

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

It was about this time I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into... thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occur'd to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each, a short precept, which fully express'd the extent I gave to its meaning. These names of virtues, with their precepts, were:

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FORM OF THE PAGES

Temperance.							
<i>Eat not to Dulness Drink not to Elevation.</i>							
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1. TEMPERANCE. Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. SILENCE. Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. ORDER. Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
4. RESOLUTION. Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
5. FRUGALITY. Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.
6. INDUSTRY. Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
7. SINCERITY. Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. JUSTICE. Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
9. MODERATION. Avoid extreams; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
10. CLEANLINESS. Tolerate no uncleanness in body, cloaths, or habitation.
11. TRANQUILLITY. Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. CHASTITY. Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dulness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
13. HUMILITY. Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

... I made a little book... I rul'd each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I cross'd these columns with thirteen red lines, ... and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

... I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus, in the first week, my great guard was to avoid every the least offence against Temperance, leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day. Thus, if in the first week I could keep my first line, marked T, clear of spots, I suppos'd the habit of that virtue so much strengthen'd and its opposite weaken'd, that I might venture extending my attention to include the next, and for the following week keep both lines clear of spots. Proceeding thus to the last, I could go thro' a course compleat in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a year. And like him who, having a garden to weed, does not attempt to eradicate all the bad herbs at once, which would exceed his reach and his strength, but works on one of the beds at a time, and, having accomplish'd the first, proceeds to a second, so I should have, I hoped... be happy in viewing a clean book, after a thirteen weeks' daily examination.

Speech and Silence

1. Avot ch.1

משנה מסכת אבות פרק א

15. Shammai would say: Make your Torah study a permanent fixture of your life. **Say little and do much.** And receive every man with a pleasant countenance.

משנה טו
[*] שמאי אומר עשה תורתך קבע **אמור מעט ועשה הרבה** והיו מקבל את כל האדם בסבר פנים יפות:

16. Rabban Gamliel would say: Assume for yourself a master; stay away from doubt; and do not accustom yourself to tithe by estimation.

משנה טז [*] רבן גמליאל אומר עשה לך רב והסתלק מן הספק ואל תרבה לעשר אומדות:

17. His son, Shimon, would say:

All my life I have been raised among the wise, and I have found nothing better for the body than silence. The essential thing is not study, but deed. And one who speaks excessively brings on sin.

משנה יז [*] שמעון בנו אומר כל ימי גדלתי בין החכמים ולא מצאתי לגוף טוב אלא שתיקה ולא המדרש הוא העיקר אלא המעשה וכל המרבה דברים מביא חטא:

2. Rabbeinu Yonah

Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel hardly needed to advocate silence; a person knows to guard themselves from harm. However, even non damaging, positive speech, such as a person talking about their work, bodily needs or livelihood, should be minimised, especially if the talk is simple banter which has no higher benefit In the Jerusalem Talmud it is said "Reish Lakish said, 'If I had been at Mount Sinai, I would have requested two mouths.' Afterwards he said, 'With only one mouth I cannot stop myself from evil speech, all the more so if we had two.'" He means to say [he wanted two mouths] so that he should not speak from his [one] mouth words of Torah and words that are completely vain things of the world; in the same [way] that our holy sages would make themselves like holy vessels which are not to be used for profane matters. And this is that which we say in the Talmud "All chatter is bad except for Torah chatter which is good."

פירוש רבינו יונה על אבות פרק א משנה יז
... מצד אחר לא הוצרך רשב"ג להזהיר בזה כי כל אדם יזהר ממנו אם שומר נפשו מצרה. אלא אפילו בדבור שאין לאדם נזק בו כלל וכלו ריוח כמי שמדבר בעסקיו ובצורך גופו ובצורך פרנסתו צריך למעט בדבור ושלא יאריך בו אך כדי סיפוקו ואין צריך לומר בדבר של הבל ושאינו מעלה ולא מוריד שאין לאדם לזכרו כלל וכן אמרו בירושלמי ארשב"ל אלו היונא בטורא דסיני בעינא תרי פומי הדר אמר השתא דלית לן אלא חד לא יכילנא למיצל נפשין מלישנא בישא כל שכן אי הוה לן תרין. ר"ל שלא ידבר בפה דברי תורה ודברים שכלו דברים של הבל עולם שהיו החכמים הקדושים עושים עצמן ככלי שרת שאין משתמשין בהם דברים של חול...

3. Vayikra Rabbah ch.33

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel once sent his servant, Tavi, to buy "good food." Tavi, who was famous for his wisdom, brought back a tongue. Thereupon, Rav Shimon sent him to buy some "bad food." Again he returned with a tongue. Rav Shimon asked him to explain how the same food could be both good and bad. Tavi answered, "From a tongue can come good and bad."

ויקרא רבה לג
אמר רבי שמעון בן גמליאל לטבי עבדו: צא קנה לי מאכל טוב מן השוק. יצא ולקח לו לשון.
אמר לו: צא וקנה לי מאכל רע מן השוק. יצא ולקח לו לשון.
אמר לו רבי שמעון בן גמליאל: מפני מה עשית כך?
אמר לו עבדו: "ממנה הטובה וממנה הרעה" - כשהיא טובה אין טובה ממנה, וכשהיא רעה אין רעה ממנה.

4. Alan Morinis. Everyday Holiness pg.142

I regularly conduct students in an exercise in which I pair people up and direct them to relate to their partner one instance in the last week when they said something to someone, or heard something from someone, that reflected

negatively on another person who was absent. The point is not to assess whether or not the facts in the conversation were true, but simply whether derogatory, potentially damaging speaking took place in your presence.

5. So ...an exercise.

Talk to your “spiritual chavruta”. Reflect on the past week or weekend (or beyond)

Is there in instance in which you have:

- Been insulted by speech
- Offended or insulted others – in their presence or in their absence
- Experienced or given praise – been boosted by the way a person has spoken to you?

Do you find that the environment with your friends is positive, negative or neutral when it comes to speech?

6. Alei Shor. Rav Wolbe page 177-179

Silence and solitude are connected. A person who knows how to be silent loves isolation. A person who doesn't know the art of silence flees from being alone. There is no intent here for a person never to talk, or to live in eternal solitude; such an extreme is not the way of the Torah. We are talking about people who are social, happy and active in the throes of life. Exactly this sort of person need to love an hour of isolation and silence and to designate such a time.

Some people escape from moments in which they are alone as if from fire. In those moments they suddenly confront, face to face, a foreigner who they have no interest to get to know, and they run away from him ... because at such a moment of silence, a person faces his own self, and such people are distant from themselves.

An intelligent person seeks an hour of aloneness so that he can come closer to himself and his inner world...

This is not piety. Any healthy, social person, feels a need once in a while to be alone with oneself, and without fulfilling this need, one causes oneself damage.

Out of the solitude and silence grows the power of thought, the “inner intelligence” is strengthened, and the “intelligence of speech” withers...

If it were not for the night, we would never know about the stars... so it is with our inner world. When we are with other people, our entire attention is directed to earthly matters...but by taking an hour out, and shutting the world out from our consciousness, then the heavens that exist within our soul is revealed, a spiritual space is opened before us, distant worlds twinkle at us like stars, and arouse within us love and fear, yearnings of holiness and kindness (hessed). Without a graceful moment of solitude, we would not know of these things at all!

7. Psalms 33:

⁶By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
by the breath of His mouth, all their host.

⁷He heaps up the ocean waters, stores the deep in vaults.

⁸Let all the earth fear the Lord;

let all the inhabitants of the world dread Him.

⁹For He spoke, and it was; He commanded, and it endured.

תהילים לג

ו בְּדִבַּר ה', שָׁמַיִם נִעֲשׂוּ; וּבְרוּחַ פִּי, כָּל-צְבָאָם.

ז כִּנֵּס בְּיַד, מִי הַיָּם; נָתַן בְּאוֹצְרוֹת תְּהוֹמוֹת.

ח יִירָאוּ מֵה', כָּל-הָאָרֶץ;

מִמֶּנּוּ יִגֹּדוּ, כָּל-יֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֶל.

ט כִּי הוּא אָמַר יְיָהִי;

הוּא-צִוָּה, וַיֵּעֲמֵד.

8. Avot 5:1.

The world was created with ten utterances.

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ה משנה א

בַּעֲשֶׂרָה מֵאֲמֹרֹת נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם[*]

9. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Metzora 5771. “Lashon Tov!”

Judaism is a sustained meditation on the power of words to heal or harm, mend or destroy. Just as God created the world with words, so we create, and can destroy, relationships with words. The rabbis said much about *lashon hara*, but virtually nothing about the corollary, *lashon tov*, “good speech”

In Mishnah Avot, Ethics of the Fathers (2: 10-11), we read the following:

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had five (pre-eminent) disciples, namely Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi Joshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yose the Priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh.

He used to recount their praise: Eliezer ben Hyrcanus: a plastered well that never loses a drop. Joshua ben Chananya: happy the one who gave him birth. Yose the Priest: a pious man. Shimon ben Netanel: a man who fears sin. Elazar ben Arakh: an ever-flowing spring.

... There is a famous passage in the Talmud which discusses how one should sing the praises of a bride at her wedding:

Our Rabbis taught: How should you dance before the bride [i.e. what should one sing]?

The School of Shammai say: [Sing] “The bride is as she is.”

The School of Hillel say: [Sing] “The bride is beautiful and graceful.”

The School of Beth Shammai said to the School of Hillel, “If she were lame or blind, would you sing that the bride is beautiful and graceful? Does the Torah not say, ‘Keep far from falsehood’?”

The School of Hillel answered the School of Shammai: “According to your view, if someone has made a bad purchase in the market, should you praise it in his eyes or depreciate it? Surely, one should praise it in his eyes.” (Ketubot 16b-17a)

The disciples of Hillel hold that at a wedding you should sing that the bride is beautiful, whether she is or not. Shammai’s disciples disagree. Whatever the occasion, don’t tell a lie. “Do you call that a lie?” the Hillelites respond. In the eyes of the groom at least, the bride is beautiful, just as in the eyes of someone who has just made a purchase, he has made a good deal, even if in your opinion, he hasn’t.

What’s really at stake here is ... **two views about the nature of language. The Shammaites think of language as a way of making statements, which are either true or false. The Hillelites understand that language is about more than making statements. We can use language to encourage, empathise, motivate and inspire. Or we can use it to discourage, disparage, criticise and depress. Language does more than convey information. It conveys emotion. It creates or disrupts a mood. The sensitive use of speech involves social and emotional intelligence.**

...

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai when he praised his students, showing them their specific strengths... And that is *lashon tov*. Evil speech diminishes us, good speech helps us grow. Evil speech puts people down, good speech lifts them up. Focused, targeted praise, informed by considered judgment of individual strengths, and sustained by faith in people

and their potentiality, is what makes teachers great and their disciples greater than they would otherwise have been. That is what we learn from Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai.

10. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Words and the Power of Covenant

Words not only allow us to communicate, they enable us to form partnerships. For I can use language not just to describe facts and express feelings, but also to create a moral bond-to promise, to bind, to commit myself. This is what is called a "**performative utterance**," meaning the use of language to create something that did not exist before. So, for example, when I promise to do something, I create an obligation. When, standing under the bridal canopy, I say, "Behold, you are betrothed to me," I create a new and transformative relationship, the relationship of marriage.

Just as God creates the natural world with words, so we create the social world with words-sacred words, meaning, words that bind. This is the first intimation of an idea on which eventually all Jewish history will turn: the idea of a covenant. (A Letter in the Scroll pgs 82)

Something else happened at Sinai that had not happened before. God tells Moses to announce the nature of the covenant before making it, to see whether the people agree. They do so no less than three times: "Then the people answered as one, saying, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do'" (Ex. 19:7); "The people all responded with a single voice, 'We will do everything the Lord has spoken'" (Ex. 24:3); "The people said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do and heed'" (Ex. 24:7).

This is the first time in history that we encounter the phenomenon enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence, namely "the consent of the governed." God only spoke the Ten Commandments after the people had signalled that they had given their consent to be bound by His word. God does not impose His rule by force.¹ At Sinai, covenant-making became mutual. Both sides had to agree. (Life Changing Ideas. Nitzavim)

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/matot/keeping-our-word/>

Words create because words are holy: that is to say, they bind. When words bind, they generate trust. **Trust is to society what predictability is to nature: the basis of order as opposed to chaos.**

...If trust breaks down, social relationships break down, and then society depends on law enforcement agencies or some other use of force. When force is widely used, society is no longer free. The only way free human beings can form collaborative and cooperative relationships without recourse to force is by the use of verbal undertakings honoured by those who make them.

... Although it sounds strange to us now, the father of toleration and liberalism, John Locke (England, 17th century) held that citizenship should not be extended to atheists because, not believing in God, they could not be trusted to honour their word.

So the appearance of laws about vows and oaths at the end of the book of Bamidbar, as the Israelites are approaching the holy land, is no accident, and the moral is still relevant today. A free society depends on trust. Trust depends on keeping your word. That is how humans imitate God by using language to create.

Words create moral obligations, and moral obligations, undertaken responsibly and honoured faithfully, create the possibility of a free society.