

# Breslov Repair Kit – Speech

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***The power of human speech is treated very seriously throughout the breadth of the Torah—we're reminded often how our words have the power to create and the potential to destroy!***

*...when speech [which is an aspect of Hashem, the Malchus/Kingship of Holiness] is blemished, the blemish turns the "ruach [breath/wind] of his mouth into a ruach searah (storm wind).*

*...this storm wind is the Great Accuser. From it comes all accusations and tests.*

*...this ruach searah is also what causes a person's body to become agitated. Also, all the libel and evil spoken about a*

*person comes from the storm wind...*

*...people who judge their fellow men unfavorably and constantly scrutinize other people's shortcomings, are from the aspect of "an end to all flesh". As it is written (Job 28.3), "He puts an end to darkness, he scrutinizes every limit"—he scrutinizes constantly in order to put limit and utter ruin to every matter, and to arouse judgment, to libel and to accuse, as is written (Isiah 57:20), "But the wicked are like the troubled sea which cannot be still."*

—Excerpted from the Likutei Moharan, Volume 1, Number 38, BRI publications.

Q. *Why is academia riddled with gossip and backstabbing?*

A. *Because the stakes are so small.*

—Old joke

We know that Hashem created the world with words and that His most important creation, man, is called *adibbur*, a speaker, in order to distinguish him from other living beings. The power of human speech is treated very seriously throughout the breadth of the Torah—we're reminded often how our words have the power to create and the potential to destroy.

When we hear the term *loshon hara* (gossip/slander, lit. evil speech) Rebbe Nachman of Breslov might not spring to mind, yet in Likutei Moharan the Rebbe offers several insights into the profound effects of negative speech. The Rebbe explains how blemished speech churns up a *ruach searah*, a "storm wind", which he says is the "Great Accuser" (Satan).

Blemished speech includes gossip (telling uncomfortable "truths" about others) and slander (telling lies about others). It also includes other kinds of lies\*, profanity, idle chit-chat, mockery, and insults designed to expose, hurt or humiliate others—in other words, pretty much what you find

on the Internet and in virtually all other communications media.

The Rebbe's use of the negative dramatic term "storm wind" in correlation with *loshon hara* is not without precedent. The Talmud likens *loshon hara* to denying the entire Torah and even suggest that it leads to idol worship, immorality and bloodshed. The use of the term "storm wind" is also precise and important. The very first vision Yechezkel (Ezekiel) had was of a "storm wind from the north." According to Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah), north is the direction from where evil begins. And the first evil act in the Torah was an act of speech.

The *nakhash* (serpent) was the first being to use distorted speech for a destructive purpose. The *nakhash* nudged Chava to sin with propaganda—just enough truth was in its words to obscure the devastating consequences of following its advice. Interestingly, our words snake (SNaKe) and sneak (SNeaK) are linguistically related to NaKhaSh. In both Indian and Chinese mythology, the dragon or snake, which is worshiped, is called a *naga*, which is also linguistically linked to *nakhash*\*\*. Is there perhaps an etymological link between one type of blemished speech, to *nag*, and a *nakhash*?

But why a storm wind? First, there was the telephone, then radio and television—little did we know this was just the beginning. Now, there are cell phones, Internet, email and texting, which turbulently blow our words around the world.

As the average person becomes more and more technologically and verbally sophisticated, the occasions for stirring up a *ruach searah* multiply exponentially. We all have plenty of practice thanks to email, texting, cell phones and blogs. Today, everyone's a pundit with a potential audience of millions.

But our instant access to technological currents is not without benefits. We all know people who've been able to access authentic Torah learning via communications technology.

I know a woman who first learned about Judaism whilst serving in the Peace Corps, living in a tent in rural Zimbabwe! Today she is Torah observant, raising a family, and working for a dynamic Jewish organization. Thousands of bagel-and-lox Jews, social-justice Jews, macrobiotic Jews, corporate finance Jews, Hollywood Jews, and so on first heard about Jewish Jews (and Torah) over the Internet.

Because of my healthy Jewish food blog, I've been contacted by Jews that I'd otherwise never have the chance to meet. Recently, I reviewed a culinary product developed by a woman who classified herself as a "born-again Christian, raised Catholic" in her initial email. To my surprise, I felt a visceral connection with her—her emails were brilliant, warm, and creative. We emailed back and forth, exploring the possibilities for sharing her knowledge about nutrition with observant Jews in Brooklyn. Eventually she revealed to me that her mother and grandmother were European Jews! This potentially explosive situation was well-served by the medium of email, where I was able to slowly and hopefully sensitively, think through our correspondence. (My enthusiasm might have sounded threatening over the phone).

But despite the potentially positive connections, we have to remember that the Internet is still a sticky Web, and the storm winds are always brewing just offstage, waiting to make their howling entrance.

Together, my husband and I write for a well-known psychology web site. There we field questions, comments and sometimes outright attacks, especially when we blog about Hashem. We write about the importance of having a relationship with G-d and how this is necessary to one's emotional wellbeing. Most of the negative comments we receive are from people with Jewish-sounding names (including many psychologists), who let us know in no uncertain terms that they are atheists or agnostics, or that they are heavily involved in Eastern religions, or "spiritual paths" as they prefer to call them.

Yet they take the time to contact us, and tell us how “organized religions like Judaism” aren’t spiritual. And then they ask questions. Some even stick around a while longer. Over time we’ve ended up with phone calls and new friends.

It’s always a given that important truths are going to push someone’s buttons. And because today speech is free, easily created and accessed, as well as amplified, broadcasted, and transported around the world in milliseconds, almost everyone gets to be a button-pusher. We button-pushers often hear from listeners/readers nearly instantaneously. Unless tempered by judicious calmness, wars can be ignited at the touch of a keyboard.

Unfortunately, this whirlwind of words doesn’t just stir up contentiousness in the world at large; in the Torah observant world, a *ruach searah* can puff up between people in an instant. Even if we believe the same essential truth, but we emphasize different aspects of that essential truth, conflicts may arise. At the level of *tzaddikim*, tiny differences are of great importance. The arguments of *tzaddikim* are *l’shem Shamayim* (for the sake of Heaven), but at the everyday level of most of us, our differences can be petty.

If we’re honest, we’ll admit that they’re sometimes due to less-than-noble feelings such as jealousy and arrogance. We have to keep in mind the Rebbe’s words, “...people who judge their fellow men unfavorably and constantly scrutinize other people’s shortcomings are from the aspect of “an end to all flesh”. Strong words to help us quell our criticism of others.

I try to keep this in mind when someone says or writes something I think is inflammatory (and I try to remember: what to one person might be inflammatory, to another, might be ho-hum insignificant). Many times I tell myself: Think before writing a response or before even alluding to what someone said. Understanding other people’s motives is never easy—actually, even understanding our own motives is never

easy. (One of the benefits of Breslov Chassidus is the chance to learn about and believe in yourself—the Rebbe says that believing in yourself is nearly as important as believing in Hashem.)

But the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) has a field day crafting subtle ways in which we can “get back” at the person who’s wounded our vanity, ego or sensibilities. With allusions and sleight-of-hand we can kid ourselves into thinking that we’ve not engaged in slander and libel, when we actually have.

We’re told that it is forbidden to speak (or write) ill of another Jew because the accusatory words are used during Heavenly judgment against him (and us).

Rebbe Nachman says that this storm wind of blemished speech agitates the body. Although it might sound simplistic to ascribe specific bodily ailments to specific types of sin, it really isn’t. A bit of self-analysis of what parts of our bodies are affected by illnesses (G-d forbid), might lead us to develop insights into possible positive changes we can make to our thoughts, words or deeds. And as we work on ourselves, we spark a chain reaction, bringing the world that much closer to Mashiach.

According to *Anatomy of the Soul* (Chaim Kramer, BRI), “Rebbe Nachman taught the Jewish exile is a reflection of blemished speech.” We read that by engaging in *holy* speech, one’s speech corresponds to Eretz Yisroel, the holy land, but by engaging in *mundane* speech, one’s speech corresponds to the other lands. This begs the question: What does *blemished* speech correspond to? Perhaps the hurricanes and cyclones which blow onto and destroy many lands?

I’m reminded of several Rebbeim who, using Hashem as a role model, would describe negative things as “not good” rather than “bad”, as Hashem does in the story of Noach, when He instructs Noach regarding “not clean” animals instead of

calling them “dirty or impure” animals. Even in the secular world at large you can get a sense of a person’s humanity, not to mention humility, by listening to the words he chooses to convey his ideas (as opposed to the words created for him by his speechwriters).

“The era of Mashiach will be one in which people will be able to speak their minds freely without causing pain to others, for everyone will be dedicated to the pursuit of peace and spirituality.” (*Anatomy of the Soul*).

Until then, know that if eyes are the windows to the soul, speech is its mirror.

\*I would also include plagiarism, misleading propaganda, movies, some reportage and most advertising in this list as they, too are types of falsehood.

\*\* In linguistics, the letters of words can be dropped and/or transposed as they make their etymological journey into various languages. The harsh guttural “KH” can over time and place transform into “K” or hard “G”, which have similar sounds that come from the same place in the throat. Writer David Gurwitz found the sneak-snake connection. ll languages are sourced in Hebrew and many surprising roots can be found.