

“Everyone’s Entitled To My Opinion”

Jews love to give their opinion. What do you think of Trump? What about Netanyahu? Do you hear who got engaged? What do you think of the shidduch? They’ve been married a while and don’t have any kids – what do you think is going on?

It’s amazing to me how many times people have asked my opinion on questions like these. My response is usually “how do I know?” Occasionally it’s “Why is this any of my business?” The reaction is often one of surprise – how could you not have an opinion?

Sometimes people ask my opinion on factual questions; how many people do you think live in that town? What medical treatment do you think is the best? Will this get me in trouble with the IRS? Questions that I am clearly not qualified to answer.

In 8th grade here in Israel the girls have to memorize two chapters of Pirkei Avos. My daughter got the fifth chapter and when she came on a particular Mishna she started laughing. “This one will be easy” she said “you say it all the time”. It is the Mishna that describes a wise man. One of the seven traits of a wise man is when you ask him something he hasn’t heard he admits “I haven’t heard it”. My daughter has heard those words from me many times.

What is it that drives people to offer opinions on subjects that are clearly none of their business? ...

Why do you think that we Yidden offer our opinion any more than anyone else?

Fair question. There is an old joke – two Jews, three opinions. I can tell you from experience that when I’ve told that over people invariably correct me – four Jews, five opinions, 10 Jews, 11 opinions. I can’t even get a group of Jews to agree on the punchline!

More to the point, the USA has over 300 million people and two political parties. Great Britain has three. Israel has three religious parties, three right wing parties, three left wing parties; you get the idea. Churches are not constantly having “break off” churches, neither do mosques.

So there is something unique about us Jews.

I have several ideas and as I mentioned in the title I’m happy to share my opinion.

After all, I’m a Jew too!

One is that we Jews have a strong sense of *emes*, truth. Tell a story and someone will say “that’s not how it goes” and proceed to repeat the story word for word. Except that it was Vilna, not Volozhin. This *midda* has allowed us to search for and preserve the truth for many generations.

There is a deeper idea that I heard many times from HaRav Moshe Shapiro *zt”l*. Hashem created the world with the power of speech. He spoke and the world came into existence. That, explains the Maharal, is why the words for “thing” and “speech” are spelled identically: *davar* דבר and *daber* דבר.

When we speak we understand that we have the power to affect the world. *Hakol kol Yaakov*, the power of the Jewish people is in their voice. We daven when people are sick because we know we have the ability to change the physical reality with our words.

So when we offer an opinion on a subject, we aren’t just talking – we’re doing. That’s why *lashon hara* is so serious. We can also destroy the world, not only people’s reputations, with the power of our words.

(Excerpted from essay by Rabbi Dovid Orlofsky)