

Silence – *Shtika*

*Before you open your mouth, be silent and reflect:
“What benefit will my speech bring me or others?”¹*

— 1 —

Our primary mode of interaction with others is via speech. To a very large extent we project ourselves into the world in speech. It therefore is no surprise that control of the power of speech is a main goal of our *Yetzer Hara* as control of the power of speech is also one of the main tools of the soul. How we speak to others, how we project ourselves into the world in speech will often determine precisely whether we are projecting our soul or our *Yetzer Hara* into the world. If we are projecting our soul into the world then we are, as it were, projecting an embrace of the other into the space within us that is constituted by the *Yetzer Hatov*. If we are projecting our *self* into the world, then we are, as it were, not projecting at all, but rather rejecting the possibility of embracing the other and thus constricting the space within us that is constituted by the *Yetzer Hatov*.

No opportunity to choose between the *Yetzer Hara* and the *Yetzer tov* is more ubiquitously part of our everyday experience. It is therefore an essential strategy of the *Yetzer Hara* to assert its control over our speech on every occasion. Every word that exits our mouths acting as a closure of our soul, pushing the other away from us, protecting us from perceived threat from another, not only accomplishes the diminishment of the other but also diminishes the potential of our soul. Multiplied by the ubiquity of these opportunities, we end up in a process of continuing to diminish the potential of our soul throughout the day, often even as we are working in other ways to enlarge our souls. Without getting control of our faculty of speech these other efforts turn out to be futile.

Given the importance of controlling speech one might expect that the strategy for doing so would be difficult and arcane. Yet it is not so. On the contrary, the ease with which the *Yetzer Hara* can be disarmed in this situation only raises the question: If it is so easy to do why is it so often not done? First let us review this strategy and then let us attempt to address this question.

¹ Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Page 165.

As the author of *Chesbon HaNefesh* informs us the strategy for taking control of speech is *shtika*, silence. However he teaches us that our conventional understanding of silence is not what is meant. Simply not speaking does not accomplish control over speech. In fact, it can be a disguised method of using speech, by virtue of denying it, as a tool of the *Yetzer Hara*. Rather, what is meant by *shtika* is *considered* speech. Specifically, speech that is withheld long enough for a conscious decision to be made between the *Yetzer Hara* and the *Yetzer Hatov*. Thus, by silence we mean the act of not reacting in speech immediately, but taking the time to consider the good of another in whatever we will answer. Such momentary consideration, and more importantly, such exercise of choice, transforms speech from acting as a tool of the *Yetzer Hara* into a tool of the *Yetzer Hatov*. In taking time to answer we literally extend the space within us that constitutes the potential of our soul, allowing it to marshal its resources and thereby withstand the onrushing action of the *Yetzer Hara*. When we consider the affects of such a process repeated many times in the course of a day we can begin to see the power such exercise will have in the project of creating our souls.

This strategy re-emphasizes for us the role of time in *Mussar* consciousness. When we react in the present moment we react in what can be called the time of the self. When we react, as it were, in the future, we are reacting in the time of the other person. By allowing ourselves to emerge from the present into the future through the act of creating duration out of a moment, we escape the chains of the present, which are the chains of self absorption.

In light of our discussion and the seeming ease of the strategy that can so powerfully take control of this central faculty we possess for crafting our soul, we return to the question: why is it so difficult? There are two parts to the answer to this question. The first part has to do with the power of the *Yetzer Hara* and the second part has to do with the quality of *Mussar* work that is required to make this easy strategy truly easy.

It is around the *middah* of *shtika* that we learn again that the power of the *Yetzer Hara* is such that it emerges most strongly in those areas of our life where we might feel that we are more in control of ourselves and therefore less susceptible to its blandishments. In the case of *shtika* this is manifest in the fact that we convince ourselves that, in fact, what we say does not have nearly the significance of what we do and

therefore we do not have to be as careful of what we say as we have to be careful of what we do. Mistaking speech as essentially not constituting an act, invites the *Yetzer Hara* to use it to its fullest. The *Yetzer Hara* is expert at taking advantage of our misjudgments regarding the seriousness of particular *middot* to our spiritual development. There are other examples of *middot* whose relevance we underestimate, but I will refrain from mentioning them at this point for fear of confusing the discussion.

The second part of our answer to the question we've posed has to do with what we might call the placement of this *Middah* in the order of our *Mussar* discipline. If one analyses the steps necessary in making full use of the momentary pause that *shtika* allows us before acting through speech, we recognize that in that very moment we may well be using the *middot* of *seder*, *menuchat ha-nefesh*, *savlanut*, *haritzut*, *zirizut*, and *anavah* in order to craft the speech appropriate to the moment. So, far from being as easy as it sounds, *shtika* does not provide a miraculous effect simply by our managing to take a moment before speaking. It is what we do with that moment that will provide the desired results and what we are able to do with the moment will be a consequence of the quality of the work we have already done at rectifying the preceding *middot* that we have studied.

— 2 —

The *middah* of *shtika* applies in other ways than merely the conventions of speech or silence. It is relevant to a variety of other forms of expressions that people use during the course of the day in their encounters with other people. What we call “body language,” including especially facial expressions, are a form of communication. In some ways these non-verbal forms of communication are more primal even than speech. As difficult as we think it might be to control our speech in reaction to others, it is far more difficult to control the almost automatic responses that we communicate through facial expression and signals given by our body postures. Thus in addition to learning how to escape the enchainment of the present by creating a moment of duration before we speak, we must also learn to escape the enchainment of the present by creating a moment of duration before our face or other body movement communicates the will of the *Yetzer Hara*. The very fact that we characterize these responses as automatic testifies to our

admission that we have no control over them. But we do, and we must assert that control, in order to truly allow the *Yetzer Hatov* to do its work.

When someone speaks to us and we react with rolling of our eyes, or fluttering of the eyelids, or clenching of the fists, or throwing our heads back, or stretching our neck, we are communicating, “speaking” if you will. When such speech occurs without thought, without a moment’s consideration of the good of the other, we have allowed our *Yetzer Hara* to inject itself into our encounter with the other. We allow it to reject the other, diminish the space available for the other within us thus diminishing the potential of our soul just as surely as if we reacted with a harsh or ill-considered word; Sometimes more so. Any success we manage in controlling, let alone transforming, our speech is undermined by our physical expressions.

The first step in applying the *middah* of *shtika* to this more difficult realm is awareness. It is important to try to become conscious of our physical responses in the same way that we are immediately aware of our reaction to people in words. This kind of self-awareness is not impossible when we apply ourselves to truthful analysis of our responses. However, applying ourselves this truthfully to ourselves is admittedly difficult. It can be significantly aided by the rebuke, or *tochecha*, of others. We have not spoken of *tochecha* before. Generally speaking, when we use the term *tochecha* in *Mussar* it refers to the responsibility to sometimes bear the burden of the other precisely by compassionately delivering needed rebuke. This is a highly sensitive subject and one we will return to in future *shiurim*. But in truth, the possibility of delivering *tochecha* is predicated, among other important factors that will be discussed at that time, on our being able to receive and accept *tochecha* from others. In fact, accustoming ourselves to receive and accept *tochecha* even when it is not delivered compassionately, even when it is delivered by people who have not considered our ability to hear it, is a mark of our own spiritual development and an obligation of our own *Mussar* practice. Specifically, it is implicit in the *middah cheshbon* connected with *anavah* that we have already examined. To learn from every person includes learning about ourselves from them. This is another reason why the *middah* of *shtika* falls at this point in the order of *middah* work.

Once we have accustomed ourselves to receiving and accepting *tochecha* it will certainly become easier for us to be aware of the violations of *shtika* of physical

expression that we need to work on. It is rare when a thoughtless expression does not result in a response from another. Even if that response itself emanates from that person's *Yetzer Hara* it can serve as a teaching moment for us. *Anavah* and *shtika* are thus intimately related.