

Putting Words into Practice

* Study the line preceding the *Amidah* (*Sim Shalom*, p. 106) and the line which begins the meditation following the *Amidah*, which begins "Guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking Guile" (p.120). How can the wisdom of this personal prayer found in the *Talmud Berakhot* 16b-17a help guide us in our interpersonal relations?

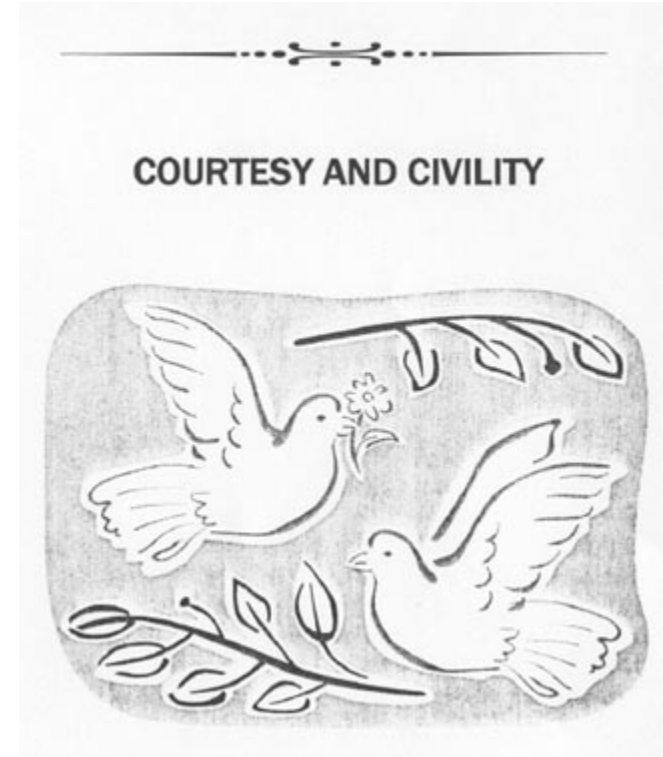
* Read Psalm 34 (*Sim Shalom*, p.65), especially "Who is the man that desires life, who loves days of seeing good, guard your tongue...turn from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it. " What is the ideal expressed, and how does someone move in the direction of achieving the goal?

*Study the *Shabbat/Yom Tov* prayer entitled *Nishmat Kol Bai* (*Sim Shalom*, pp.334-336), which concludes the *Psukei d'Zimrah*. The author states that every living thing is bidden to praise God. What body parts are selected for this praise? Why should we praise God? When the author returns to the list of the body's involvement in blessing God, additional dimensions are cited. What is the goal of this prayer in respect to civility?

* On *Shabbat/Yom Tov* we recite *ShokhaynAd* (*Sim Shalom*, p.336) prior to beginning *Shabarit*. The *tefillah* teaches us the sacred use of our mouth, our words, our tongue. Study the prayer. How can we make this areal dimension of life? Why is the prayer situated in this particular place in the *siddur*? What does it teach about civility?

* On Yom Kippur we recite the litany entitled *AI Bet*, which lists "sins" committed by Jews in the community. Study the *AI Bet* and identify those that correlate to the theme of interpersonal relations and particularly civil behavior and speech. Why is the expression " *al bet*" used so often about words spoken?

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THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM
Rapaport House, 155 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y.10010
Tel:212-533-7800 Fax:212-353-9439
E-mail: info@uscj.org Internet: www.uscj.org

From the charge/counter charge rhetoric of election



campaigns to the loud, shrill voices heard on call-in radio talk shows; from antagonistic encounters between individuals on the street to the angry interchanges too frequently heard at communal gatherings, we are witnessing throughout society the breakdown of derekh erez (proper manners) in public discourse. One factor that may promote a lack of civility is the extent of public attention paid to those whose language or behavior is outrageous. Unfortunately, such language also ratchets up the level of heat, anger and hostility we have for each other .

As citizens of a democratic nation, this should disturb us greatly, since civility has been called the keystone of democracy. As Jews, we should be even more concerned, for such behavior represents a serious violation of the Mishnaic teaching" Im ayn Torah ayn derekh erez; im ayn derekh erez ayn Torah." Clearly, we have the right to be angry at times. Nevertheless, Jewish tradition teaches that we should avoid shaming, embarrassing, and belittling one another by acting or speaking rashly in the heat of passion.

Sometimes, it is hard to "keep our cool." Nevertheless, as with any habit that is hard to break, we can do better with practice if we would only begin. As the sage Hillel said, "If not now, when?"

The Importance of Civility

The Rabbis compare the act of shaming someone to the act of shedding blood (i.e., murder) because the blood drains from the face of the person (Baba Metzia 58b). Perhaps they also recognized that shaming someone can often cause long term or permanent damage to the psyche, reputation and/ or livelihood of the person. Everyone knows the story of the great sage Hillel who, when asked by an idolater to teach the entire Torah while the challenger stood on one foot, answered, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow, that is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and study"(Shabbat 31a). Clearly, Hillel believed that acting decently to your fellow human being was the most important teaching of our tradition. Even the sage Shammai, who is depicted as being less patient in the story of the heathen, elsewhere said "receive everyone with a cheerful attitude" (Avot 1:15, Siddur Sim Shalom, p.607).

Hatred and Anger

The Talmud records an instance in which Rabbi Meir prayed for the death of certain lawless men who caused him trouble. His wife, Beruria, asked how he could pray for such a thing. By use of a clever word-play on a verse in Psalms 104:35, "Sinners will cease from the earth, and the wicked will be no more" (*Siddur Sim Shalom*, p.38), she interprets the verse to mean when sins cease from the earth (because sinners repent and sin no more), the wicked will no longer be wicked. She then suggests that her husband pray rather that these sinners repent. He did, and they repented (*Berakhot* 10a). The Talmud states that the First Temple was destroyed because of three sins: idolatry , immorality, and bloodshed; while the Second Temple was destroyed because of senseless hatred. It is concluded that senseless hatred is as deplorable as all three of the former sins combined (*Yoma* 9b).

Lashon Harah --the Evil Tongue

Saying anything derogatory about another person is absolutely forbidden by Jewish law, except under very limited circumstances. If a statement is true, it is considered *lashon hara* -and it is forbidden. If a statement is false, even if only in some minor way, it is considered *motsi shem ra* (defamation of character) -an even worse offense. It is no defense to say that the statement is true. It is also no defense to say it was made in jest, or that "everybody knew it anyway," or that the speaker included him/herself in the derogatory remark. While difficult to observe, the laws of *lashon harah* provide much-needed guidance in a fundamental aspect of human interaction –speech.

Reproving Someone

There are times when it is necessary to point out to someone else that he or she has, in fact, erred. The Talmud, citing Leviticus 19: 17, states that one has an obligation to rebuke another when necessary , and even to do so more than once if the other persists. However, it further admonishes that one is not permitted to shame the person to the point where he or she turns white from shame (*Arakhin* 16b). This is clearly a tricky matter. One helpful principle is to remember that the rebuke is supposed to help the other person to change his or her ways. It is not supposed to be an expression of the rebuker's rage or hatred.