

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Matot / Masei  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Matot Masei – The power of the mouth

In this week's double Parsha of Matot Masei we learn the halachot relating to nedarim (vows).

*If a man makes a vow to Hashem or makes an oath to prohibit himself, he shall not violate his word; according to whatever came out of his mouth, he shall do. (Bamidbar 30:3)*

Rashi explains that this pasuk teaches us that we must treat our words as being holy.

The Torah gives amazing power to a person's speech. For example, a person can make a vow declaring an apple forbidden to eat and for that person the apple will have the same status as non-kosher food which is forbidden by the Torah. Once a vow has been uttered it can only be annulled in certain circumstances. This law encourages people to be more careful with their words. To avoid making and breaking vows, many people are accustomed to add the words 'bli neder' when stating their intentions to make it clear that they do not intend their words to take on the status of a vow.

This teaches the amazing power of words. The Torah starts with Hashem creating the world through speech. For example: “And G-d **said** “Let there be light”, and there was light (Breishit 1:3). Ten divine utterances brought everything into existence. Hashem then gave human beings the same power of speech.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz teaches us that each part of the body has one underlying function. If the same part of the body has more than one function, then each of those functions must be connected. We can see this with the mouth. The mouth is used for three things – eating, kissing and talking. So these three functions must be connected. Let's examine this connection a bit more closely.

**Eating:** The purpose of eating is to give the body nutrients and energy. The body needs food in order for the neshama to stay connected with the body (i.e. in order to stay alive). If a person denies the body sustenance, then the connection between the neshama and the body weakens until (G-d forbid) the neshama totally separates from the body and the person is niftar. We therefore see that one function of the mouth is eating which allows the person's neshama to stay connected with their body.

**Kissing:** When we see a mother kiss her child, we instinctively know that the kiss demonstrates the strong connection between mother and child. That is the purpose of kissing – it is a physical demonstration of the connection between people.

**Talking:** Both eating and kissing connote connection. The same applies for the final function of the mouth – talking. We can use our speech to increase our connection with others. Speaking kindly to others increases our connection with them. Words of prayer, Torah study, or even just talking to Hashem in our own words, increases the connection between us and Hashem.

However, we also have the power to use our mouths to cause dis-connection. This is using our mouth for the opposite of what it is intended for. Let's analyse the negative three uses of our mouths:

**The negative side of eating:** We can use our mouths to overeat, to eat unhealthy food or to eat non-kosher food. Also, when we are unwell, we can use our mouths to expel harmful substances or germs from our bodies via vomiting.

**The negative side of kissing:** When Eisav met Yaakov after many years apart, Eisav embraced Yaakov and kissed him. There is a machloket as to what Eisav's true intention was. Some commentators consider that Eisav's compassion was aroused and Eisav kissed Yaakov wholeheartedly. Other commentators consider that Eisav did not kiss Yaakov with a full heart (Rashi to Breishit 33:4). The midrash says that Eisav intended to bite Yaakov on the neck so as to cause him harm. However, a miracle occurred and Yaakov's neck turned to stone. We see that the mouth can be used to kiss or to bite – to increase connection or to do the opposite.

**The negative side of talking:** Similarly, words emanating from our mouths can serve to decrease connection. Negative words, lashon hara, harsh words and words caused by anger can all decrease connections between people.

The following story from Chovot Halevavot<sup>1</sup> (Duties of the Heart) provides us with some extra incentive to use our words for good:

*"It is told of one of the pious that, when he was slandered and word of this reached him, he sent a basket filled with the choicest produce of his land to the slanderer and wrote to him: "I heard that you sent me a gift of your merits, and I send you this gift in return".*

The Chovot Halevavot explains that when we have our final judgement after 120 years, we will notice that we have been credited with mitzvot that we did not perform. This credit emanates from other people who have spoken negatively about us. Some people may discover that their credits have been diminished. They will be told that some of their merits were transferred to people that they slandered. Other people will find sins that they did not commit recorded in the book of their demerits. They will be told: "These were added to your account because you slandered this or that individual".

This truth can encourage us to avoid negative speech about others. It may also help to reduce our own the pain when we hear that others have spoken negatively about us.

Just like Hashem used words to create this world, we too can use words to create and to build connections with others in this world and with Hashem.

Let's try something this week:

1. Before using our mouths to speak, pause and reflect on the power of speech and on how our speech can be used to elevate or destroy.
2. Try to use your mouth to speak positively, e.g. by speaking kindly to others, davening or learning Torah.
3. When we use our power of speech for positive effect, it is comparable to eating a sweet delicacy or kissing someone we love. When we use our power of speech to negative effect, it is comparable to eating non-kosher, vomiting or biting someone we hate. We can try to keep this imagery in mind before we open our mouths to speak.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>1</sup> Duties of the Heart, the classic mussar text by Rabbeinu Bachya ben Yoseph, The Gate of Humility, Chapter 7.