

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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How To Praise

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The sages were eloquent on the subject of *lashon hara*, evil speech, the sin they took to be the cause of *tsara'at*, the subject of this week's parsha. But there is a meta-halakhic principle: "From the negative you can infer the positive"¹ So, for example, from the seriousness of the prohibition against *Chillul Hashem*, desecrating God's name, you can infer the importance of the opposite, *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying God's name.

So there must in principle be a concept of *lashon hatov*, good speech, and it must be more than a mere negation of its opposite. The way to avoid *lashon hara* is to practise silence, and indeed the sages were eloquent on the important of silence.² Silence saves us from evil speech but in and of itself it achieves nothing positive. What then is *lashon hatov*?

“The way to avoid *lashon hara* is to practise silence. Silence saves us from evil speech but in and of itself it achieves nothing positive. What then is *lashon hatov*?”

Lashon hatov – one of the most important tasks of a leader, a parent or a friend – is focused praise. The classic text on this is a Mishnah in the tractate of Avot, “The Ethics of the Fathers”:

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

¹ Nedarim 11a.

² See for example Mishnah Avot 1:17; 3:13.

Priest: a pious man. Shimon ben Netanel: a man who fears sin. Elazar ben Arakh: an ever-flowing spring. (Avot 2: 10-11)

The Mishnah is doing more than telling us that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai had disciples. Every rabbi had disciples. The imperative, “Raise up many disciples”³ is one of the oldest rabbinic teachings on record. What the Mishnah is telling us is *how* to create disciples. It is easy to have students who are uncritical devotees but never become creative intellects in their own right. It is not difficult to create followers. It is far harder to create leaders. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai was a great teacher because five of his students became giants in their own right. The Mishnah is telling us how he did it.

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He did it by focussed praise. He showed each of his pupils where their particular strength lay. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, the “plastered well that never loses a drop,” was gifted with a superb memory – an important gift in an age in which manuscripts were rare and the Oral Law was not yet committed to writing. Shimon ben Netanel, the “man who fears sin,” may not have had the intellectual brilliance of the others but his reverential nature was a reminder to others that they were not mere scholars but also holy men engaged in a sacred task. Elazar ben Arakh, the “ever-flowing spring,” had a creative mind constantly giving rise to new interpretations of ancient texts.

I discovered the transformative power of focused praise from one of the more remarkable people I ever met, the late Lena Rustin. Lena was a speech therapist, specialising in helping stammering children. I came to know her through a television documentary I was making for the BBC about the state of the family in Britain. Lena believed that the young stammerers she was treating – they were, on average, around five years old – had to be understood in the context of their families. Families tend to develop an equilibrium. If a child stammers, everyone in the family adjusts to it. Therefore if the child is to lose its stammer, all the relationships within the family will have to be renegotiated. Not only must the child change. So must everyone else.

By and large, we tend to resist change. We settle into patterns of behaviour until they become comfortable like a well-worn armchair or a comfortable pair of shoes. How do you create an atmosphere within a family that encourages change and makes it unthreatening? The answer Lena discovered was praise. She told the families with which she was working that every day they must catch each member of the family doing something right, and say so, specifically, positively and thankfully.

³ Avot 1:1.

She did not go into deep explanations, but watching her at work I began to realise what she was doing. She was creating, within each home, an atmosphere of mutual regard and continuous positive reinforcement. She wanted the parents to shape an environment of self-respect and self-confidence, not just for the stammering child but for every member of the family, so that the entire atmosphere of the home was one in which people felt safe to change and help others to do so.

I suddenly realised that she had discovered a solution not just for stammering but for group dynamics as a whole. My intuition was soon confirmed in a surprising way. There had been tensions among the television crew with which I had been working. Various things had gone wrong and there was an atmosphere of mutual recrimination. After filming a session of Lena Rustin teaching parents how to give and receive praise, the crew started praising one another. Instantly the atmosphere was transformed. The tension dissolved, and filming became fun again. Praise gives people the confidence to let go of the negative aspects of their character and reach their full potential.

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There is in praise a deep spiritual message. We think religion is about faith in God. What I had not fully understood before was that faith in God should lead us to have faith in people, for God’s image is in each of us, and we have to learn how to discern it. I then understood that the repeated phrase in Genesis 1, “And God saw that it was good,” was there to teach us to see the good in people and events, and by so doing, help to strengthen it. I also understood why God briefly punished Moses by turning his hand leprous – as mentioned in the last Covenant and Conversation – because he had said about the Israelites, “They will not believe in me.” Moses was being taught a fundamental lesson of leadership: *It does not matter whether they believe in you. What matters is that you believe in them.*

It was from another wise woman that I learned another important lesson about praise. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, in her book *Mindset*,⁴ argues that it makes a decisive difference whether we believe that our abilities are innate and determined once and for all (the “fixed” mindset), or that talent is something we achieve through time by effort, practice and persistence (the “growth” mindset). The former tend to be risk-averse, afraid that if they fail this will show that they are not as good as they were thought to be. The latter embrace risk because they take failure as a learning experience from which we grow. It follows that there is good praise and bad praise. Parents and teachers should not praise children in absolute terms: “You are gifted, brilliant, a star.” They should praise effort: “You tried hard, you gave of your best.” They should encourage a growth mindset, not a fixed one.

⁴ Carol Dweck, *Mindset*, Ballantine Books, 2007.

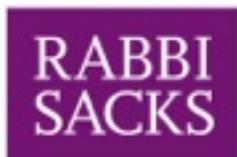
Perhaps this explains a sad aftermath in the life of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's two most gifted pupils. The Mishnah immediately following the one quoted above states:

He [Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai] used to say: If all the sages of Israel were in one scale of a balance and Eliezer ben Hyrcanus in the other, he would outweigh them all. However, Abba Saul said in his name: If all the sages of Israel, including Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, were in one scale of a balance, and Elazar ben Arakh in the other, he would outweigh them all. (Avot 2: 12)

Tragically Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was eventually excommunicated by his colleagues for failing to accept the majority view on a matter of Jewish law.⁵ As for Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh, he became separated from his colleagues. When they went to the academy at Yavneh, he went to Emmaus, a pleasant place to live but lacking in other Torah scholars. Eventually he forgot his learning and became a pale shadow of his former self.⁶ It may be that praising his students for their innate abilities rather than their effort, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai inadvertently encouraged the two most talented of them to develop a fixed mindset rather than engage with colleagues and stay open to intellectual growth.

Praise and how we administer it is a fundamental element in leadership of any kind. Recognising the good in people and saying so, we help bring people's potential to fruition. Praising their efforts rather than their innate gifts helps encourage growth, about which Hillel used to say: "He who does not increase his knowledge, loses it" (Avot 1: 13). The right kind of praise changes lives. That is the power of *lashon hatov*. Bad speech diminishes us; good speech can lift us to great heights. Or as W. H. Auden said in one of his beautiful poems: "In the prison of his days. Teach the free man how to praise."

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⁵ Baba Metsia 59b.

⁶ Shabbat 147b.