

Maharal Torah Paths

The Virtue of Silence

Netiv HaSh'tika 2,1:97 - Rabbi Chiya said that silence is proper for sages, evermore so for simpletons [Talmud Yerushalmi, Pesachim 69:9]. Speech is through verbal sechel [intellect] which inclines toward physicality, particularly when carried out by simpletons. When one speaks, his foolishness is evident. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, "All my life I have grown up among the sages, and I have not found a better trait than silence" [Yalkut B'haalotcha 739]. The rabbis answered with a story. Two tutors stood before Hadrian, one taught speaking is virtuous and the other taught that silence is beautiful. The first said to the king, "My master, speech is the best thing in the world, for without it kings could not rule, the dead could not be treated with kindness, brides could not be praised, the ships could not spread over the seas." Hadrian said that he had spoken well. The other tutor contradicted the first, saying silence is still better. How so? "Master, my position applies to me while his applies to him - mine does not apply to his nor his to me". Shlomo says, "One who is sparing with his words knows knowledge, and a man of understanding speaks sparingly" [Mishlei 17:27].

I did not say seal your lips and sit and be quiet, but use your lips sparingly so as not to speak against your fellow man. His father David said, "Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking falsehood" [T'hilim 34:14]. But when speech results in something good, it is

beautiful. Total abstinence from speech when one is among people is indecent, for a person needs to be intermixed with others, which requires speech.

Gemara says that the verse "and you shall speak of them [words of Torah]" [D'varim 6:4] excludes other words [Yoma 19b]. Man actuates through speech, and only Torah actuates man. Rambam discusses at great length in the Eight Chapters the matter of speech and silence. Most words are accessory, unnecessary, permissible, albeit sinful. When one talks too much, he sins, for it is impossible not to say something unseemly. Among the wonders of sages is the sparsity of their speech while among the wonders of fools is the excess of their words.

Column preped by Dr. Moshe Kuhr

