



# The Power of Words

## THE NATURE OF WORDS

### “The Princess Bride” 1987

“You keep using that word, I do not think it means what you think it means.”  
Spoken by Inigo Montoya, in response to Vizzini’s repeated use of the word “inconceivable.”

### Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

- These quotes from film and literature suggest that words are definite, with specific meanings that cannot be changed. Is this true in your experience, or can the speaker (or writer) change the nature of words?
- Is the intent of the speaker more or less important than the actual words he or she speaks?

<b>Chaim Nachman Bialik, from his 1915 essay</b>	<b>חיים נחמן ביאליק, מגילוי וכיסוי בלשון</b>
There are words like lofty mountains, and words like yawning gulfs.	יש מלים – הררי אל, ומלים – תהום רבה.

- Do you think that words have different qualities?
- Think of, and share, some words that you think are like “lofty mountains” and “yawning gulfs.”
- What other descriptors might you use to describe words?

<b>Iyov (Job) 12:11</b>	<b>איוב יב:יא</b>
Does not the ear test words as the palate tastes food?	הלא־אֵזן מִלִּין תִּבְחַן וְחֵךְ אֹכֵל יִטְעֵם־לוֹ:

- What is Job trying to convey in comparing words to food?
- Do you have positive or negative associations with certain words? If so, is it possible for you to receive these words in a different way than the speaker intended?



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<b>Beresheet (Genesis) 1:3</b>	<b>בראשית א:ג</b>
God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.	וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי אוֹר :

<b>Sefer Yetzira 2:5</b>	<b>ספר יצירה ב:ה</b>
...And from Nothingness did He make something, and all forms of speech and every created thing, and from the empty void He made the solid earth, and from the non-existent He brought forth Life. (Interpretive translation based on the commentary of the 12 <sup>th</sup> century scholar Ra'avad)	כיצד שקלן והמירן אל"ף עם כלם וכלם עם אל"ף, בי"ת עם כלם וכלם עם בי"ת וחוזרת חלילה נמצא כל היצור וכל הדבור יוצא בשם אחד

<b>Moses Ibn Ezra, Long Commentary of Exodus 20:1</b>	<b>משה אבן עזרא על שמות כ:א</b>
Words are like bodies; meanings are like souls.	ודע כי המלות הם כגופות והטעמים הם כנשמות

<b>Attributed to Shimon Bar Yochai, The Zohar, Parashat Metzora 55a</b>	<b>זהר, פרשת מצרע נה.</b>
Every word a man utters rises upward, splitting heavens to reach its destined place	כָּל מִקְלָה וּמְקָלָה דְּצָלוּתָא, דְּאַפִּיק בַּר נֶשׁ מְפוּמִּיָּה, סְלִקָא לְעֵילָא וּבִקְעָא רְקִיעִין, וְעָלִית לְאַתְר דְּעָלִית

- God created the world by declaring it: Let there be light, etc. What do human beings create with our words? How do we do this?
- Some of the texts above suggest that words have a spiritual quality. Do you believe this is the case? Why or why not?
- Do you believe that all of your words reach the heavens? Would knowing that all of your words were going up to the heavens affect the words you choose?



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### THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK

<b>Derekh Eretz Zuta 3:1</b>	<b>דרך ארץ זוטא ג:א</b>
Consider your words before you utter them!	תן דעתך עד שיצא מפיד

<b>Derekh Eretz Zuta 2:1-2</b>	<b>דרך ארץ זוטא ב:א-ב</b>
Sit before elders and incline your ear to hear their words. Pay attention to the words of your friend. Do not be hasty to answer, and consider everything from the right point, and answer to the first question first, and to the last, last; and always confess the truth. Do not discuss in the presence of one who is greater than you in wisdom. If somebody wants to teach you something, do not say "I heard [it already]" if you have not heard it already. If you are questioned about a small matter, and you do not know it, do not be ashamed to say, "I do not know." If somebody taught you something and you did not listen to it, do not be ashamed to say, "Repeat it again"; and say not that you have not listened to it, but that you did not understand it.	שב לפני הזקנים והטה אוזנך לשמוע את דבריהם, והקשב אוזנך לדברי חברך. אל תהי נבהל להשיב, ותהא מחשב דברים כעניין. ואמור על ראשון - ראשון, ועל אחרון - אחרון. והוי מודה על האמת, ואל תדבר בפני מי שגדול ממך בחכמה.  ואם חפצת ללמוד, אל תאמר על מה שלא שמעת - "שמעתי". ואם שאלוך דבר קטן ואי אתה יודע בו, אל תבוש לומר "איני יודע". ואם שנו לך ולא שמעת, אל תבוש לומר "שנה לי", ואל תשא פנים לעצמך לומר "לא שמעתי"

Words should be weighed, not counted. <b>Yiddish Proverb</b>	ווערטער זאל מען וועגן און ניט ציילן.
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<b>Shlomo ibn Gabirol, Mivchar Hapeninim 338</b>	<b>שלמה אבן גבירול, מבחר הפנינים שלח</b>
After you speak, your words master you. Before you speak, you are the master of your words.	ואמר כשאני מדבר דבר הוא מושל בי, וכשאני מדבר אני מושל בו.

<b>Shlomo ibn Gabirol, Yehi Keshoresh Eitz Erekh Amirav</b>	<b>שלמה אבן גבירול, יהי כשרש עץ ארך אמיריו</b>
As the length of a tree's branches depend on its roots, so right words depend on a man's good sense.	כשרש עץ יהי ארך אמיריו לשרש עץ יהי ארך אמיריו / וכתבונת אנוש ישר אמריו



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- One can find advice on thinking before speaking from many scholars and in many Jewish sources. Why do you think this is the case?
- What does this mean: “After you speak, your words master you.”? Can you think of a scenario in which this was the case? How might knowing this change what you say?
- There is a difference of opinion among the sources quoted above. Which do you think is the most important thing to take care with: thoughts, words, or actions?

### ENCOURAGEMENT/DISCOURAGEMENT

<b>Mishlei (Proverbs) 15:4</b>	<b>משלי טו:ד</b>
A healing tongue is a tree of life, but a devious one makes for a broken spirit.	מִרְפָּא לְשׁוֹן עֵץ חַיִּים וְסִלְף בָּהּ שֶׁבַר בְּרוּחַ:

<b>Mishlei 16:24</b>	<b>משלי טז:כד</b>
Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweet to the palate and a cure for the body.	צוּף־דְּבִשׁ אֲמַרְיִנֵּעַם מִתּוֹק לְנֶפֶשׁ וּמִרְפָּא לְעֶצְמוֹ:

<b>Rabbi Elysha Sandler, Sparkling Speech, page 47</b>
The Pele Yo'etz (Sanegoriya) says, “...everything that a man speaks makes an impression and awakens the hosts of Heaven. If one speaks derogatorily, he awakens the prosecuting angels. However, if one speaks in a positive manner, he awakens angels of advocacy. A man’s words bear fruit!”

- The sources above describe how positive and negative words feel. Do you agree their assessments? What other metaphors would you use to describe these types of speech?
- The *Pele Yo'etz* suggests that words are taken note of by angels and that someone will eventually be rewarded or punished for the way they speak. Do you think that people are generally rewarded for speaking positively or punished for speaking negatively? What do you pay more attention to, someone’s actions or words?



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## KEEPING SILENT

<b>Mishlei (Proverbs) 17:27</b>	<b>משלי יז:כז</b>
A knowledgeable man is sparing with his words; A man of understanding is reticent.	חושך אִמְרָיו יוֹדֵעַ דַּעַת וּקְרֹאֵי-קֶרֶת [וְקֶרֶת] רוּחַ אִישׁ תְּבוּנָה:

<b>Tractate Megillah 18a</b>	<b>מסבת מגילה יח.</b>
If a word be worth one <i>sela</i> *, silence is worth two. <small>*A valuable coin</small>	מלה בסלע משתוקא בתרין:

<b>Shlomo ibn Gabirol, Mivchar Hapeninim 354</b>	<b>שלמה אבן גבירול, מבחר הפנינים שנד</b>
The fewer a man's words, the fewer his mistakes.	ואמר חכם כשתדבר המעט. כי כפי שימעטו דברי האדם ימעטו טעיותיו

- According to the sources above, what are the rewards for keeping quiet?
- What are you demonstrating when you keep quiet?

## ASSISTING THE POOR

<b>Shalom Aleichem, from Tevye the Milkman</b>
A kind word is no substitute for a piece of herring or a bag of oats.

<b>Rabbi Joshua Steinberg, Mishlei Yehoshua 8:26</b>	<b>משלי יהושע ח:כו</b>
Advice and words will not fill an empty belly.	עצה ודבר שפתים לא ישיבועו נפש רעבה



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<b>Vayikra (Leviticus) Rabba 34:15</b>	<b>ויקרא רבה לד:טו</b>
Rabbi Levi said: "If you have no means to give to the poor, comfort him with kind words!"	אָמַר רַבִּי לֵוִי אִם אֵין לָךְ לְתַתּוֹן לוֹ נְחָמוּ בְדַבָּרִים

<b>Tractate Bava Batra 9b</b>	<b>בבא בתרא ט:</b>
Rabbi Yizchak said, "Whoever gives the poor money is blessed with six blessings; whoever does it with a kind word is blessed with 11 blessings."	ואמר רבי יצחק כל הנותן פרוטה לעני מתברך בשש ברכות והמפייסו בדברים מתברך בי"א ברכות

- Two of the above sources suggest that kind words alone are not helpful to the poor. Two sources suggest that kind words are helpful. Under what circumstances are kind words helpful?
- With which of these sources do you agree, if any?
- Whether or not you give money to someone who is less fortunate, is it your custom to speak to them nicely? Why or why not?

## SINCERITY

<b>Moshe ibn Ezra, Shirat Yisrael, p. 156</b>	<b>משה אבן עזרא, שירת ישראל, עמ' קנו</b>
Words that come from the heart enter the heart. Words that do not come from the heart will not enter the ear.	דברים היוצאים מן הלב נכנסים אל הלב, ודברים שאינם יוצאים מן הלב לא יעברו דרך האזן

"Most people think that shadows follow, precede or surround beings or objects. The truth is that they also surround words, ideas, desires, deeds, impulses and memories."

**Elie Wiesel, *The Fifth Son* p.54**

- According to the sources above, why is it important to be sincere in your words?
- What does Elie Wiesel mean when he says that shadows "follow, precede, or surround" words?



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### HONESTY/DECEIT

<b>Iyov (Job) 6:25</b>	<b>איוב ו:כה</b>
How forceful are honest words! ...	מה־נִמְרָצוּ אִמְרֵי־יֵשָׁר וּמֵה־יִזְכִּיתִּי הַזִּכָּח מִקָּמֶם:

<b>Tractate Bava Metzia 58b</b>	<b>מסבת בבא מציעא נח:</b>
Deceit in words is worse than deceit in money.	גדול אונאת דברים מאונאת ממון

<b>Mishnah Bava Metzia 4:10</b>	<b>משנה בבא מציעא ד:י</b>
Just as there is fraud regarding commerce, so too there is fraud regarding words.	כְּשֵׁם שֶׁאוֹנְאָה בְּמִקְח וּבְמִמְכָר, כֵּן אוֹנְאָה בְּדְבָרִים

- Job suggests that honest words are powerful. Do you think honest words are more or less powerful than other types of words, for instance angry or deceitful words?
- Two sources above equate deceit in words to deceit with money. Do you agree that these two things are similar? Do you feel that one is worse than the other?

### DISTRESS/ANGER

<b>Tractate Bava Batra 16b</b>	<b>מסבת בבא בתרא טז:</b>
A person is not held responsible for what he says when he is in distress.	שׂאִין אָדָם נִתְפָס בְּשַׁעַת צַעַר

Only God can give us credit for the angry words we did not speak.  
**Rabbi Harold Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, page 187**

- Do you think that we should always be held responsible for our words; or are there times when, because of our emotional state or circumstances of living, we can speak without consequence?
- Can you think of a time when someone might want to watch their words even when they are distressed?
- Do we deserve credit for thinking angry words but not speaking them? Why does Rabbi Kushner suggest that only God can give us credit for controlling ourselves and not speaking angry words?



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## LASHON HARA

<b>Mishlei (Proverbs) 18:21</b>	<b>משלי יח:כא</b>
Death and life are in the power of the tongue; those who love it will eat its fruit.	מִוֹת וְחַיִּים בְּיַד-לְשׁוֹן וְאֹהֲבֶיהָ יֹאכַל פְּרִיָהּ:

<b>Tractate Ta'anit 7b</b>	<b>מסכת תענית ז:</b>
Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi said: The rains are withheld only due to [the sin of] those who speak slander, as it is stated: "The north wind brings forth rain, but a backbiting tongue, an angry countenance" (Proverbs 25:23).	אמר רבי שמעון בן פזי אין הגשמים נעצרין אלא בשביל מספרי לשון הרע שנאמר (משלי כה, כג) רוח צפון תחולל גשם ופנים נזעמים לשון סתר

<b>Derekh Eretz Zuta 2:7</b>	<b>דרך ארץ זוטא ב:ז</b>
Do not let your teeth shame you, and do not let your mouth disgrace you, and do not let your tongue curse you, and do not let your lips shame you, and [take care that you should not need] to bow [to someone] on account of your own words.	ואל יביישך שינייך, ואל יבוזך פידך, ואל יקללך לשונך, ואל יכלימודך שפתיך, ואל תשתחוה לדבריך.

<b>Mishlei Yehoshua 54:3</b>	<b>משלי יהושע נד:ג</b>
A bird you set free you may catch again, but a word that escapes your lips will never return.	גם צפור שלחת עוד תשוב תצודנה, ודבר נמלט מפידך לא ישוב עד עולם

The *Chochmas Anach (Parshas Mattos)* says, "He shall not desecrate his word; according to what comes out of his mouth he shall do' (*Bamidbar* 30:3). The *Chida* (Rav Chaim Yosef David Azulai) writes: This *posuk* alludes to a person who guards his mouth from speaking forbidden words, as well as from engaging in empty talk and sanctifies his mouth. Whatever he requests of Hashem will be accepted. The *posuk* is interpreted thus: He shall not desecrate his word - if his words are not mundane, in that he does not speak empty words and certainly not words which are forbidden, then whatever comes out of his mouth Hashem will do, and his prayers will be accepted. Furthermore, even when not in the form of a prayer, whatever he speaks will be fulfilled"

Rabbi Elysha Sandler, *Sparkling Speech*, pages 49 - 50





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- Can you think of a time when words caused physical pain or damage? Can you think of a time when words caused emotional damage or hurt someone's career or reputation?
- *Derekh Eretz Zuta* suggests that one should treat any evil word said about someone else to be a big deal. Do you think that all negative things one says about another are equal? Are some worse than others? Why or why not?
- A few sources suggest that once you say something you no longer have power over it. Explain this further?

### ADVICE

Tractate <i>Berachot</i> 6b	מסכת ברכות ו:
And Rabbi Ḥelbo said that Rav Huna said, "Any person who has the fear of Heaven, his words are heeded."	וא"ר חלבו אמר רב הונא כל אדם שיש בו יראת שמים דבריו נשמעין

### WORDS OF TORAH

Tractate <i>Ta'anit</i> 7a	מסכת תענית ז:
Rabbi Oshaya said, "Why are the words of the Torah compared to... water, wine, and milk? ... To teach you that, just as these three liquids are kept only in the simplest of vessels, so too words of Torah are preserved in the humblest of men."	ואמר רבי אושעיא למה נמשלו דברי תורה לשלשה משקין הללו במים וביין ובחלב דכתיב הוי כל צמא לכו למים וכתיב (ישעיהו נה, א) לכו שברו ואכלו ולכו שברו בלא כסף ובלא מחיר יין וחלב לומר לך מה שלשה משקין הללו אין מתקיימין אלא בפחות שבכלים אף דברי תורה אין מתקיימין אלא במי שדעתו שפלה

<i>Shir Hashirim</i> (Song of Songs) Rabbah 1:2	שיר השירים רבה א:ב
As wine enlivens the heart, so do words of Torah enliven the heart.	ויין ישמח לבב אנוש, כך דברי תורה משמחין הלב

- Can you think of a time when words nourished you?
- Can you think of a time when words from Torah or from Jewish tradition provided comfort?