

## Words Of Encouragement (Edited Transcript)

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Welcome and thank you for listening.

This week's portion deals with some of the laws of war. The parsha begins, 'Ki Teitzei Lamilchama Al Oyvecha- When you go out to war against your enemies'. Every kind of human experience is dealt with in the Torah, even going out to battle. In particular, the Parasha deals with the laws regarding soldiers' conduct on encountering women in the battlefield, and how to approach that situation in the most ethical way possible.

The theme of the laws of war is a continuation of last week's portion. One interesting aspect of last week's portion is the law governing the final speeches made when an army went to war. A special priest was appointed to give the troops courage. He would tell them not to be afraid and to have faith in G-d. The Talmud discusses the exact text of the speech, which is recorded in last week's portion, and how it should be read.

### Kind words

From this, we learn the mitzvah of encouraging people with words. One can do great kindness with words. An example of this is to give people encouragement. The Chofetz Chaim, one of our great sages of the 20th century, points out that there are many dimensions to the commandment of kindness that can be fulfilled through words. There are two major commandments dealing with our treatment of others; one is tzedakah or charity, and the other is chesed or loving kindness. The Talmud says that tzedakah is charity dispensed with financial resources, whilst chesed is assistance given in the form of other help. An important distinction between the two is drawn because tzedakah can only be given by those who have financial resources, while chesed can be done by anybody. Charity always flows from the rich to the poor - from those who have to those who have not; whereas chesed can go in either direction. Even a wealthy person can be a recipient of chesed, of loving kindness, whilst he can't be a recipient of tzedakah, of charity.

There are many physical ways of doing chesed, such as helping someone cross the road or carry their groceries. The Chofetz Chaim describes some of the kindnesses that can be done simply with words. Helping another with words should be the easiest thing in the world because words come so naturally. One example he gives is teaching Torah with words. Another is to use your words to help someone. The Chofetz Chaim says this can be done by interceding on another's behalf with someone who is angry with them. The example he gives is of Joseph's imprisonment with Pharaoh's butler. The Book of Genesis, Bereishit, describes that the butler had a dream which Joseph interpreted, saying that he would be restored to his position. Joseph asked the butler to intercede on his behalf with Pharaoh. When Pharaoh had his own dreams that he couldn't interpret the butler remembered how Joseph had helped him interpret his dreams, and he interceded on Joseph's behalf which led to his release.

A third way is by giving advice. Advice is very important and can be solicited or unsolicited. Sometimes you may see that someone is making a mistake and you feel close enough to them to give them advice. That's what friends are for.

### Definition of friendship

The concept of advice goes to the heart of what friends are really all about. The Mishnah of Pirkei Avot tells us in Chapter 1, 'Acquire for yourself a friend'. Rabbeinu Yonah, a commentator from the Middle Ages, asks what the purpose is of a friend? Firstly, he answers, a friend is someone to learn Torah with, and secondly, a friend is someone who can guide you if he sees you making a mistake. Someone who has an objective eye and criticises out of love, but has your best interests at heart, is a friend. Thirdly, a friend offers advice when you have a choice or decision to make and need an objective perspective. Fourthly, a friend

uses words to give encouragement and upliftment. In life there are problems that cannot be solved and often what is then required is just a kind word of encouragement. The Talmud says in Mishleh, Proverbs, 'If there are worries in a person's heart you should talk about it'. Just talking to another person and their giving you words of encouragement, can lift your spirit. Giving somebody encouragement when they are facing a difficult situation, is the greatest kindness. One of the major sources for it is a Gemara in the Talmud: 'One who gives a coin to a poor person is blessed with six blessings as reward from G-d for that act of charity. But one who speaks words of kindness and encouragement to the poor person is blessed with eleven blessings'. The Tosafot says that you can't just give the words of encouragement and not give charity. People can't live on words of encouragement alone. But what the Talmud is teaching is that if you give money and then encouragement as well, the greater reward is for the encouragement because that lifts the person's spirits. And if their spirits are lifted that gives them a boost to feel confident and ready to face the world.

### **Words of encouragement**

It's a tremendous kindness to reach out to a person with words of encouragement, and that's what we see from the laws of going to battle. The soldiers are frightened and anxious as they are about to leave, but the priest tells them to have faith in G-d which gives them encouragement at their time of great vulnerability.

We learn this mitzvah from G-d Himself. Jacob was running away from home after he had received the blessing from his father Isaac since his brother Esau wanted to harm and even possibly kill him because he had received Esau's blessing. When Jacob stops to sleep on the way G-d comes to him in a dream and gives him words of encouragement, telling him not to be afraid. The commentaries explain that when Jacob woke up he was so excited and elated that he 'lifted up' his feet with joy and enthusiasm

From this we learn a few lessons. Firstly, we learn that even great people like our forefather Jacob faced anxiety and uncertainty about the future. Secondly, we learn that giving encouragement is a form of chesed 'loving kindness'. The Talmud says that we should imitate G-d and that in the same way He was compassionate with Jacob, so too should we be compassionate. So whenever you see a person who needs a bit of a boost, try and give it to them with words.

The Chofetz Chaim points out that only part of the chesed of visiting the sick, Bikkur Cholim, is the actual visit. The Hebrew word Bikkur actually means analyse. The Talmud thus teaches that you should assess the situation to make sure the patient is receiving adequate medical attention, that the room is clean, and that the patient has the right resources to fight the illness. The other dimension then is to give the sick encouragement and lift their spirits with words.

Another dimension to loving kindness is comforting mourners. The difference here is that the law says that one should not speak to a mourner unless spoken to, as the mourner may not want to talk. A house of shiva often becomes an extended tea party where everybody is having a chat. But one should be sensitive to the fact that the mourners may not want to speak. It may be uncomfortable to sit in silence, but the discomfort of those who are going to comfort the mourners doesn't matter. The purpose is to comfort the mourners, not to comfort the comforters. Words of encouragement are important for mourners, but so is your mere presence. There is the traditional greeting when leaving and that is the only time when one is permitted, indeed obligated, to speak at one's own initiative and that is to say, 'May the Almighty comfort you amongst all the other mourners of Zion in Jerusalem?.'

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot offers another example of showing kindness with words, and that is to initiate a greeting. The Maharal of Prague says that by initiating a greeting, you are conveying a potent non-verbal message, which shows that you regard that person as important in your eyes - another way of dispensing kindness.

Conversely, negative or discouraging speech is very harmful. The Talmud says that one should not relay gratuitous bad news. Sometimes you need to convey bad news because it's important for a particular person to know, that, for example, a person is sick or has died, so that they can do something about it. But sometimes bad news has absolutely no practical implications for the person being informed of it, as they don't even know the person affected. This is seen as gratuitous bad news, the giving of which is forbidden as it brings a person down for no good reason. We should always use words not to discourage people, particularly when it comes to doing mitzvot, but rather to encourage them.

The Chofetz Chaim says that it's a great thing, not only to give encouragement, but to give encouragement to people who want to do positive things. If someone wants to do a mitzvah, a good deed, they should be encouraged to the utmost. So we see that the power of speech is enormous as it can encourage people to do great mitzvot.

### **Preparing for the year ahead**

At the moment we are in the final few weeks of preparation for Rosh Hashana and we should be looking for ways to improve ourselves. The chesed of using words for encouragement is an important tool in the battle ahead. Each one of us has areas that we need to work on; we need to be introspective, repent and improve ourselves for the Day of Judgment which lies ahead so that we can become better people in the New Year.

One of the major areas to focus on is our interpersonal relationships, which our Sages classify as Bein Adam L'chavero - between man and his fellow. In that sphere we need to start thinking whether there is anyone that we have hurt and begin asking for forgiveness as part of our preparations for Rosh Hashanah, The Day of Judgment, and certainly we should do so before Yom Kippur, The Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement provides atonement for all sins that one truly repents for, except for those committed by us against other people where we haven't asked the victim that we've harmed for forgiveness. Only when we ask for forgiveness will G-d be ready to forgive us.

On the positive side, we do this as it's not only an opportunity to undo the harm we have caused others, but also for the sake of doing an act of loving kindness. The verse says that with chesed, loving kindness, and emet, truth, sin is atoned.

The Maharal of Prague says that this is because the doing of chesed elevates us to a G-dly plane as we are imitating G-d in doing so. Also, when we perform acts of kindness we are elevated above sin. The higher we are above sin, the more we will be forgiven and these higher levels can be achieved through doing chesed, loving kindness, and reaching out to our fellow man because this is what G-d wants from us.

The emet, truth, that the Maharal is referring to is the study of Torah. G-d's Truth is to understand G-d's World. Again, that elevates us towards the level of the mind of G-d so to speak. Through Torah study we learn the thoughts of G-d and the way He sees the world. Truth and loving kindness are G-dly qualities and when we achieve them we will have atoned for our sins.

There can be no better preparation for Rosh Hashanah than focusing on these two values because they have the capacity to elevate us above sin and to give us the atonement we seek as we head towards the Day of Judgment and the Day of Atonement. And very often that chesed, those acts of kindness can be so easy. It's a kind word or using one's insight to identify opportunities to help another person and uplift them in the world, thereby imitating G-d.

Thank you for listening. Have a wonderful Shabbos and I look forward to connecting with you again next week.