



The Obligation to Speak and to Act

based on an address by RABBI MOSHE FEINSTEIN שליט"א at the 56th National Convention of Agudath Israel of America.

The Ephron Failing

SHAMMAI SAID: "Say little and do much" (*Avos* 1:15). In his commentary on this *Mishna*, the *Rambam* says, "The wicked speak much but do not even a little—like Ephron, who spoke of accommodating Avrohom to the fullest when he had sought to purchase a burial plot for Sarah, but in deed deducted not one cent from the top price for her field."

Studying this commentary, a question arises: Why did the *Rambam* not confine himself to illustrating those which exemplify Shammai's ruling instead of citing an extreme exception?—or, instead, list the many gradations that fill the spectrum between Avrohom at one extreme and Ephron at the other? By only citing the example of Ephron, the *Rambam* would seem to imply that Ephron was exceptional as a man who fell short of his promises, while people generally are inclined to live up to Shammai's dictum. Yet this is far from the way things are.

It seems, therefore, that the *Rambam* was apparently concerned with underscoring a common human failing: People, of course, respond to praise; and since so much attention and acclaim are heaped upon those who *promise* to do things, the result of this abundance of praise is that people are motivated to speak even more expansively. Action is postponed, often indefinitely—never to be embarked upon. Whenever one responds to the urge to "speak up" and demonstrate verbally what one is capable of doing, he always runs the risk that he will remain with the spoken word, and advance no further. Within every enthusiastic talker is an incipient Ephron. In citing the Ephron example, the *Rambam* highlights this all-too-common hazard.

Speaking Sparingly and Acting Expansively

RESTRAINT IN SPEECH can be achieved by concentrating on what is required to be done for fulfilling the needs of the hour. As an example, take note of Rivka's response to Eliezer, the servant of Avrohom, when he was dispatched to find a suitable wife for Yitzchok. The crucial part of her response was that beyond drawing water for Eliezer, in keeping with his request, she also offered on her own to water the camels, as well. But there was an additional aspect of her response that was not part of Eliezer's spoken condition for Yitzchok's wife—a detail he later excluded from his report to Rivka's family: He had stipulated that the girl suitable for Avrohom's family must be so concerned for the welfare of others that she reply to the request for water for himself with the assurance that she'll supply both the man and his animals with water. In the actual incident, Rivka first answered in the affirmative to Eliezer's personal request and filled her bucket with water on his behalf. Only after he drank did she inform him, "and I will also draw water for your camels." She kept announcements of her good in-

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Why Speak at all?

The Exceptional "Viduy"

tentions to the minimum, and postponed them to the last pertinent moment—in stark contrast to the conduct of Ephron, recorded in the previous passages in the Torah. She exemplified "speaking sparingly and acting expansively" to the fullest, in such an extreme way that Eliezer omitted this detail from his report to her family because such guarded speech was beyond their understanding.

IF, AS DEMONSTRATED, there is an inherent hazard in talk, why does Sham-mai only admonish against speaking excessively? He should rather call for eliminating *all* words of promise to the effect of: "Say nothing, concentrate on action." Talk, however, cannot be eliminated, for indeed there are times when there is a need for articulating one's good intentions in advance. On one hand, the performance of some *mitzvos* requires the spoken word to accompany the deed, or else the actions are ineffective. When one contributes *tzeddakah* on behalf of a sick person, or fasts on his behalf, giving the money or refraining from eating in themselves are insufficient. In both cases, the donor must say, "I am donating this . . ." or ". . . fasting so as to provide so-and-so with merit to recover from his illness." Moreover, a person must declare his intentions of fasting on the eve of his fast. This declaration is an integral part of the preparation required to endow the day of abstinence from eating with the status of a special day of fasting and introspection.

Similarly, when a person intends to bring a *korban* (a sacrificial offering) he must declare "This is to be a *korban*" in advance. Without this statement, the offering is a case of bringing *chulin le'azora*—the act of bringing an unconsecrated animal into the Temple, which is strictly prohibited, rather than the elevating act it was meant to be.

THESE CASES UNDERSCORE a general need to speak up in advance of embarking on any worthwhile action, to give it a special status. In this way, there is a need to declare an action as a *mitzva* as much more than a ritual requirement in specific isolated cases. It is essential to the performance of every *mitzva*, as will be explained.

The potency of a few well-chosen words is exemplified by the *Viduy Ma'asros*—a periodic declaration that was required when the Jewish People lived in *Eretz Yisroel*, and the various required gifts and tithes were set aside for eventual disposition. Every three years, these gifts were to be completely distributed and the owner said a "Viduy Ma'asros"—a declaration that "I have removed all that is sacred from my home . . . I gave it to the Leviite and to the impoverished . . . I have done all that You have commanded me."

The term *viduy* is usually associated with a confessional, such as the "*Osham-nu, bogadnu, gozalnu* . . . we sinned, we rebelled, we robbed . . ." recited on *Yom Kippur*, as well as various other times. This is a far cry from the seemingly self-congratulatory "I have done all that You have commanded me" of the *Viduy Ma'asros*. In fact, it is difficult to find any element of confessional in this latter recitation.

Upon further thought, however, a formidable challenge lies in its words—a challenge that qualifies it as a *viduy*. Who, in all honesty, can ever say in regard to any *mitzva*, "I have done precisely as You have commanded us"? Who can make such a statement in regard to the *kavanos* (intentions) required in *tefilla* or in wearing *tefillin*? Yet one must say these words regarding discharging his responsibility to the *kohain*, the Leviite, the stranger, the poor, the orphan. . . .

Words That Inspire Thought

Saying these words with honesty calls for a great deal of self-searching and *teshuva* (repentance). Any declaration that grows out of such introspection can rightly be termed as *viduy*—whether it is “*oshamnu*—we have sinned” or “I have done all that You have commanded me.”

SUCH WORDS—WORDS THAT CALL for thought, words that inspire reflection, words that determine the coloration and tone of the actions that follow—are the type of few well-chosen words that Shammai calls for.

One might assume that while a declaration of a fast or a *Viduy Ma'asros* calls for such words of impact, they represent exceptional circumstances. It might seem, then, that there is no need for such statements in regard to *Shabbos*, *tefillos*, or any other such *mitzva*. But this is not the case. One must endeavor to call upon his deepest feelings of commitment for the performance of any and all *mitzvos*. The “few well-chosen words” have their place in regard to *all* great endeavors—that is, they should be pronounced in advance of every contemplated action, to raise it to the level of a great endeavor.

AS MUCH AS ONE MUST endow personal *mitzvos* with a high level of commitment, so must one approach communal responsibilities with a sense of dedication, developed and articulated in advance of one's actions. This is not a luxury, or an optional attitude to be used at the individual's convenience or inspiration. Unfortunately, people tend to think otherwise, comforting themselves that as long as they are confident of the strength of their own religious commitment and that of their children, the religious status of the community at large need not concern them. But this sense of security is ill-founded. As much as a person may think that he can limit his own sphere of activities to a self-imposed ghetto, one can never be certain of successfully sheltering his children. Exposure to market-place values is inevitable and as a result, one must truly endeavor to make the world a better place—at least to upgrade the level of his immediate community—if but for purely selfish reasons. Beyond this, no individual can truly function in a vacuum, for everyone has a genuine need for social interaction, for his spiritual well-being.

The Need For Community Activism

Thus, every person must be concerned for the spiritual standing of his community and endeavor to upgrade it. Interestingly, a man's need to recognize the social aspect of his make-up is expressed in a *Mishna* that binds it with yet another need: “Make a *Rav* for yourself and buy yourself a friend” (*Avos* I,6). Much as a person must seek association with others of similar values and interests—even if at personal expense—so must he accept a spiritual mentor over himself as a source of guidance. While a sense of community responsibility can lead one into active involvement in behalf of *yeshiva* education, *kashrus*, neighborhood stability, basic rights as a human being, or other communal endeavors, all such activities must be under the guidance of a *rav*, as stated in *Avos*. It is because of this that I commend Agudath Israel of America as an organization of G-d fearing membership with an all-encompassing communal sweep. In addition, it is directed by a responsible leadership that is constant consultation with Torah authorities. It offers a welcome format for accomplishing much.

IN SUMMARY, one's words must be few and well-chosen, and only spoken after much soul-searching. Such words are essential, however, to raise the ordinary actions to the level of great endeavors. They should be part and parcel of our way of conducting our affairs.