

Biblical Lessons in the Mussar of Communication

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"Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov. 18:21)

1. Awareness of Anger and Choice - בחירה - *Cain and Havel*

הֲלוֹא אִם-תִּיטִיב שְׂאֵת וְאִם לֹא תִיטִיב לְפִתַּח חַטָּאת רִבִּץ וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשׁוּקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל-בוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל-הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיְהִי בְהִיוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּקָּם קַיִן אֶל-הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ:

Surely, if you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin crouches at the door; it's urge is toward you but you can be its master. Cain said to Abel his brother... And when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him. (Gen. 4:7-8)

2. Active Listening- התלמדות - Curiosity/Listening with a good ear

Receiving the other completely - *Avraham and Sarah*

וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אוֹדֹת בְּנוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-אַבְרָהָם אֶל-יִרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל-הַנֶּעֱר וְעַל-אַמְתָּךְ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שִׁמְעַת בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בִיצָחֶק יִקְרָא לָךְ זֶרַע:

The matter distressed Abraham greatly for it concerned a son of his. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave, whatever Sarah tells you, *sh'mah b'kolah* – listen to her voice..." (Gen. 21:11-12)

3. Awareness of Ego Needs- Developing Humility and Trust - ענוה- בטחון

Does my action/reaction serve my ego or the greater good? *Joseph and his brothers:*

אֵלֶּה | הַתְלָדוֹת יַעֲקֹב יוֹסֵף בֶּן-שֶׁבַע-עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה הָיָה רָעָה אֶת-אָחָיו בְּעָאן וְהוּא נֶעַר אֶת-בְּנֵי בְלָחָה וְאֶת-בְּנֵי זְלֶפְחָה נְשֵׂי אָבִיו וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת-דְּבַרְתֵּם רָעָה אֶל-אֲבִיהֶם:

...and Joseph brought bad reports of them (his brothers) to his father. (Gen. 37:2)

וַיַּחְלֵם יוֹסֵף חֲלוֹם וַיַּגִּד לְאָחָיו וַיּוֹסְפוּ עוֹד שִׁנְאָה אֹתוֹ:

Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more. (Gen. 37: 5)

4. Speaking/Responding from a place of compassion – רחמים – Yehudah and Yoseph

וְעַתָּה יִשְׁבֹּב־נָא עֲבָדְךָ תַּחַת הַנַּעַר עֹבֵד לְאֹדְנִי וְהַנַּעַר יַעֲלֶה עִם־אָחִיו: כִּי־אֵיךְ אֶעֱלֶה
אֶל־אָבִי וְהַנַּעַר אֵינְנִי אִתִּי פֶן אֲרֹאֶה בְרַע אֲשֶׁר יִמָּצֵא אֶת־אָבִי:

Please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father.

(Gen. 44:33-34)

5. Timing – Tamar

וַיְהִי אַבְרָמָה שְׁלֹשׁ חֳדָשִׁים וַיִּגַּד לַיהוָה לַיהוּדָה לֵאמֹר זָנַתָּה תָמָר כַּלְתֶּךָ וְגַם הֵינָה הָרָה לְזַנּוּנִים
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה הוֹצִיאוּהָ וְתִשְׂרָף: הוּא מוֹצֵאתָ וְהִיא שְׁלֶחָה אֶל־חַמִּיָּה לֵאמֹר לְאִישׁ
אֲשֶׁר־יֵלֵךְ לוֹ אֲנֹכִי הָרָה וְהִיא מְאֹמֶר הַכֹּרֶן־נָא לְמִי הַחֲתָמָת וְהַפְתִּילִים וְהַמָּטָה
הָאֵלֶּה: וַיִּכַּר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי־עַל־כֵּן לֹא־נָתַתִּיחָ לְשֵׁלָה בְנִי וְלֹא־יָסַף עוֹד
לְדַעְתָּה:

About three months later, Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry.” “Bring her out,” said Judah, “and let her be burned.” As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, “I am with child by the man to whom these belong.” And she added, “Examine these: whose seal and staff and cord are these?” Judah recognized them and said, “She is more right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah...

(Gen. 38:24-26)

6. Silence – שתיקה – Aaron

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי־אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אִשׁ וַיִּשְׁמֹוּ עָלֶיהָ קַמֶּרֶת
וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אִשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אַתֶּם: וַתֵּצֵא אִשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם
וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אֶהֱרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבִּי אֶקְדָּשׁ
וְעַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָעָם אֶכְבֹּד וַיִּדָּם אֶהֱרֹן:

...and Aaron was silent. (Lev. 10:3)

Questions to consider before speaking:

- 1) Am I feeling anger in response to what I am hearing?
- 2) Am I listening with compassion for the other?
- 3) Does what I want to say stem from my need for attention, power, control, or from fear of losing status, or other fears? Does what I want to communicate emerge from my ego's needs?
- 4) Am I motivated by good-will? By the greater good? By love? Is what I want to communicate l'shem shamayim?
- 5) Is this the right time to share what I want to say?
- 6) Is this a time for silence?

Right Speech- *samma vaca* is the third of the eight factors in [the Noble Eightfold Path](#) of Buddhism.

There are five keys to right speech:

"Monks, a statement endowed with five factors is well-spoken, not ill-spoken. It is blameless & unfaulted by knowledgeable people. Which five? "It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will."

From the place where we are right
Flowers never grow
In the spring.
The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.
But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a wisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

~Yehuda Amichai