



Don't Tell Me What I Shouldn't Do

In recent years, researchers have discovered that negative advertising has the opposite effect. Merely talking about a bad behavior actually encourages it further. This, needless to say, is an old Jewish concept.

The Great Discovery

Oxford University once conducted a wide-ranging study on which types of advertisements influence people and which do not. They interviewed 2,000 people in five different countries to determine what effect advertising has. One of the important discoveries made by the research was related to smoking. Many ads try to convince people to not smoke—but the research discovered that the ads actually triggered the urge to smoke in people. As soon as the people in the study would see the image of a cigarette, it would awaken the inner desire to smoke.

On every cigarette pack today, there is a huge warning covering half the box stating that “smoking is harmful to your health”—but researchers concluded that this warning is one of the leading causes of smoking. The will to smoke is stronger than the warning that it’s unhealthy to smoke.

In other words, when someone gives you a whole speech on how eating chocolate is bad for your health, what do you want to do at that very moment? Eat chocolate!

Chassidism's Age-Old Message

This great discovery, that cost seven million dollars and two years of scientific research, was discovered hundreds of years ago by Chasidic philosophy.

One of the big debates between the Mussar movement and the Chasidic movement is on this very subject. The Mussar movement deals with avoiding the negative. Everyone knows that you're not allowed to speak Lashon Hora, which in Hebrew means "evil talk." Lashon Hora means gossip, slander and generally speaking negatively about others. Even people who don't know one word of Hebrew have heard of Lashon Hora. But when you talk about Lashon Hora all the time, even if you're only saying that you're not allowed to speak Lashon Hora, what's left in your head? The words, "Lashon Hora"!

It's the same if a rabbi gets up and starts talking about modesty: How far you have to go to wear clothing that is modest, the importance of being modest, what parts of the body must be covered to be considered modest, and so on. The more he goes into details, the more it arouses what we call the "Yetzer Hora," the heart's darker desires, and not only does his speech not accomplish anything positive but just the opposite—it drags his listeners down to even darker places.

As the Rebbe himself wrote with regards to Mussar's philosophy: "Repeated emphasis on a philosophy of avoiding the negative, lends a foothold, in some measure, to the negative."

The philosophy of Chassidism, on the other hand, is that we shouldn't focus on avoiding the negative because that only stimulates and causes more negative. On the contrary: We need to deal with positive things. Instead of speaking about Lashon Horah, speak about Ahavas Yisroel (love of fellow Jew) instead. Even if your listener is not about to suddenly turn into the most loving person in town, what will be left in

his head is the subject of loving your fellow Jew. That's why the Rebbe almost never mentioned negative things and only spoke about the positive.

Modesty, for example, was a subject that the Rebbe hardly talked about, and for the same reason—because talking about it only drags a person down. That's also why Judaism never believed in youth education regarding a certain three-letter-word— because the more you talk about that subject, the more you drag children into it.

Chasidic philosophy keeps the mind busy with positive and spiritual things, leaving no place for negative things. The more you elevate the person to spiritual things, the less he will be busy with negative things. As the Rebbe wrote in a letter, “Chasidic essays make the heart happy, lift up the soul and thus lift the person up and out of the mud.”

The Tablets' Uneven Balance

This lesson comes to us from this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah, we read the Ten Commandments. How many letters are there are in the Ten Commandments?

In the original Hebrew, the Ten Commandments contain exactly 620 letters. These correspond to the 613 Mitzvos of the Torah plus the Seven Noahide Laws. But when we contemplate the contents of the Ten Commandments, we'll discover something very interesting.

The Ten Commandments were written on two stone tablets—five on one tablet and five on the other. But what is interesting is that the first five, which deal with spiritual matters, are much longer than the second five.

For example, the first commandment, to believe in the One G-d, does not only say, “I am the Lord your G-d” but also, “Who took you out

from the Land of Egypt etc.”

The second commandment, the prohibition to worship false gods, also goes on at length—because it is not something that people are attracted to. Because of this, the Torah gives itself permission to expand and explain: “Do not make for yourselves the form of any image that is in the heavens above or the earth below...”

And the same thing is true for observing the Shabbos—the commandment goes into lengthy detail and even gives a reason why one must observe the Shabbos: “Because G-d created the heaven and earth in six days...”

Even the Commandment of honoring your father and mother, a fundamental tenet of the Torah, adds that one gets a reward for honoring his or her father and mother: “Your days will be lengthened.”

But when the Ten Commandments get to things you’re not allowed to do—things in the negative category, things that a person’s heart lusts for—here the Torah keeps it as short as possible. “Don’t steal” is just one word, “steal,” with a “don’t” added. Nothing more. “Don’t murder” is the same thing.

Here, the Torah is teaching us that with negative things, no elaboration is necessary. True, there is no choice and it must be explicitly stated that it is forbidden to do these things—but we keep them as short as possible.

Out of the 620 letters of the Ten Commandments, less than 100 are dedicated to the negative side. The rest deal with the positive.

The Baal Shem Tov’s Message

According to a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov, the normal order of things is that one first avoids the negative and then focuses on the positive. This means that a person first must stop doing bad things,

and only then does it make sense to start speaking about positive things with him.

However, the Baal Shem Tov adds, in our day, before the coming of Moshiach, the order is reversed. Don't wait for someone to avoid the negative before working with him. To the contrary. Begin with positive things immediately. In other words, tell the other what he or she should do, not what is forbidden to do. In this way, the person will automatically be avoiding the negative.

The source of this philosophy is the Ten Commandments: First, G-d spoke about the positive, and only then did He touch upon the negative.

Don't focus on the negative. Spread light, and the bad will melt away on its own.