

## Silence | *Shtikah* | שְׁתִּיקָה

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

We have already explained that when the animal spirit — even if entirely serene — is in its “mode of sluggishness,” it leaps from sensation to idea, and from one idea to another idea, and then from the idea to action according to the order in which it is externally stimulated [i.e., not according to a pre-planned or preset pattern of behavior]. For example: When I see a father, I think of his son, which leads me in turn to think of the grandchild, which in turn leads me to think about their possessions and on and on. Additionally, the animal spirit moves by instinctive responses, e.g., the skipping of calves or the jumping of goats.<sup>1</sup> This kind of response is evident in the animal spirit’s thought mode as well [i.e., the free association of thoughts without any pre-planned order of progression]. The reason for this is that the imagination of the animal spirit is totally devoid of the ability to link thoughts, for the progression of its thoughts proceeds according to the order of the stimuli which it experiences

The intellectual spirit, on the other hand, controls this “mode of sluggishness” whenever it so desires, and it can link specific ideas with either written or spoken words. It is for this reason that the intellectual spirit is also known as the “speaking soul,” i.e., it was created within man so as to give expression to the feelings of the human heart so that others might become aware of them. Thus, either through sight or through sound people can learn from each other and their interaction can be a means of achieving perfection.<sup>2</sup> However, when speech is overused, it can itself become a *yetzer ha-ra* and an acquired desire, a maidservant to one’s ego and search for personal prestige. Moreover, pointless speech can lead one to speak *lashon ha-ra*, to gossip, to scorning and to lying, as our sages said (*Avot* 1:17), “One who speaks too much brings sin.”<sup>3</sup>

The regimen of discipline for this trait is to free one’s mind to deliberate before speaking, i.e., when the “appetite” is still weak and close to its source and it can be nipped in the bud. If one is tempted to say something frivolous, a person should condition oneself to swallow one’s words. As David ha-Melech said proudly about himself (*Tehillim* 17:3), “My thought did not leave my mouth.”<sup>4</sup> And as our Sages said (*Tanna d’vei Eliyahu*), “Think before you speak.”

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Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Pages 164-169.

*End notes added.*

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<sup>1</sup> Possibly a poetic allusion to “He makes Lebanon skip like a calf” (*Psalms* 29:6), and “You mountains, why were you jumping like goats, and you little hills like lambs?” (*Psalms* 114:6)

<sup>2</sup> **Footnote from Landesman translation:**

As explained, the animal spirit lacks both understanding and will. It can thus neither analyze nor synthesize thoughts on its own, independently of the stimuli which it experiences in the world at large. It surely is unable to discern how thoughts are linked to each other. The intellectual spirit, however, through its ability to understand, can discriminate and see how two separate thoughts are connected. Moreover, it will is not dependent upon external stimuli. It can thus connect ideas and sensations that would seem to be unrelated, or it can separate those which are clearly linked so as to use them to achieve some other purpose. It can also condition the animal spirit—through education and habit.

For example: The beating of a drum by an army can be associated with either war or peace, taps or reveille, attack or retreat, parading or standing at attention. Similarly, physical signals can have specific meaning [different than what they would seem to have were the person not aware of their specificity]; e.g., sign language used to communicate with the deaf, which gives them the ability to express themselves. Other examples are the universal symbols which everyone understands; e.g., an upright triangle which symbolizes fire or an inverted triangle which symbolizes water which physicians use in their prescriptions throughout Europe, or musical notes or accounting symbols. In China, the script itself is made up of symbols which enable each person to read the script according to his dialect [i.e., the symbols represent a concept rather than a specific word]. Another example is the recently devised universal script known as “phasigraphy.” Another example are the symbols, which one wise man — blind from birth and possessed of extraordinary mathematical capabilities — developed to enable himself to make astronomical calculations using his sense of touch. Another example is the abacus which is widely used by storekeepers in Russia. Using it, they can make complex calculations even in the dark using their sense of touch alone. All of these things are possible by establishing a link between ideas and intent—a gift that was given to man alone among living creatures. It is this link that is the basis of speech.

Moreover, through utilization of this faculty [i.e., of giving meaning to symbols et. al.], a person can use the other species to accomplish one’s goals through conditioning of the animal spirit, as we explained. What is more, one can even condition one’s own animal spirit to accomplish tasks that call for the combination of various unrelated parts and setting them into a fixed order so as to realize any benefit from them. People discipline themselves to accomplish these types of tasks one at a time, and once they have done so, they can condition their animal spirit to continue to follow the pattern which they have established. They can then free their faculty of understanding to accomplish new tasks and engage in new areas of study as per the exigencies of the moment. For example: For a number of years, a certain writer conditioned himself to copying texts — to the point where he could transfer this work to his animal spirit. Once he had done so, his hand could write one thing while his mouth spoke of other things. He could ask and respond to people intelligently [even though his hands were busy copying texts]. We see many great people who are busy with their occupations and household duties, yet their minds are completely free to sail on the seas of the Talmud and wisdom.

Once the conditioning process is accomplished, and the discipline is affixed into the spirit, they leave the province of the spirit and become habit. They are then inculcated into the “mode of sluggishness” since they become automatic responses and demand no conscious effort. The intellectual spirit is then free to pursue any contemplative activity which it desires. This is the basis for the conditioning of traits.

<sup>3</sup> Shimon, his son [the son of Rabban Gamaliel], said: All my days have I grown up among the wise and I have not found anything better for a man than silence. Studying Torah is not the most important thing rather fulfilling it. Whoever multiplies words causes sin.

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<sup>4</sup> *Psalms 17:3*

<p>You have scrutinized my inner motives; you have examined me during the night. You have carefully evaluated me, but you find no sin. I am determined I will say nothing sinful.</p>	<p>בְּחִנְתָּ לִבִּי, פְּקֹדֶת לַיְלָה -- צָרַפְתָּנִי בַל-תִּמְצָא; זְמוֹתַי, בַּל-יִעְבְּר-פִּי.</p>
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