

Speaking the Language of Blessings

Speech as a Jewish Spiritual Practice

Parashat Naso 5778

- כב** וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. **Numbers 6:22** And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying:
- כג** וַדַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל-בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר, כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: אָמֹר, לָהֶם. {ס} **23** 'Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying: On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel; ye shall **say unto them**: {S}
- כד** יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה, וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ. {ס} **24** The LORD bless thee, and keep thee; {S}
- כה** יֵאָר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וַיַּחֲנֶנֶךָ. {ס} **25** The LORD make His face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee; {S}
- כו** יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם. {ס} **26** The LORD lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. {S}
- כז** וְשָׂמוּ אֶת-שְׁמִי, עַל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְאֲנִי, אֲבָרְכֶם. {ס} **27** So shall they put My name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them.'

Rashi's Commentary: The word אָמֹר is written in its full form [i.e., with a "vav"], indicating that they should not bless them hastily or in a hurried manner, but with concentration and with wholeheartedness. - [Midrash Tanchuma Naso 10]

Perhaps the first step in being able to count our blessings is to be able to make each blessing count – and to transform everything we say into a blessing, to make every word we utter an exercise in holy speech. Here are some time-honored spiritual practices we can follow:

SOURCE:
"JEWISH SPIRITUAL PRACTICES"
Yitzchak Buxbaum

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Blessings

20:1 A blessing is a short meditation, and should be said with love and fear of God, and with *kavvanah* (directed attention) and *hitlahavut* (fervor).

See the discussion in Chapter 2, p. 37 on blessings for some general thoughts; here we will concentrate on the specifics of how to say a blessing.

20:2 Never just throw off a blessing without intention (*kavvanah*), and never say a blessing quickly. (*Derech Hayim* 5-35)

20:3 You should not do anything else while you are saying a blessing. (*Shulchan Aruch* 6-1)

20:4 When saying a blessing we should first think of what the blessing we have to say is, and then, with our full attention to God, say it. One counsel is:

You should think of the translation and meaning of the words of a blessing *before* you say it and utter God's name, not after you say the Name. (*Yachin v'Boaz*, in *DhTvH Y*, p. 9b, *Kavvanat ha-Berachot* #1)

20:5 When you make a blessing, direct your heart and mind to bless [praise and thank] God. (*Sefer ha-Yirah* of Rabbeinu Yonah, p. 193)

20:6 When you say the blessings of enjoyment, your intention should be to bless the King of the Universe and to praise Him, and not just to throw a blessing out of your mouth where it is obvious that your true intention is only your own bodily pleasure—to eat this fruit—and not to give praise to His name, blessed be He. (*Totzaot Hayim*, p. 15)

20:7 Rav said: When you make a blessing you must say, "Blessed are You, O Lord" . . . as it is written, "I have placed the Lord before me always." (*Midrash Psalms* 16-8)

When you say "Blessed are You" . . . you should think that He is standing before you, as it says, "I have placed the Lord before me always"; and you should have the fear of God on your face, and love of God within you, and speak with the full intention and concentration of your heart. (*Sefer ha-Rokeach*, quoted in *Reshit Hochmah*, Sh'ar ha-Kedushah, chap. 14, #32)

Although a blessing is something done in a very short time, it requires some preparation. Before making a blessing, you can take a deep breath and do a brief meditation on the *Shechinah* surrounding you in all six directions.¹ Then say mentally, "I have placed the Lord before me always," and think that the Holy One, blessed be He, is standing before you. Then say the blessing aloud.

20:8 Another rule for directing attention in blessings is that you should make it a habit when you are in your own house to say the blessings in a loud voice; for a raised voice arouses *kavvanah*. (*Totzaot Hayim*, p. 15)

20:9 You may also say blessings in a whispered shout (see "Individual Practices," 39:23); this can be done outside your house as well.

20:10 Rabbeinu Ashier suggests closing your eyes when making a blessing (*Orchot Hayim* 3-38).

Rabbi Alexander Ziskind:

You should say all the blessings with closed eyes. (*Yesod v'Shoresh ha-Avodah*, Gate 2, p. 28)

On *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov* [when you cannot touch money], state verbally what you will give, and give after the day. (*Hanhagot Tzaddikim*, p. 52, #7)

22:8:6 At the time of *Minha* give *tzedaka* before you pray. *Erev Shabbat* and *Erev Yom Tov* give double the amount. (Megaleh Amukot, by Rabbi Hayim Liberzohn, p. 17)

22:8:7 Before going on a journey, give some charity. (*Shulchan Aruch*, chap. 68)

22:9 GIVE WHENEVER YOU SPEND

We are told in the *Midrash* about Rabbi Tanhum:

If he was going to buy one liter of meat, he would purchase two liters instead: one portion for himself and one portion for the poor.

A practice such as this can be adapted. You can, for example, give some charity whenever you spend any money on yourself. If you carry a special *tzedaka* purse with you, you can put this money in it. (*Kohelet Rabba* 7-2)

23

Speech

23:1 Speech is a world in itself, and many of the most important aspects of our lives are lived through speech. Whole books have been written about how to speak as a Jew should speak. The Torah teaches about the ethical dimensions of speech and how we should not tell lies, slander others, and so on. Frequently, in lists of *hanhagot*, one will be found that names these aspects of speech one after another, and says to be careful about them. For example:

Stay far away from slander and lies and from flattery and informing and mockery, and also from idle conversation, and certainly from lewd talk, even between husband and wife. (Rabbi David ha-Levi of Steppin, *Hanhagot Tzaddikim*, p. 56, #23)

In a more general sense the goal of virtuous speech is given in the wisdom books of the Torah in such sayings as Proverbs 2:18: "There is one whose sharp words are like sword thrusts; but the speech of the wise is healing."

Most of us know people who fit the first half of this verse; happy are they who have met some whose speech fulfills the second half, for there are such holy people.

Along with the ethical side, the hasidic *rebbe*s also emphasized teachings about purity in speech, and the avoidance of speech about unclean things or the use of unclean expressions.

Never let anything unclean or ugly cross your lips, not even the word for excrement. (*Derech Hayim*, 5-16)

Let nothing unclean be heard on your lips, such as the names of various kinds of idolatry . . . and let nothing lewd or licentious be heard from your mouth, as for example, mentioning prostitutes or similar things. (*Sefer ha-Yirah* of Rabbeinu Yonah, p. 200)

One should not only avoid undesirable types of speech, but more positively:

You should make it a habit always to intermingle in your conversation something connected with a *mitzvah*, or some Torah or words of *musar*, in order to sanctify your speech. (Rabbi Natan Netta of Shinovi, *Hanhagot Tzaddikim* [III], vol. 1, p. 268, #10)

Not only is the content of speech important, but also how it is delivered. Many hasidic *rebbe*s taught that you should speak softly and quietly, with humility. Rabbi Rafael of Bershad specifically emphasized that the tone of your voice should be gentle:

He would teach us to be careful even about the tone of our voice. For example, if you have to tell someone in your family not to do something, you should not speak in an angry or strict tone, but softly and gently. And he would remind us of what is written in the Ramban's Letter, that all your speech with your fellow man should be spoken gently. (*Midrash Pinhas*, p. 40, #32)

(See "Anger," 37:1 for more about this.)

23:2 D'VEKUT

There is still another hasidic goal connected with speech, and it is that during conversation you should maintain your consciousness of God. This is always considered one of the most difficult attainments.

You should see to it that every day you separate yourself for some time to be alone with God, with your mind just on Him, and draw

on yourself fear of Him due to His greatness. Become accustomed to doing this until you reach the level where even when you speak with someone else you will not forget the Creator, blessed be He. (Rabbi Hayim Heikel of Amdur, *Hanhagot Tzaddikim*, p. 43)

Controlling speech and maintaining *d'vekut* during speech is so difficult that some pious people, in order to achieve holiness, almost give up talking. One hasidic story tells of how a hasid of the Holy Jew (Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak of Pshischa) decided not to talk at all except when absolutely necessary, and to speak only words of Torah and prayer. He kept this up for three years until:

His holy master, the Holy Jew of Pshischa, sent a message with some hasidim that he should come to him. So he traveled to Pshischa, and when he arrived close to the city at dusk, he came across his *rebbe*, the Holy Jew, who had gone out for a walk in the countryside with some disciples. When the hasid saw his master he jumped out of the carriage and ran to him to receive the greeting of peace. But when the Holy Jew greeted him, he said, "Young man, why don't I see any of your words?" [With his spiritual sight he did not see that this hasid had any hold in the World of Speech.] He answered simply, "Why should I speak unnecessarily? Isn't it better instead just to speak words in learning Torah and praying?" But his holy master responded, "If that's the situation, prepare a pipe for yourself, and get enough tobacco for the whole night; come to me after the Evening Prayers and I'll teach you how to speak." And he sat with him the whole night, teaching him how to speak. After this, he began to talk again. (*Ohel Elimelech*, p. 72, #172)

There are various ways to approach the goal of God-consciousness in conversation. On the one hand, due attention to the religious and ethical aspects of your speech and to its purity while you are engaged in conversation is certainly a service of God and a demanding one. Moreover, it can be a method of maintaining awareness of God. But the hasidic methods also include those that are more direct.

23:2:1 For a method which is direct but also "negative" in aspect, see the quote in Chapter 1, p. 12 that when you speak about worldly things you should be like a man who leaves home and is thinking continually about when he will be able to return—to the Upper World with God. This kind of consciousness during speech will itself keep your mind on God

23:2:2 A more positive approach is that when you talk to people you should somehow talk to, or before, God.

23:2:2:1 When you want to maintain your God-consciousness while talking with others, see to it that everything you say is directed to God; you can also think that all the words you speak are coming to you from God who gives you the power of speech [more about this below]—and as a result you will not forget God when you converse. (*Darkei Tzedek*, p. 4, #16)

23:2:2:2 The light of the living God rests above your head; so be silent in your awe of Him. When you speak, speak with Him and let the one who is listening [the person you are talking to] hear [by the way]. This way you will be able to cleave to Him, blessed be He, always in *d'vekut*. (*Sefer Haredim*, chap. 66, #14)

23:2:2:3 When you speak with your fellow man, let your intention be to speak with your Creator. (*Sefer Haredim*, chap. 66, #118)

23:2:2:4 You should also make it a practice, when you ask any favor of another person, that you have it in your mind as you ask that you are asking God.

This was the level of the earlier *tzaddikim*, and also of Daniel. See Rashi on Daniel 4:16 where, though Daniel ostensibly is speaking to Nebuchadnezzar, he is really directing a prayer to God. This is also what is said about Nehemiah, where he says "and so I prayed"—all these words were spoken to God and not to the king [see below]. And so too in the *Gemara* [*Avodah Zarah* 16b], the story in which Rabbi Eliezer, when brought before the court, says: "I have complete trust in the Judge." He was speaking to the Roman judge but directed his words to God.

And this is a very great thing, and a high level, and its attainment requires much practice. (*Darkei Tzedek*, p. 4, #17)

23:2:2:5 The Besht said that:

When talking to your friend, and just speaking about this and that, at the same time you should be doing unifications [meditations that unite the upper and lower worlds¹]. The Maharsha, in his interpretation [on *Rosh HaShanah* 3b] said that when Nehemiah was conversing with the king Artahshasta, he was with these same words really praying to God, blessed be He. (*Sefer Baal Shem Tov al ha-Torah*, vol. 1, p. 253)

In *Rosh HaShanah* 3b, Nehemiah 2:5 is translated/interpreted as: "So I prayed to the God of Heaven, and I said to the King [of the Universe]." He seemingly spoke the words to the king Artahshasta, but his intention when he made his request was to speak to God, the King of the Universe.

23:2:2:6 Another method of attaining God-consciousness during conversation is to turn every topic, at least for yourself, to God, and be reminded of God and His service in everything spoken about:

It is a good spiritual practice to "go upward" [to raise each thing to its spiritual root Above] when speaking with others. When the people you are with are talking about something connected with some kind of love for example, you should turn your mind to love of God, and think of how you should love only Him, blessed be He; or when the talk is about wealth, you should think here too that it is from God that wealth comes to a man, and so also honor. And do the same when the conversation is about anything relating to beauty, splendor, or glory. So too when the talk is about worldly fears, think that you should fear only God. And so with all other things. You should attend to what is before you, and as a result you will never cease from God-consciousness, even when you are conversing with other people. (*Darkei Tzedek*, p. 3, #15)

Rabbi Israel Baal Shem said: "Sometimes when I am sitting among people who are conversing idly, I first attach myself in *d'vekut* with God, blessed be He, and then I bind all their words with greater attachment [to their spiritual roots]. (*Likkutim Yekarim*, p. 5a)

23:2:2:7 Some *tzaddikim* always saw that their words had some twist toward holiness and carried more than one meaning:

The essence of the perfection of the *tzaddikim* is that they always have their minds on Him and attached to Him without any separation whatsoever, God forbid. Even when they speak of something about their worldly needs, they direct and form their speech so that they will not be separated from Him, God forbid. Their words are chosen to carry two meanings and to arouse some fear of God or *d'vekut* or unification. So too with what he hears from someone talking to him, he also understands his words as if they were holy words. . . . You have to teach yourself to be able to speak in your ordinary speech in a way that you are not separated from your *d'vekut*. (From *Divrei Moshe*; found in *Lev Sameah ha-Hadash*, p. 73, n. 1 and *Derech Emunah u'Maaseh Rav*, p. 31)

An example of speech with two meanings is this story about Rabbi Hayim of Tzanz:

His daughter . . . died during his lifetime and on the first *Shabbat* after the seven days of mourning he asked that some English porter be brought to the table and he drank some of it. Then he said, "People say that porter is bitter. But the truth is that it's not bitter, it's just strong." And he repeated these words a number of times with great fervor. Everyone understood that he was speaking about the bitter experience he had gone through and was saying that everything is for good and not bad. (*Mekor Hayim*, p. 22, #63)

23:2:3 There are many stories of *tzaddikim* in great *d'vekut* while they seemingly engage in worldly conversation. Here is one report about the hasidic *rebbe*, Rabbi David Biderman of Lelov-Jerusalem (d. 1917):

The *gaon* Rabbi Mordechai Girsh, the head of Yeshivah Hasdei Avot in Hebron and the leader of the *rebbe's* people there, said: "I have seen many *tzaddikim*, but another *tzaddik* like Rebbe Reb David! I have not seen—a *tzaddik* who is in *d'vekut* with God even when he converses about insignificant matters. For I have seen him when he was talking about worldly matters of no import, and yet an inner conflagration was bursting out of him—his limbs were trembling and the arteries of his head were swelling up and sticking out, and his heart was pounding like a drum—from his supernal fear of God. (*Tiferet Beit David*, p. 104)

23:2:4 So far the teachings quoted have been mostly about speaking; but of course hearing is the other half of the world of speech.

The Besht:

In all the . . . world there is nothing but the Light of the Infinite One, blessed be He; which is hidden within all things. And all the verses, such as "There is none but Him" and "I fill heaven and earth"—are to be understood according to their literal meaning that there is no act or speech or thought whose essence is not the Godliness that is hidden and contracted within it.

So when one looks well, with his mind's eye, on all the things before his eyes, on their inner essence and their vitality, and not their surface and external side alone, he will not see anything but the Divine power within them, which gives them their vitality, brings them into being, and preserves them each and every minute.

And when he listens well to the inner voice which is within the material voice and sound that his ears hear, he will not hear anything other than the voice of God, which enlivens and brings into being, that very minute, the sound he hears. (*Hadrachot ha-Besht*, end of *Divrei Shmuel* [The teachings of Rabbi Shmuel of Slonim])

23:2:5 It is a hasidic practice to understand all things that happen to you (and everything that happens to you is from God) as a hint or message from God. This is particularly true of words spoken to you, regardless of how the speaker intends them. (This is briefly mentioned at the end of the quote from *Divrei Moshe* in 23:2:2:7.)

23:2:5:1 How should we understand the verse "A voice in the desert cries out: Clear the way of the Lord!" [Isaiah 40:3]? In every word you hear another speaking, even from ordinary people, from there too it is a voice calling out: "Clear the way to serve the Lord!"² So in what you hear there will also be something from God. And you should believe with perfect faith that everything that happens to you comes about through the Divine Providence of the Creator of the world, who has brought this to you, to hear these very words and no others, on this day and no other.

There is a time for every thing and for every purpose, and it is not in vain that God sent these words for you to hear, now and not on another day, to you and not to someone else. Because the thing is for *you* and it is for you to fix something spiritual here, not for someone else; that is why it was sent to you.

It is explained in the holy books that the way of the *tzaddikim* in all the things that they are involved in, is to separate out the holy sparks [focus on the spiritual aspect and separate out good from evil and holy from profane]. They see in every place the glory of God, for the whole world is full of His glory, and there is no place where he is not. So whenever people speak to them, even when ordinary people speak to them about ordinary and this-worldly things, the *tzaddikim* hear just the spiritual lesson for their own selves, whatever they can take from what they hear. (*DhTvH Y*, II pp. 36b–37a, Dibbur #24 and 25; the first of these quotes is taken from *Or ha-Meir*, Beshallah, and the second from *Divrei Hayim*, Mikaitz)

23:2:5:2 When you merit to bend your ears to truly hear all the speech in the world, you will hear that all of it is crying out to you and giving you hints to return to Him, blessed be He, for from all

the things and words in this world the glory of God cries out. . . . And when you accustom yourself to hear, in everything spoken, just the inside, the voice of God within it, the light of your soul will shine on you with the light of understanding, with an awesome and wonderful illumination. [*Tikkun Kriat Sh'ma al ha-Mitah mai ha-Arizal*, Bratzlav, p. 81]

23:2:5:3 There is no speech from which you cannot hear the voice of instruction in how to serve God, even in words spoken in the marketplace when one person speaks to another about buying and selling. . . . Perhaps this was a hint of David, in the psalm where he says, "I will hear what God says," that is, even from the words spoken in the marketplace. (*DhTvY*, III p. 77, Tochachat Musar #1, from *Or ha-Meir*)

23:2:5:4 There are various hasidic stories that illustrate how the *tzaddikim* would hear the voice of God in what was spoken to them, or even overheard by them. Here are three examples:

23:2:5:4:1 The holy rabbi, the Rebbe Reb Elimelech of Lizensk, and his brother, the holy rabbi, Rebbe Reb Zusya [of Hanipol], were wandering for a number of years "in exile," sharing the fate of the Divine Presence which is in exile, so as to heal the spiritual breach in the world.

Once, they arrived in a certain village, and though the head of the village wasn't in his house, his wife took them in as guests. When her husband came home in the middle of the night, he lit a candle on the table as he worked to mend a rip in his fur coat.

The two brothers who were in bed but awake, heard how his wife called to him saying, "Hurry up and fix the coat while the candle is still burning." And one brother said to the other, "Did you hear what the lady of the house is saying to her husband?"

This is a great teaching, to fix yourself quickly and repent while your soul is still within you. (*Siah Sarfei Kodesh*, II, p. 80, #260)

23:2:5:4:2 Once, when the Holy Jew was taking a walk in the countryside with his disciples, they came across a hay wagon that had overturned. The gentile driver called out to them to help him put it upright and reload the hay. They went to his aid, but try as they could, they were not able to turn it over. "We can't do it," they said. But the gentile yelled at them angrily in Polish, "You can all right, but you don't want to!" Then the Holy Jew turned to his disciples and said, "Do you hear what this gentile is saying? He says

we can lift up the *Shechinah* from the dust, but we don't want to." (*Sichot Hayim*, p. 9)

23:2:5:4:3 The holy Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov, of blessed memory, was, as a young man, very poor (may the Merciful One save us), and his house was next door to someone whose business was to travel to the market on market day. Once, his neighbor's compassion was aroused over the sad state of the holy rabbi and he said that he should come with him to market day and stand by his merchandise so it would not be stolen. For his trouble he would pay him enough to feed his family for the week. The holy rabbi agreed. But when he arrived in the city early in the morning, he went to the *Beit Midrash* to pray with a congregation, and he stayed so long in prayer that when he returned, the merchant, seeing that he would be no use to him at all in this job, did not give him any of the money he had promised him.

When the holy rabbi came home and his wife and children found out that he did not bring back any money at all, they cried out, "You didn't bring back anything from market day?" Hearing this the holy rabbi fell on the ground and began sobbing loudly. When they asked him why he was crying, he said, "Why shouldn't I cry? Wasn't I at the market for just one day, and you asked me 'What have you brought back?' But what about the other market day—that they sent me here from Above—and I've been here for twenty-five years. When I return they'll demand, 'What have you brought back with you?'—and I won't be able to answer them. Why shouldn't I cry?" (*Siftei Kodesh*, p. 84)

23:2:5:4:4 See the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov quoted in "Repentance," 14:5:3, where "hearing of the hints" is mentioned, along with related matters; 14:6 has other stories of this kind.

23:2:5:4:5 Even hearing the messages from heaven requires intelligence and discrimination. A hasidic story tells how a *misnagid* once came before Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Ladi and rebuked him for his supposedly haughty ways, in having a servant standing at his door, and so on. The *rebbe* put his head down on his hand on the table, and stayed that way for some time. Then he lifted his head and answered the man, explaining how a leader has to maintain some separation from the people. The explanation was, indeed, accepted, and the man left; but when he did, the *rebbe's* son asked him why he had put his head on his arm like that, because for the answer he gave that [degree of meditation

and concentration] was not necessary. His father then told him that at first he had to know if this man (regardless of his own motives) was delivering to him a heavenly message criticizing him for pride. So he put his head down to consider if there was pride and haughtiness in his actions. When he saw that there was not, he realized that this was not such a heavenly message and he answered what he answered. (*Sippurei Hasidim*, vol. 1, p. 354)

23:2:6 A great rabbi and *tzaddik* of our time has said that he feels that methods of direct God-consciousness in conversation (such as those discussed above) make it seem as if talking to people is not in itself good enough—but it is.

Perhaps one reconciliation of the two attitudes is to take the view that the person you are speaking to is in the image of God, or (much the same) a son or daughter of God, and that you should speak to him or her with the greatest love and reverence. As it says in *Or ha-Ganuz l'Tzaddikim*:

You should speak with your fellow-man with great reverence and love, as if you were speaking with the Holy One, blessed be He [p. 31]. When you see any person, imagine the Being of God and His effulgent light flooding through him to you [p. 62].

When you see the fellow human you are conversing with as closely connected to God, you can talk with *him* with reverence and love, and yet maintain your awareness of *God*.

Rabbi Mordechai of Tchernobil suggested something like this also:

The main thing is to believe with perfect faith that the Glory [*Shechinah*] of God fills all the earth, and there is no place where He is not. And when you look at the world you are looking at God, blessed be He. And when you converse with someone, you are conversing with the soul within him (for were the soul to leave his body you would not be able to talk to him at all, for he would be as lifeless as a stone). [So] you are conversing with the soul within him—it is just that you cannot see it, just as you cannot see God, Who is the soul of all souls. So you should believe this, and say to yourself: "He is here and present—I just cannot see him." (*Likkutei Torah*, Hadracha 6, p. 7)

(See the chapters on "Humility and Pride," 38:3 and "Loving and Honoring Our Fellow Men" [9].)

23:3 THE SPEECH OF THE WISE IS HEALING

As in the quote from Proverbs (23:1), our speech should not only be ethical but healing. We should train our tongues to speak well of others and to be accustomed to give blessings.

23:3:1 When we hear of others' worthy hopes or plans, we should bless them that God fulfill their wishes for good. (See "Pious Phrases," 26:11 for an example.)

23:3:2 Whenever you mention someone, anyone, in conversation, make it a habit to bless him, with a good eye and a good heart. (*Derech Hayim*, 7-8)

23:3:3 When you praise someone for his wisdom or his children, or speak about his great wealth, etc., you must then give him a blessing, to ward off the evil eye. (Rabbi Hayim Yosef David Azulai, *Hanhagot Tzaddikim*, p. 67, #15)

Regardless of what people in former times understood by the "evil eye," what it can mean to us in this instance is that praise arouses in the mind its opposite, or sometimes jealousy—and to ward this off we should bless the person we praise.

23:3:4 Be careful never to speak against the Jewish people; never say that a certain Jewish custom is no good, or any other bad thing, God forbid. But rather accustom your tongue always to speak good about the people Israel, and in their defense. (*Derech Hayim*, 7-43)

23:3:5:1 You should refrain from speaking derogatorily of any man, and even of any creature or animal. (Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, in the list of his *hanhagot*, #7, in *Reshit Hochmah*, H. Y. Walman edition, Jerusalem, vol. 1, p. 50)

23:3:5:2 Never speak derogatorily of any creature of God, not even a cow or a wild animal or birds. (*Derech Hayim*, 7-44)

23:4 FROM ONE SOURCE

It is a very high level when talking with another person to consider it as if you are talking with yourself, as if the conversation was all within one mind and self. For all souls have their root in the *Shechinah*. This is another way of maintaining *d'vekut* in speech (see 23:2:2:1). And if you do this you will not be as critical of what the other person says (a very common tendency and failing), and you will not disagree as readily and get angry.

It should be as if the thought the other person speaks had arisen in your own mind; then, even if it seems wrong or strange, your response will be sympathetic even in disagreement.

The Baal Shem Tov:

When you speak, do not think that you are the one speaking—because it is the Divine life-energy within you, God, blessed be He, speaking in you. And by this [awareness] you lift up the act of speech to its Source. And equanimity is also included in this reflection; for just as everything you speak is from Him, blessed be He, so is everything that your fellow man speaks from Him. (*Tzavaat ha-Ribash*, p. 21)

[To clarify the comment about equanimity:] You should have equanimity in whatever happens; everything should be equal to you, as in the matter of whether men praise you or abuse you. . . . And whatever occurs, say to yourself, "Isn't this from Him? And if it's acceptable in His eyes [certainly it should be so in mine]." (*Tzavaat ha-Ribash*, p. 2)

23:5 BEGINNINGS

Each day make a special effort with the first words you speak to another person, that they be spoken with the right awareness. And make a special effort with the first words of every conversation, to begin the right way.

23:6 AT PEACE

In Hebrew a conversation opens and closes with the blessing of peace (*Shalom*). So at the beginning and end of a conversation you should see that you are in the right relation with the other person.

The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, after lamenting how too often today the *Shalom* exchanged in greeting is not what it once was, writes:

But the Torah-inspired *Shalom Aleichem*—the *Shalom Aleichem* of bygone days—is a vehicle for the light of love. (*Likkutei Dibburim*, vol. 1, p. 4)

When you begin a conversation, make your opening a blessing in your intention, regardless of the expression used in greeting.

During a conversation there can be tension and offense (often without either party being fully aware of it). Knowing this, speak words of parting that reestablish the right relationship: say words of blessing or peace and, if necessary, at the end of the conversation, also humbly ask forgiveness in case of any offense. (See "Pious Phrases," 26:20.)

23:7 AFTERWARD

After a conversation it is good to go over in your mind the quality of your speech—and repair what needs fixing.

23:8 CONTROLLING YOUR SPEECH

Control over your speech is essential in holiness.

23:8:1 Never let anything be uttered by you unless you know that it is the will of God that you say it. (*Derech Hayim*, 2-17)

23:8:2 Twice a week you should have a set period for reflection and meditation on how you should be as careful in giving out words as in giving out money. (*Hayei Musar*, III, p. 89)

23:8:3 Just as it is good to gain control of your eating through interruptions, so is the same true about speech and conversation. In Chapter 3, pp. 60-61 we quoted how Rabbi Mendel of Premishlan "in the midst of a conversation would interrupt himself and stop for a while to break his talk-lust."

Along the same lines, it is possible to have a "fast" of words and speech, just as you can fast from food.

It is better to fast by abstaining from talk than by abstaining from food—for when you fast from talking it will not hurt your body or your soul, and it will not weaken you [causing you to lessen your Divine service]. (*Rosh ha-Givah* quoted in *Or Yesharim*, p. 90)

Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin said: Rather than fasting from *Shabbat* to *Shabbat* [as very pious people would sometimes do], it is better to fast from lies and untruths, and not speak a false word from one *Shabbat* to the next. (*Mazkeret Shem ha-Gedolim*, p. 196)

These two quotes should be considered as practical suggestions.

A fast of speech can be more or less strict. The Hafetz Hayim occasionally instructed people to engage in such a fast and "not speak during that day at all, except what is absolutely necessary" (*Michtivei ha-Hafetz Hayim ha-Hadash*, vol. 2, III, p. 74, #7). Another source, however, says:

The difficulty involved in [a fast of speech] is that one must put a rein on one's mouth to refrain from speaking even about one's needs, and to be even more careful not to speak unnecessary things, and still more careful about entirely idle conversation. That day, you should use your speech only for Torah and prayer. (Rabbi Yitzhak Alfiah, *Hanhagot Tzaddikim* [III], vol. 2, p. 836, #9)

23:8:4 Control of speech implies the avoidance not only of forbidden talk (lies, etc.), but of idle conversation.

23:8:4:1 As much as possible, avoid idle conversation. This was one of the ten pious customs of Rav [a famous rabbi of the Talmud], who in all of his life never talked idly. (Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, in the list of his *hanhagot*, #23, *Reshit Hochmah*, Walman edition p. 50)

23:8:4:2 There is nothing so good for purifying the soul as keeping a rein over your mouth and eschewing idle conversation. Not only is this the case, but it aids greatly in having *kavvanah* in prayer, as alien thoughts do not intrude and distract you.

There is a story of a hasid who, after his death, appeared to his wife in a dream, and seeing the hair of his head and beard all aglow like a torch, in his glory, she asked him, "By what did you merit all this?" He answered that it was because he spoke as little as possible of things other than Torah and the fear of God—for the Holy One,

blessed be He, is sure to care for those who exert themselves to avoid profane talk. (*Kav ha-Yashar*, chap. 12)

23:8:4:3 Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov:

Keep yourself from empty conversation . . . and all the more so from forbidden speech. If you get involved in one or the other, fine or penalize yourself somehow and meditate immediately on turning back to God, and confess. (*Hanhagot Adam*, #20)

(See "Psalms," 16:15 about "fixing" sins of speech with holy speech, by words of Torah or the recitation of Psalms.)

23:8:4:4 Watch over your mouth and your speech, for this is an important fence in the service of God. Therefore, be very careful not to speak unnecessarily, and . . . each time you speak improperly or to no purpose, fine yourself and give something to *tzedaka*. (Rabbi Yaakov Hagiz, *Zichron l'Vnai Yisrael* #1 and 2, in *YHVt*, p. 38)

23:8:4:5 Rabbi Yosi Ber of Brisk always had a snuffbox on his table. When he was about to converse with someone, he would first open it up, glance within, and then begin to talk. One of those close to him could not overcome his curiosity, and took a look inside, where he found engraved the abbreviation W.K.H.M.A.T.K.H.F.T. Not knowing what this meant, he asked the rabbi about it, who told him: "It is from the verse of Scripture: 'Whoso keeps his mouth and tongue, keeps himself from trouble'" [Proverbs 21:23]. (*Midor Dor*, vol. 2, #1619)

23:8:4:6 Although there is great value in avoiding idle talk, there is still a time to talk and a time to listen—for human brotherhood can be established through speech, and conversation can be a vessel for love. The rabbis say that when you are burdened with anxieties you should talk over your troubles with another and get them out. The Seer of Lublin said:

You should receive every person with warmth, and bear his yoke, and treat him with gentleness, as if he were your king. It is part of human kindness to listen to him talk, even if he overdoes it; but at the very same time you should not forget the Creator, blessed be He, at all. (*Zot Zichron*, p. 3)

Here is a story about the great *musar* teacher, Rabbi Israel Salanter:

Once our master and teacher and rabbi had a conversation with one of his relatives about worldly things, and he was speaking with him in a jovial way. One of his students, who was a God-fearing person, overheard the drift of this conversation and it seemed to him that the rabbi was talking needlessly. So later he spoke with him about the subject of avoiding idle conversation, and dared to ask him about the conversation with that man.

Our master, in his humility, did not take umbrage at the question, but answered him, telling him that this person was very depressed, and it was very much an act of kindness to try to cheer him up and remove his anxiety and sadness. "And," said Rabbi Israel, "with what could I bring him some joy—by talking with him about the fear of God and *musar*? No, the only way was to talk with him in a pleasant and amusing manner about things of this world."

From this story we can judge how carefully our rabbi weighed all his words in the scale of the fear of God. (*Or Yisrael*, p. 112)

23:9 CONTROLLING WHAT YOU HEAR

It takes intelligence and determination to control, to the extent possible, what you hear.

23:9:1 About Rabbi Shlomo Leib of Lentshno:

He never engaged in any idle conversation. Even from his youth he was careful to guard himself against hearing idle talk and, even more so, bad talk, God forbid.

When he was young, he was living with a tailor, and he never came back to the house until all were asleep. Once, during the winter, it happened that they closed the *Beit Midrash* for some reason and [not being able to stay there to study and pray] he was forced to return home.

When he approached the house, however, he heard the tailor, as usual, still at work with his young helpers, and, also as usual, they were talking about indecent and unclean things. As a result, Rabbi Shlomo did not go in, but stayed outside walking this way and that, for it was very cold outside. He became so cold that he almost died, and he lay down on the earth from weakness; but in spite of this he still would not go in—for he was determined that he would not hear idle conversation. And when he lay down that way, a miracle occurred and the one candle they had inside went out, so they were forced to finish for the night and go to sleep. Seeing this he went in.

"And from then on," said the holy rabbi, "my ears developed the ability to hear what people are whispering even at far distances." (*Eser Atarot*, p. 21, #3)

Rabbi Shlomo Leib himself refrained from inappropriate speech, and did everything possible to avoid hearing it from others. What is one to do, however, if one does hear such things?

Rabbi Uri of Strelisk said:

"You should guard your ears more so than all your other senses, even though what you hear is not completely in your control and sometimes something which damages your soul, God forbid, will penetrate into your ear. The main way to deal with this is to pray to God that it not damage you; then, certainly, it will not have any bad effect at all. This is a general principle, that you should pray to God that a [spiritually] hurtful thing not cause you harm." (*Imrei Kodesh ha-Shalem*, p. 15, #40)

23:10 WHAT TO TALK ABOUT

The best use of speech is to talk always about God, about Torah, about holy people, and about holy ways and good deeds.

When you converse about wicked people you can, as a result, have thoughts of wickedness and draw evil into the world, God forbid; you should rather talk always about the good traits and deeds of the *tzaddikim*, and so bring good into the world. (*Darkei Tzedek*, p. 6, #40)

