



Talk Is Cheap?! (Not Necessarily!)

Why is verbal expression important and what impact does it have?

Verbal Study

There are people who have the tendency to talk to themselves. Sit down beside one of them and you will hear all about his day. They say that one such person was asked why he talks to himself. The man replied that he enjoys talking to an intelligent person...

In Jewish tradition it has become the custom to say almost everything out loud. Take Torah study for example. If you were to visit a Yeshiva, you would find that upon entering the study hall you are met by a huge tumult, or what we call "Kol Torah" (the voice of Torah study). You would see yeshiva students sitting across from each other arguing loudly with their study partners.

This is quite different from what you might find in a university. In the study halls and libraries of universities silence reigns, each student sits by himself and studies quietly. Even the "conversers" are talking in whispers, not to disturb the "studiers."

But in the Yeshivos, students are encouraged to study loudly, and even once a yeshiva student has left the yeshiva he will often take a few minutes and learn by himself, also quite loudly! Stand outside his door and you will hear one man studying alone, arguing with himself! "Why does Rava say this, and why does Abaye say that." One minute he's siding with Rashi's interpretation, and the very next minute he's

backing the opposing interpretation, and interrogating himself back and forth. People like these we would usually lock up in halfway houses, but when it comes to studying Torah this type of behavior is very much encouraged.

Even Jewish law states that if one were to study Torah by reading the words in his mind and not speak the words with his mouth, he has not fulfilled the mitzvah of Torah study (Hilchos Talmud Torah 2:12). The Alter Rebbe in his code of Jewish law therefore decrees that one who learns Torah only in thought and not through speech need not make the blessing over the mitzvah of Torah study, for “thought is not the same as speaking” (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 47:2).

Why Is It So Important

The main point of Torah study is to understand what you are studying. If you were to study Torah sheBa'al Peh (the oral law) and not understand what you were studying, it would be considered as though you hadn't studied at all, because Torah is about understanding the will of G-d. Why then, is it so important that the study be conducted specifically through speech? (See Likkutei Sichos vol. 25 pg. 326)

In many places throughout Judaism, we find the same idea. Let's look at prayer as an example. Shulchan Aruch states that “one who pronounces the prayers with his lips, even though he cannot hear the words he is saying, he has prayed. But one who prays in his heart and does not pronounce the prayers with his lips has not prayed at all, for ‘thought is not the same as speaking’” (101:4).

Isn't prayer “the service of the heart”? Shouldn't the most important thing be what your thoughts are during prayer?

In this week's Torah portion (Naso) we again find a similar law. The verse says, “When a man or woman commits any of the sins... they

shall confess the sins which they committed” (5:6-7). Rambam explains that “When a person will do teshuva and return from his sinful ways he must confess his sins before G-d... that is, a verbal confession.” The Torah is telling us that if we want to repent we must verbally confess all our wrongdoings!

Here is the same question. Isn't the most important part of repentance the regret that you feel in your heart? As Rambam himself states, “If one verbally confesses his sins but has not firmly decided in his heart to change it's just like immersing in the mikvah with an impure animal in your hand.” Just like the immersion cannot cleanse you until you let go of the impurity, confessing without regretting is worthless!

Why then does the Torah require a verbal confession? Why this stubborn insistence that everything Jewish needs to be spoken, otherwise the study or the prayer is null and void?!

Making It Real

Our sages have explained to us that there are things that we know but will never say for G-d created within us this method of self-defense. We instinctively distance ourselves from unpleasant memories or situations. The Talmud relates how when Rabeinu Hakadosh R' Yehuda Hanasi passed away, his students declared, “Anyone who says ‘Rabbi died’ will be stabbed with a sword!” (Kesubos 104a). They were aware that Rabbi had died but they could not utter such horrible words. They were protecting themselves from the sad truth by not speaking the facts.

The same applies to Teshuva. The sinner knows he has sinned but he is not prepared to speak the words “I have sinned!” The verbal confession forces him to face his actions for what they really are and to recognize the true gravity of his behavior for only then can he properly do teshuva.

We find a similar ruling regarding promises and oaths. Rambam writes that a silent promise is not binding at all, for this is not considered a promise. If, however, the words of the promise are spoken but only he heard them, his promise is binding (Hilchos Shavuos 2:10). This is because as long as the oath is only a thought, it remains a fantasy, unreal. Only when put into words does a promise take on true or “tangible” existence.

The true advantage of speech is not only a psychological one. It’s much more practical than that. I once heard from a man who had mastered the art of public speaking that a person should rehearse his speech out loud, even if only to himself. Because through speaking not only do his ideas become so much clearer to him, he may even come upon new ideas that he might not have thought of, had he not put his thoughts into words!

Chassidus explains, “This is why Torah study must be conducted out loud... Because through learning out loud one can come upon new insights into the depths of the laws such as he would not have been able to reach only by thinking... For specifically through speech can one’s deepest intellectual powers be uncovered, for the spoken word forces the intellect to reveal more than it could reveal on its own... And all this is due to the advantage of speech in its source which is loftier even than the root and source of intellect” (Hemshech Rana”t pg. 4).

In other words, speech is rooted in a deeper, loftier level of the soul than thought, and that is why specifically through speaking people can reveal the very depths of their souls.

This is the truest reason why Torah study, prayers, promises and teshuva must be through speech. Because speaking helps us to a deeper level of awareness, which otherwise is impossible to discover.

We can all relate to this idea. Why does a wife want to hear her

husband verbally express his love for even though he's done just that countless times before? This is because every time those loving words are spoken, a newer deeper level of love is revealed.

The same applies to each one of us in our relationship with G-d. In order to truly love the Almighty and constantly reveal ever newer and deeper levels of connection with Him, we need — for our own sake — to keep on telling the Holy One blessed be He again and again, “I love you”!