



THE REAL COST OF WORDS

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Avos 1. 11

I have this thing about shoe laces; I just don't like tying them. Although my shoes come with these strings attached, I hate having to keep them fastened. When I was younger, I wore shoes that didn't need such support, but like much else, age has taught me that my body needs all the support it can get. The problem is that bending over and tying the things seems such a waste of time. At my age, when you bend over to such a degree you begin to wonder, "Is there anything else I can be doing now that I am down here?" Having said all this, I do tie the things at least once a day, and then let nature take its course, if they come undone, then it's just too bad, I really can't be bothered. Obviously, this doesn't go down all that well with family members who are all living in a constant state of fear that Zeidy will trip over his miscreant shoe strings and havoc will ensue. There is yet another strand (excuse the pun) to all this. When I lived in South Manchester, my community had taken to thinking that there must be some deep kabbalistic reason for me not to tie the laces, some Torah edict that only Rabbis are aware of. I came by this information through hints and whispers. Like the comment from a child who asked me why my shoelaces were undone. Before I could make an excuse, the child's mother whispered "Shush darling, Rabbis aren't allowed to tie their shoes." "Excuse my daughter's ignorance Rabbi," she added, "I am so sorry". There have been other moments of revelation, where it became clear to me that I have somehow created an impression that Rabbis just don't do shoe laces very well, and this has some deeper spiritual meaning that plain folk just aren't privy to.

When I was younger, I davened in the Beis Medrash of the Voideslover Rav ZTL, and on the back wall hung a large sign

בס"ד



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that had the entire Psalm of LeDovid Hashem Ori This was a gift from someone so that during the periods of the year when this particular psalm is added to our prayers, people wouldn't have to go rifling through their siddurim searching. Every year the Rav would make the same quip, "trust me, there will come a day when people will say that in Voiceslov the minhag is that when you say L'Dovid you turn towards the rear of the shul and look at the wall." We would all chuckle at the absurd yet very plausible truth in this casual statement. Yet, I am certain that for some this was not all that apparent and that there are a few who till this day will vouchsafe that this minhag from that venerable Tzadik is worth keeping at all costs, despite the fact that there is nothing sacred about how we all turned to recite that prayer.

This little vignette came to mind when I learnt this Mishna.

"Avtalyon says: Scholars, be cautious with your words, for you may incur the penalty of exile and be banished to a place of evil waters. The disciples who follow you there may drink and die, and consequently the Name of heaven may be desecrated."

Obviously the two little episodes I shared with you don't lead anyone to waters poisoned or otherwise, yet they are instructive. I used to be astounded by what words can mean to different people. If a Rav gives a drosha to one hundred people, there will be one hundred and one different understandings of what he said. (The extra one is the speaker himself). Words are heard through the medium of each individual's own experiences in life, and therefore you will interpret the words accordingly. I said I used to be amazed, however, after giving over forty years of weekly droshas, nothing astounds me any longer.

I remember one congregant who was often called upon to stand outside whilst I spoke, this for security reasons, and I understood that he may have seen it as a mixed blessing. He suddenly asked one week what I had said during my drosha, and when I asked him why he suddenly seemed so interested, he smiled and said that he had asked five people what the Rav had spoken about only to find that each person had a different version. All this is instructive because in the world today where we are often speaking to huge and diverse crowds, those in leadership roles have to be extremely wary.

The Rebbe, Reb Bunim of Peshischa Ztl, used to say that he prefers to speak to small intimate groups so that he can tailor his words to their understanding. He explained that a scholar's words are like a physician's medication. Just as a chemist meticulously weighs every medication that he prepares, making them specific to the patient, so a Tzadik must measure his words, relating them to each of his community. The Rebbe was particularly well suited to speak in such terms as he was a well-respected pharmacist before taking on the mantle of leadership.

It may not be fair, but it is nevertheless the fact that in these times every religious Jew is seen by others as a scholar. It is therefore imperative that we watch our ways, and heed our every action. Every time we speak or act, our actions are being measured, and Hashem's Glory is on the line. We often forget that our role in public is to create Kidush Hashem, and it is imperative that we act accordingly. As the summer holidays come around, and many will be traveling beyond the normative boundaries of our community we should be careful. Remember that words count and their misuse can cause poisonous waters to flow.

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