

FROM THE EDITOR

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Scientists estimate that there are nearly 9 million different species on Earth, only a fraction of which – a mere 1.2 million – have actually been identified, meaning that “86% of all species on land and 91% of those in the seas have yet to be discovered, described, or catalogued.”¹ Animals. Plants. Fungi. Protozoa. It’s a huge world out there – and these numbers don’t even take into account the billions (if not trillions) of species of single-celled organisms all around us, such as bacteria. And, of all these countless different creatures in the world, quite remarkably, man is the only one among them that possesses the ability to speak. Our Sages recognised just how unique this ability is among all of creation, noting that when G-d invested man with a soul, He made him a “speaking spirit.”² The Torah teaches that the entire physical universe came into being simply through the power of G-d’s speech. Speech is truly a Divine power.

One of the hallmarks of the many mitzvos contained within the Torah, one of those things that almost everyone knows about us even if he has never met a Jew before in his life, is the unique emphasis that the Torah places on what goes in our mouths, on the many foods we eat. More than 30 of the 613 mitzvos in the Torah are devoted to detailing the requirements of the foods that we may consume. And the kosher food industry is big business, with billions of dollars being spent annually on foods that are certified as kosher. What is far less well-known, however, is just how much of an emphasis the Torah places on what comes out of our mouths, on the words we speak. Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, ztz”l, one of the greatest rabbis of the 20th Century, better known by the name of his seminal work on the laws of proper speech, Chofetz Chaim (lit: Who desires life?), lists 31 mitzvos from the Torah that a person can potentially violate by speaking loshen horah (defamatory speech), despite the fact that the things being said by the speaker about his subject are entirely true!

We’re all familiar with the concept of chillul Shabbos, desecrating Shabbos. But did you know that just as we can take Shabbos, which is holy, and make it profane, so too the Torah considers our speech to be holy by default – until we do something to make it otherwise, thereby profaning it. We are told that a person must “not profane his word.”³ So, what does it mean for speech to be holy? Does it mean we must only speak words of Torah all day? No! Quite simply, for our speech to be holy is to do what we say we’re going to do – to stand behind our words. Similarly, the Torah admonishes us that we must “distance” ourselves “from a false word.”⁴ As important as it is that what goes in our mouths is kosher, so too we must ensure that what comes out of our mouths is also kosher.

The festival of Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah on Har Sinai and it serves as an opportunity for us to reflect upon the many teachings and obligations that it contains. Where are we measuring up? Where are we falling short? How can we improve?

In the past few months, a new community organisation – the Chofetz Chaim Educational Foundation (CCEF) – has made a big push towards promoting programming in schools as well as in the broader community aimed at teaching and inspiring proper and positive speech. *Jewish Life* is proud to join them in their campaign to raise awareness of these important and, too often, neglected mitzvos. With this in mind, we are proud to introduce a new column: A Kind Word, A Kinder World (see page 20), made possible through the assistance of the CCEF (cchfsa@gmail.com). A tremendous thank you and yasher koach to everyone at the CCEF, as well as to Sara Gila Margulies, staff writer for the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation in New York, who will be writing the column for us.

On behalf of everyone here at *Jewish Life*, wishing everyone here in South Africa and abroad a chag sameach!

ROBERT SUSSMAN, EDITOR

¹www.news.discovery.com/earth/plants/874-million-species-on-earth-110823.htm

²Onkelos on Bereishis 2:7

³Bamidbar 30:3

⁴Shemos 23:7

ON THE COVER: WWW.WIKIMEDIA.ORG (SHREE KRISHNA DHITAL). COLOURFUL STALKS OF WHEAT WHEN SHAVUOT WAS CELEBRATED IN THE TIMES OF THE BEIS HAMIKDASH (TEMPLE), A SPECIAL OFFERING FROM THE NEW CROP OF WHEAT THAT HAD BEEN HARVESTED, TWO LOAVES OF BREAD (AKA SHTEI HALECHEM), WAS BROUGHT. THE GRAIN HARVEST ALSO FEATURES PROMINENTLY IN MEGILAS RUS (THE BOOK OF RUTH) WHICH IS READ ON SHAVUOT.

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