



## *Insights into Pirke Avot*

by

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*Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom*

### *Perek Alef, Mishnah Yud-alef*

**1:11 Avtalyon says, Sages, be careful with your words lest you become liable for exile, and are exiled to a place of evil waters, and the students who come after you will drink and die, and the Name of Heaven is desecrated.**

#### *Every Word*

**Avtalyon says, Sages, be careful with your words.**

This is a very important *mishnah* with a very important message.

Avtalyon's words are addressed to all Torah scholars, be they rabbis, teachers, or *roshe yeshivah*. A Torah scholar cannot allow himself the luxury of teaching or speaking with off-the-cuff spontaneity. He must weigh his every word because others are listening, and an innocent misunderstanding can have dreadful results. A tragic example is the case of Tzadok and Beitus, two of the many students of Antigonus of Socho.

Antigonus taught, "Do not be like servants who serve their master in order to receive reward. Instead, be like servants who serve their master not in order to receive reward" (*Avot* 1:3). Antigonus discussed an important principle in the refinement of man's service of the Al-mighty. Rather than keeping tabs on the eternal reward awaiting us for every worthy move we make (as it most surely does), we should purify our motives and concentrate instead on serving Hashem solely for His honor, out of loving fear of the Creator. But apparently, Antigonus' choice of words allowed room for question. His explanation of this sensitive topic was not sufficiently clear to all his listeners, opening the way to disaster. The Rambam describes what happened:



“...And this Sage had two students, one named Tzadok and the other named Beitus. And when they heard that he taught this, they left him. And one said to the other, ‘Here the rabbi explicitly stated that man has no reward and no punishment, and there is no hope at all,’ for they did not understand his true intention. One encouraged the other, and they left the community and abandoned Torah. A group attached themselves to one, and another group attached themselves to the other, and the Sages called them *Tzedokim* and *Beitusim*” (*Perush HaMishnayot, Avot 1:3*).

Unable to accept the idea of serving Hashem without reward – as they mistakenly thought Antigonus taught – they and their followers went on to deny the Divine origin of the Oral Torah altogether, and became a persistent source of trouble for the Jewish people for generations to come. **Sages, be careful with your words!**

### *A Wave of the Hand*

As we explained (see 1:1), the Sages cited in *Avot* taught much more than the brief sayings recorded in these *mishnayot*. Often, their teachings addressed issues of particular relevance to their times. In Avtalyon’s case as well, it is likely that there was an instance of a student who misinterpreted his teacher’s words, following the tragic precedents in the times of Antigonus of Socho, and later, of Yehoshua ben Perahiah, the teacher of Yeshu. Apparently, Avtalyon found it imperative to relate to this recurrent stumbling block.

While traveling with his teacher in Egypt, Yeshu sinned by speaking in an immodest manner, and Yehoshua ben Perahiah excommunicated him. Yeshu came to him again and again, begging to be reinstated, but his former teacher refused to take him back. Yeshu returned one last time, and found Yehoshua ben Perahiah in the middle of reciting *Keriat Shema*. The teacher decided that it was time to accept Yeshu back into the fold, and gestured to him to wait until he was done, as he was not permitted to speak in the middle of *Keriat Shema*. Unfortunately, Yeshu mistook the gesture for another rejection and walked away, not only from his teacher, but from Torah and Judaism altogether. The suffering endured by our people in the aftermath needs no elaboration. Yehoshua ben Perahiah had not even spoken – all he had done was wave his hand. If this was the power of a misconstrued gesture, can we possibly imagine the impact of a misinterpreted word?



## *The Long and Short of It*

Later in *Avot*, the Rambam teaches an important principle related to the necessity for a teacher, speaker, or writer to exercise caution in his choice of words. He writes that when we deliver words of Torah, they should be clear and easily understood. One who hears or reads them should not have to dig deep and work hard, exercising sophisticated analytic strategies to finally uncover what we meant to say (*Perush HaMishnayot* 2:4).

This principle raises a question. The writings of the Early Authorities are basic to our understanding of every aspect of Torah. And yet, we often find their words to be so concise or so obscure that we cannot understand them. The fault lies not with them, but with us. They wrote on a level compatible with their own enormous knowledge and comprehension. If we cannot understand them, it is because of our own limitations.<sup>1</sup>

Every stroke from the pen of the Early Authorities is fraught with significance, and all their words hold a wealth of meaning and innovative thought. Even the great Later Authorities imbued every letter of their writings with vast wisdom and knowledge. A classic example is the *Magen Avraham's* commentary on the *Shulhan Aruch*.

The author, Rabbi Avraham Abbele Gombiner of Kalish, was an unparalleled Torah scholar who suffered unparalleled poverty. His monumental work is concise in the extreme, written almost in code, because he had to economize on paper and ink! Had he been less pressed for funds he could have written at greater length, explaining exactly what he had in mind with no need for additional interpretation. Instead, he kept his explanations short because he had no choice, making every last nuance count. His brief comments, which may be no longer than a line or two, are the subject of lengthy discussions of half a page or more by such authorities as the *Mahatzit HaShekel*, *Eshel Avraham*, *Dagul Merevavah*, *Yad Ephraim*, and more. His few choice words have such profound depth that these super-commentaries often disagree as to their meaning.

Not every author is the *Magen Avraham*; his every word was a gem, and he could allow himself the luxury of brief, abbreviated writing. In general, authors are better advised to explain their ideas more clearly. However, they should not go to the opposite extreme and allow their pens free rein. Successful dissemination of Torah

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<sup>1</sup> See the Introduction to *VaYashov HaYam* for a fuller discussion of the problems of writing concisely, and the need for clarity in writing.



lies in clear, succinct presentation, in keeping with our Sages' teaching that one should always instruct his students in a concise fashion (*Pesahim* 3b).

**Sages, be careful with your words.** Detailed or concise, a Torah teacher's goal must be clarity. Cutting an explanation too short hinders full comprehension, while lengthy, rambling discourses can result in confusion. Whenever we speak and whatever we teach, we must constantly be on the alert, so that our listeners will not be led to err. In today's era of mass media, this problem is particularly acute.

### *On the Air*

Radio has become popular as a medium for teaching Torah. I personally do not approve of the practice, but there are rabbis who utilize this tool. At the very least, however, these rabbis should exercise extreme caution, because often, they unwittingly violate the words of our *mishnah*. I have witnessed this myself on all too many occasions. The lecturer on the radio has no idea of who is listening, how long the listener will stay tuned, and how he will interpret what he hears. The dangers are genuine.

Let us consider the ramifications of an ill-timed brush with *halachah* on the air.

A broadcasting rabbi sets out to expound a *halachah*. While some authorities have ruled leniently on this particular *halachah*, others have ruled strictly and their opinion is binding. An interested bus driver turns up the volume on his radio for the edification of the passengers. A gentleman gets on just as the speaker is citing the lenient opinions, one after the other. "Sounds good," our man muses, "Why do people look for extra trouble?" The bus reaches his stop and he gets off, *before the speaker starts quoting the stricter, binding opinions*. He never hears the rabbi explain that in actual halachic practice we follow the opinion of those authorities who have ruled stringently. At home, he announces that based on this new information, it is time to stop being overly strict for no good reason. He just now heard it himself, on the radio on the bus. Someone tries to point out that many opinions forbid this leniency, but he shrugs off this foolish talk with ease. He specifically heard the rabbi say that the *Taz* rules leniently. Is he more religious than the *Taz*?

Unfortunately, I am not exaggerating.



## *All Theirs*

One *erev* Yom Kippur I took a taxi home after prayers. The driver had the radio on, tuned in to a lecture on the custom of *kapparot*.<sup>2</sup> The speaker was quoting from the *Shulhan Aruch* and its commentaries (*Orah Hayyim* 605:1), who write that the custom is of non-Jewish origin and should be abolished. We drove on, listening to the rabbi cite the various opinions against *kapparot*. We arrived at my destination, and as I paid the fare the driver burst out, “He’s right. I knew all along that it’s all from the *goyim*! *Tzitzit* and *tefillin* and all the rest – they’re all just things we picked up from the Gentiles.” The poor man did not stay tuned long enough to hear the rabbi continue on to the other commentaries and the Rema’s glosses on the paragraph in question, which discuss the ancient origin of *kapparot* and state explicitly that the custom should *not* be annulled. For him it was too late; he was no longer listening. **Sages, be careful with your words!**

These are only two stories, and they are true. Can we imagine how many hundreds more such stories take place all the time?

If a radio lecturer intends to conclude his talk with the information that a certain practice is forbidden, he should not even mention that there are lenient opinions which permit it. He should *never* announce that a hallowed Jewish custom is said to have non-Jewish origins, even if he plans to refute the claim. What assurance has he that all his listeners will hear the refutation? He has no control over who will hear any given snatch of the program, and the potential for catastrophe is frighteningly real.

If a rabbi feels that it is proper for him to teach *halachah* over the radio, he must **be** exceptionally **careful with his words**. A popular radio program is not the forum for lively discussion of lenient vs. stringent rulings. Speakers on such programs should not cite too many halachic opinions altogether, and certainly not the lenient ones! This policy did not originate with my objections to radio broadcasts on *halachah*. Rabbi Eliezer Papo, author of *Peleh Yoetz*, wrote a halachic work on *Shulhan Aruch Orah Hayyim* and *Yoreh Deah* entitled *Hesed L’Alafim*. In the Introduction, he notes that he cites only *humrot* (stringent rulings), with no *kulot* (lenient rulings) at all. In his times (back in the more pious days of the early 1800’s),

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<sup>2</sup> If suffering is decreed upon us to atone for our sins, we can transfer the harsh decree in a symbolic manner to the chicken used for *kapparot*, which is slaughtered and given to charity. The powerful impression of the ceremony is intended to awaken us to the fate we actually deserve, and the compelling need to repent. We find a similar concept in the sacrifices offered in the Temple. Every step of the procedure followed by the one bringing the sacrifice was designed to move him to repent his sins (*Shaar Ruah HaKodesh, Kavanat HaTaanit*, p. 6b).



he felt that we need only know how the *halachah* should actually be observed. He goes on to criticize the *Me'am Loez*, a work which had gained enormous popularity, for quoting many lenient rulings. All we need, he says, are the *halachah* and the *humrah*; *kulot* are misleading and unnecessary and should not be recorded, especially not in books written for the masses.

The same is true of talks on the fundamentals of Jewish faith and belief. A lecture geared to *yeshivah* students and Torah scholars is not suitable fare for unlearned laymen. Complex concepts and ideas addressed to advanced scholars in a *bet midrash* are not appropriate material for a secular listener's initial exposure to Torah. It is virtually impossible to give a lecture that will meet the needs and level of young and old, men and women, the scholarly and the unlearned. A well-intentioned lecturer may inadvertently cause more harm than good.

A chilling example is a popular lecture delivered to a secular audience ignorant of Torah and the concept of belief in an all-powerful Creator. The speaker discusses basic proofs of the existence of G-d in a style geared specifically to these listeners. They need to hear it; those who were raised from birth with the fundamentals of unwavering belief and trust in the Al-mighty do not. For them, it is superfluous and in fact harmful to hear that it is in any way possible to doubt G-d, no matter how convincing the "proofs" later presented may be.

The potential for damage is not limited to lectures and radio broadcasts – a poster can do the job just as well. For example, public prayer gatherings are convened periodically, with *tikunim* scheduled to rectify a variety of sins. Colorful announcements are pasted up in all neighborhoods, with a detailed listing of the sins to be addressed. Curious readers, among them young children, are exposed to a roster of transgressions they may never have heard of, and certainly never imagined that religious people might possibly need to rectify... is this really what others are up to, they wonder?

Worse still is a new phenomenon, born of the confusion of our times. Certain rabbis now broadcast lectures on *Kabbalah*, openly airing lofty esoteric teachings for the ears of the ignorant and misguided. *Kabbalah*, the secrets of the Torah, is not material for indiscriminate dissemination by mass media. The dangers of this irresponsible practice are great.

### ***Answering the Questioner***

We discussed the problem of ruling on questions in *halachah* by phone. It is essential for a rabbi to know something about the questioner's level of observance, so that his answer will be safely within the bounds of *halachah*, but neither more



strict than a simple layman or beginner can handle, nor too lenient for the standards of a learned and pious scholar.<sup>3</sup>

For example, recitation of *arvit*, the evening prayer, is technically not obligatory, as are *shaharit* and *minhah*, the morning and afternoon prayers. The Ben Ish Hai writes that if a rabbi is asked whether one is obligated to recite the evening prayer, his answer must depend on who asks the question. If the questioner is a simple layman, under no circumstances should he be told that the evening prayers are in any way optional. If *arvit* is not a must, he is likely to decide, then it is entirely up to him whether or not he wants to recite this prayer, and the outcome is a foregone conclusion. A Torah scholar, on the other hand, can be told that *arvit* is not obligatory in the same sense as the morning and afternoon prayers. He will apply this information where necessary to better understand the relevant *halachot*, without ever dreaming of erasing *arvit* from his daily schedule (*Ben Yehoyada, Berachot* Chapter 4, p. 31a,d).

In our times, this principle is particularly important in guiding *baale teshuvah* who are new to Jewish observance. They should first learn and adopt the basics of correct halachic practice and grow from there, rather than going directly from non-observance to the highest, most demanding standards. It is especially important for their mentors to teach them that externals such as long *peyot* and an untrimmed beard should not be taken on by beginners whose internal progress nowhere matches the level suggested by this pious appearance.

### ***Fully Responsible***

The responsibility resting on a rabbi's shoulders is enormous, as we learn from a story related by Rabbi Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teumim, revered rabbi of Mir, Ponevitzh, and Jerusalem, known as the Aderet. His father, the esteemed Rabbi Binyamin Rabinowitz-Teumim, was ill and frail during the last year of his life. The weather on Sukkot that year was bitter cold, and by any standards, he was exempt from sleeping in a *sukkah* (see *Sukkah* 26a). Yet despite his poor health and the freezing weather, he insisted on doing so. As a rabbi, he feared that others who were not aware of his condition would see only that he had slept indoors on Sukkot, and assume that he felt that there was no reason to do otherwise. If it was good enough for the rabbi, they might say, it was certainly good enough for them... This concern was enough to make him overlook his own poor health and sleep in the *sukkah* throughout the Festival (*Nefesh David* 10).

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<sup>3</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:4 for a fuller discussion of this topic.





The need for careful, calculated consideration on the part of Torah scholars is not limited only to matters directly related to *halachah* and Jewish ethics. Almost any issue has potential pitfalls and should be handled with care. For example, in recent years fundraising for poor families bereaved of their breadwinner has come to rely heavily on sophisticated brochures. These brochures tell the truly heartbreaking story of the deceased and his destitute family, illustrated with photographs of the departed parent and penniless orphans. They describe in great detail his piety and devotion to Torah and *mitzvot* on the one hand, emphasizing the tragedy of the untimely loss of a *tzaddik*. On the other hand, they describe his life of utter penury, compounded by his suffering through the course of an agonizing illness, and the devastation of his death, with nothing left for his widow and young children. Reading the stories opens our hearts and moves us to contribute to the funds established for the orphaned families.

However, they do something else as well. These brochures are distributed by direct mail in every available mailbox the world over. Reading of the intense misery and painful early death of people described as exceptional *tzaddikim* can have a very negative influence. For example, a friend told me that after reading a particularly poignant charity brochure his granddaughter told him that she would never marry a man who planned to learn in *kollel*, as *kollel* scholars are obviously all miserable paupers incapable of providing for their families. For those whose faith is not sufficiently strong, the impact can be even worse. Is this how the Al-mighty treats the righteous, again and again, week after week? Is it fair that *tzaddikim* always suffer, they wonder? While the motives of the distributors are certainly good, thought should be given to the possible ramifications of this widespread practice.

### *The Audience*

**Sages, be careful with your words.** Not only our **words**, but also the manner in which they are presented, must be carefully weighed with the listener in mind. This consideration and this caution have a truly ancient, illustrious precedent: When Hashem instructed Moshe Rabbenu to teach the Torah to the Jewish people, He told him, "So shall you say (*tomar*) to the house of Yaakov and relate (*taggid*) to the children of Israel" (*Shmot* 19:3).

Our Sages tell us that the "house of Yaakov" are the Jewish women, while the "children of Israel" are the men. "Say" means "speak softly and gently," and "relate" means "speak firmly and explicitly" (*Mechilta* 19:3, cited by Rashi). The women were not to be pressured; the main points of the Torah would be presented to them in a soft, gentle, encouraging manner. The men, on the other hand, would hear a very blunt, direct discourse, outlining the many details of the *mitzvot* and the





punishments for their transgression. *Tomar* and *taggid* represent different approaches, each appropriate to a specific audience.

If our audience is on a high level we can tell more, demand more, and teach more, the consequences of sin included. If they are on a low level they may be put off by the heavy load, and we would do better to use a more positive, uplifting presentation. We find this idea in the opening paragraph of Rabbi Yehudah HeHassid's *Sefer Hassidim*. He writes that his book is intended only for the truly righteous, and not for the wicked. Those who are sincerely G-d-fearing will learn and grow from it, while lesser readers will be unable to properly appreciate and cope with its teachings, with detrimental results.

Speaking from repeated personal experience, this is a problem encountered by anyone who teaches Torah. Often, I give a *shiur* geared to listeners on a specific level. Other people may enter the hall in the middle of the lecture, but as it happens, they are not on the same level, and the material and presentation are not appropriate for them. What now? Whom should I address, the original audience or the newcomers? At other times, I see that a well-meaning father has brought his young son along with him to the *shiur*. I had planned to speak about topics relevant to the father's age and experience, but not at all to the son's. But they are both there and both listening, and I must think more than twice about every word I say.

### *Cause and Effect*

**Sages, be careful with your words lest you become liable for exile, and are exiled to a place of evil waters, and the students who come after you will drink and die, and the Name of Heaven is desecrated.**

What is a **place of evil waters**, and what are its dangers?

The Bartenura explains. A Torah scholar cannot be too **careful**. Even if he lives in a wonderful neighborhood in a wonderful town in a wonderful country – the proverbial “great city of scholars and scribes” (*Avot* 6:9) – a scholar must *still* learn to **be careful with his words**. Today he is comfortable and secure, surrounded by his students in the *yeshivah*, but what guarantee has he that he will be there always? Perhaps one day his misdeeds will tip the scales and he will be **exiled to a place of evil waters**, a euphemism for surroundings inhabited by heretics.

When this happens, the displaced scholar finds himself in an alien environment, confronted by dubious individuals who misinterpret the Torah's teachings for their own purposes. These unworthy people listen to him speak – he is a rabbi, after all – and grasp eagerly at any obscurity or double meaning in his words, twisting them to



suit their ends. He must be on guard at all times now, because those around him await the opportunity to bolster their fallacies with a rabbinical endorsement, and his will do just fine. “Look,” they claim triumphantly. “Rabbi So-and-So said such-and-such. That proves our point exactly!”

This is bad enough, but the damage does not end there. The *mishnah* continues, **the students who come after you will drink and die, and the Name of Heaven is desecrated.**

The distortion devised by the local troublemakers will be publicized and recorded for posterity in this unfortunate scholar’s name, and students in the generations to come will study it and learn from it. No one bothers to ask any more if this is at all what “Rabbi So-and-So” meant to begin with. These students’ heretical beliefs will earn them the Divine death penalty, and the perpetuation of their nonsense, cited in the name of no less than a distinguished Torah scholar, causes a terrible desecration of G-d’s Name.

This is why the *Tanna* speaks specifically of **the students who come after you**, rather than using the simpler wording, “the students who hear your words.” A teacher can correct the errors of students who are close to him and hear his words firsthand. They can ask him questions, and he can make sure that they understood him properly. But words may spread further than the room where they are spoken, whether orally or in writing, and be passed on to succeeding generations of students. At that point, the teacher can no longer clarify and explain, so he must make sure that he leaves no room for confusion or doubt. The Rambam warned against this danger in the Introduction to his philosophical work *Moreh Nevuchim*, warning those who do not understand his teachings not to apply their own misconceptions to his words.

The possibility for error is so great that a Torah scholar must be careful even with writings which are not intended for distribution. Unfortunately, it has happened that private notes containing personal opinions or criticisms, which the writer never imagined that others would see, were later made public, with detrimental results. Even worse, entire books of private, personal information related to the lives of distinguished Torah scholars have been published by irresponsible individuals, resulting in appalling damage and disgrace. If writings are not suited for the public eye, the writer should leave instructions to destroy them after his death. Otherwise, once words are committed to writing they can be publicized without regard for the writer’s wishes, when he is no longer alive to protest or prevent their publication.

Our Sages teach that one should not teach certain topics in a setting which will allow the students to derive incorrect conclusions (*Hagigah* 11b). We must train



ourselves to speak carefully, even when addressing Torah scholars. We need to choose our words with infinitely greater care when we speak before any other audience, leaving the unlearned and irreligious no room for misinterpretation, misquotation, and ultimately, misconduct.

A rabbi may deliver a profound lecture on *Kabbalah* or the fundamentals of faith, touching on very deep, subtle concepts which can easily be misunderstood. However, he does not explain them fully and clearly enough for his audience. Unknown to him, a listener may latch on to something he says, misinterpret it, and be drawn from there into heresy, G-d forbid. This rabbi was not sufficiently **careful**, and as a result, the listener's mind is **exiled to a place of evil waters**, wandering off on paths dangerous to the integrity of his faith. He **drinks** in the poisoned **waters**, **and dies** a spiritual death.

This caution also includes printing works of *Kabbalah* for wholesale distribution to a wide audience. In the past, *Kabbalah* was transmitted strictly from qualified teacher to trustworthy student. In later generations, Kabbalistic works were made available in print for all readers, with very unfortunate results. The Hidda bitterly condemned this irresponsible practice (*Shem HaGedolim*, *Kuntres Aharon*, *Maarechet Kuf*). In subsequent generations, many great rabbis have permitted the publication of Kabbalistic works. However – tragically – numerous naive scholars, considering themselves to be on the proper level, entered the proverbial “orchard” of Kabbalistic study and stumbled, leading others after them into even greater error, may G-d spare us.

**Sages, be careful with your words.** If we are wise, we will learn to address the right words, at the right time, to the right audience, be it through speech, writing, or any other means of communication. King Shlomo said, “The words of the wise heal” (*Mishle* 12:18). Our Sages say even more, describing them also as blessing and wealth (*Ketubot* 103a). Words can cure, but as we have seen, they can also destroy, G-d forbid. The carefully chosen words of our wise Torah sages bring no harm; they are a source of blessing and good for us all.

*This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.*