is God who created the world - and ultimately controls His world. Integrating this idea into one's life is the foundation of *bitachon* - true trust in the Almighty.



## Watch Your Words

Words create people, and words create societies. Delving into the latest science around speech and neuroscience, communication professor Mark Waldman, one of the world's leading experts on communication, and Dr Andrew Newberg, a research director at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, explore the idea of "compassionate communication" in their book: *Words can change your brain*. They describe how, from childhood, humans' brains are moulded by the words they hear, and that teaching children to use positive words helps them with emotional control and can even increase their attention spans.

The Torah places an enormous emphasis on the ethics of proper speech, with many detailed laws and categories. Speech, unique to humans, forms the bridge between two otherwise separate, independent people. It binds us together. Because speech is the bridge between people, the values and ethics that surround it are influential as they touch on the essence of how we treat the people around us.

This week's *parsha*, Behar, states: "One person shall not hurt his fellow." (Vayikra 25:17) The *Talmud* (Bava Metzia 58b) explains that the verse is referring to causing emotional hurt through speech. The *Talmud* goes on to provide a number of examples, all of them relating to hurting people where they are most vulnerable, such as reminding a person who has done repentance for their previous wrongdoings, or a convert of their background, or to say judgmental things to a person who is suffering.

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The *Talmud* even extends the category of hurtful speech to causing any emotional hurt or disappointment, such as asking a shopkeeper how much a particular item costs if you have no intention of buying it. Clearly, we need to be supremely sensitive to how our words will be received by another person, even if no harm is

intended.

This mitzvah of proper speech goes right to the heart of the kind of society we wish to create. Using the power of speech for good is an expression of our partnership with G-d in creating the world. The *Sefer HaChinuch* says positive speech sows peace among people, and within society at large. Regarding the mitzvah of proper speech: “Great is peace because through it blessing exists in the world, and problematic is conflict [because] many curses and calamities come from it.” In other words, a peaceful, harmonious society is created through speech that is ethical, sensitive, kind and compassionate, while a divisive, hostile society is characterised by aggressive, harsh, hurtful speech.

But, there is a deeper dimension to the power of speech. The Maharal says harmful speech constitutes a direct assault on the *Tzelem Elokim* – the Divine image, the G-dly soul – within a person. He explains that wronging another person can affect different aspects of the human being. The wrongdoing can strike at another person’s possessions or money, or it can strike at their body, their physical being. He says verbal abuse is uniquely pernicious because it strikes at the *neshama* – at the soul, which is the very essence of the human being.

It is in this context that we can understand the dramatic statement of the *Talmud* (Bava Metzia 58b) that shaming another person in public is considered a form of murder.

The Maharal explains, based on the *Gemara*, that when a person is shamed in public, their face becomes ashen. He says the *Tzelem Elokim* is physically manifest through the glow on a person’s face. This becomes obvious when, at

the point of death, the soul leaves the body and the face (and the body) of the corpse turn ashen. The glow emanates from the spiritual energy of the soul. So, if a person is shamed to such an extent that the glow leaves his face, it indicates that the *Tzelem Elokim* has, so to speak, been knocked out of such a person.

Of course, it works the other way as well. Words of praise and acknowledgement make a person’s face glow. Kind, gentle words, words of warmth and encouragement, nurture the souls of those around us.

The Maharal quotes a *Midrash* (Vayikra Rabba 4), which states that the soul of every human being is in G-d’s hands, and that G-d therefore defends it. This is how the Maharal explains the *Gemara*, which says G-d considers it a direct affront when someone uses the power of words to harm another human being. The *Talmud* goes so far as to say (Bava Metzia 59a) that even in a time when it is difficult to access Hashem, nevertheless the “Gates of Heaven” are always open to a person who calls out in pain from the hurtful words of another person.

And so this mitzvah of not hurting another person with one’s words is crucial to creating the kind of world we wish to live in. Adhering to the laws and stipulations of proper speech helps us to achieve something beyond the smooth functioning of a society. It actually lays the platform for the greatest task we have as human beings, enabling the *Tzelem Elokim* – the spark of pure G-dliness within each one of us – to flourish, enabling us to draw close to our Creator and fulfil our G-dly potential. Ensuring an environment in which the *Tzelem Elokim* is strengthened and can flourish is part of our responsibility as partners with G-d in creation,

and is in fact G-d's ultimate vision for the world.

In essence, what emerges is the idea that for human beings to flourish, we need to give space for the *Tzelem Elokim* within every human to flourish. Positive speech creates the conditions under which this is possible. Verbal abuse – hurtful words – oppress the soul and crush the human spirit; they undermine the capacity for human beings to flourish. Through words of affirmation, on the other hand, we aren't just able get along with each other; we don't just avoid conflict; we set the conditions for real human flourishing.

But, it goes even deeper. The Ramban says the power of words affects not just the people they are directed at, but also the speaker of those words. He goes as far as to say that speaking gently, sensitively and compassionately is the key to creating the kind of person we want to be. And so this mitzvah becomes part of the life project of self-creation, of self-transformation. In his famous letter to his son, the Ramban begins by saying: "Accustom yourself always to speak all of your words with gentleness to all people at all times, and through this you'll be saved from anger, which is a terrible trait that causes people to sin... this will bring to your heart the attribute of humility, which is the finest of all of the character traits... and through humility, the awe of G-d will intensify in your heart..."

So we see from this passage in the Ramban that the journey of self-transformation and self-improvement begins with the way we speak. When we speak kindly and gently, we are saved from anger and draw close to G-d. Speech that is hurtful, on the other hand, creates a world of

anger, and also drives anger deep into our own make-up. Ultimately, it distances us from G-d and unmoors us from our own spiritual potential.

These things are all interconnected. Gentleness and kindness lead to humility. Humility is about recognising the intrinsic value, appreciating the preciousness, of every person created in the image of G-d. It is about recognising that whatever gifts we may have, come directly from G-d, and do not make us better than another person, but only impose on us greater responsibility to do good in the world. This humility is intertwined with an appreciation for G-d's greatness.

Positive, kind, compassionate speech is about creating a flourishing, peaceful society. It is about upholding the image of G-d within every person and giving it the space to flourish. It is about the journey of self-transformation, the journey of self-creation.



## Positive Peer Pressure

Peer pressure is generally viewed as a negative concept – a phenomenon that encourages people to be led almost blindly by a need to fit in with the crowd and to be liked. It is most often identified with bad or even dangerous behaviour. Although it is generally associated with adolescents, in connection with issues such as body image, substance abuse and bullying, in

essence it exists at every age and in every community. With the exponential spread of social media and technology, the channels through which peer pressure can be experienced are spreading, the scope of peer pressure is growing, and its negative influences are intensifying. But to view peer pressure as purely negative is to see only the harmful outcome of a neutral phenomenon. The fact is that peer pressure can yield very positive results.

In the Torah's description of the Jubilee year, the nation is forced to let the land lie fallow and to free all Jewish servants.

And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year, and proclaim freedom (for slaves) throughout the land for all who live on it. It shall be a Jubilee for you and you shall return, each man to his property, and you shall return, each man to his family. This fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee for you, you shall not sow, nor shall you reap its aftergrowth or pick (its grapes) that you had set aside (for yourself). For it is Jubilee. It shall be holy for you; you shall eat its produce from the field (*Lev. 25:10-12*).

The underlying rationale for this command is to remind us that God is the One running the show, and that man is but a sacred trustee of the Land of Israel, and of basic human rights such as freedom (*Sefer HaChinnuch*, mitzva 328). This mitzva ennobles one with Divine purpose and a sense of humility. At the same time, it enables one to reflect on everyday morals, ethics and individual accountability. Interestingly, this momentous occasion is heralded by the blowing of a shofar (*Lev. 25:9*). The obvious question is why? What is the significance, at this particular

moment, of the shofar?

To let one's land lie fallow after years of working it is a tremendously difficult task that requires a high level of faith. Similarly, to let one's servants free after they have become a crucial part of one's daily schedule is challenging and demanding. In this difficult moment the blowing of the shofar presents an unexpected voice of support and comfort. At the moment the Jubilee begins, when each person steps outside to blow their shofar, they are immediately bombarded by numerous other shofar blasts from their surrounding neighbours. This sense of communal unity and combined dedication to God offers solace and support – a true feeling of being together in the same boat: 'The distress of the masses is comforting [for the individual]' (*Sefer HaChinnuch*, mitzva 331). In biblical times, the sounding of the shofar was a mechanism for announcing something to the world. Whilst the Jubilee task was extremely difficult to implement, it was reassuring to realise that everyone was experiencing the same struggle together.

Often in life we are faced with challenges that seem insurmountable. Whilst we may feel that we are the only ones in the world who can understand the extent of our challenges, in truth, 'There is nothing new under the sun' (*Ecclesiastes 1:9*). There is comfort in the notion that there are other people who have braved, are braving and will brave similar burdens. The concept of peer pressure, so often seen through a lens of negativity, can actually in appropriate contexts be harnessed in a positive direction. This is perhaps most commonly expressed in our generation through the myriad of support groups being started daily through social media channels like Facebook, Instagram

and WhatsApp. Furthermore, many revolutionary movements have begun simply because a few individuals shared a vision and dreamed in the same direction. In order to truly harness the positivity that can be found within the context of peer support, it is important to seek and build networks of people who share similar values, who will help foster and reinforce that which is important to us, and who will share our angst in moments of trial.

The primordial sound of the shofar awakens the heart of man, serving as a piercing reminder that we are never alone – neither in our triumphs, nor our tribulations. The voice of the shofar fosters within us a sense of camaraderie that serves to transform the potentially negative peer pressure into the comfort of peer support.



## Walking the Walk

This week's portion begins, "If you will walk with My statutes." This is a strange turn of phrase - walk with my statutes. I could understand God instructing us to "do" the statutes, or "observe" the statutes. But to *walk* with them?

The explanation is that Torah is about walking. Moving forward at a slow and steady pace - not sitting still, but equally not running. Walking is what gets you to God. If you stand still and wait for Him to come to you, He might not. But

equally, if you expect to be able to get where you want overnight, you will also fail. Slow and sure wins the race. Bit by bit, steady, daily growth leads us to Godliness.

Judaism does not believe in an "all or nothing" approach. Every command is a unique opportunity for Godliness - and it is independent of every other command. I always say that if a Jew cannot help himself from eating in McDonalds, he should at least try to have a plain burger instead of a cheeseburger. At least he's not having milk with the non-kosher meat. And if you're not going to fast on Yom Kippur, at least try to eat a bit less.

To give a more universal example: It's wrong to steal, but if you steal from someone, at least be nice and give him bus fare home. Doing one bad thing does not mean you should do another - or be an impediment to doing a good thing.

This is not hypocrisy; it is being realistic. Hypocrisy is when you pretend to be something you are not - when you pretend to fast on Yom Kippur even though you are eating in secret. Being realistic means having the realization that no one is perfect. We all make mistakes. If we are waiting to be perfect before we try to be good, we will most likely end up being bad.

The path to God is one that must be "walked." Every step is valuable, every step counts. And two steps back, with one step forward, is better than just two steps back. Being a good person does not mean getting everything right. It means "walking" in the right direction. You may never reach perfection, but you will accomplish a great deal along the way.