

Sweet Speech / *Lashon Ha-Arev*

Translated and annotated
by Shai Cherry

WHILE EXCAVATING AN ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE in Jerusalem last summer, I came across a sealed, clay vessel containing several fragments of late antique texts. The fragment which I present below is a curious example of a Talmudic *sugya*, or unit, focusing on the theme of speech. It is curious because there is a parallel *sugya* in the Babylonian Talmud (ARAKHIN 15b) which is concerned with *lashon ha-ra*, evil speech, the obverse of this text's concern. Perhaps this recently discovered fragment further justifies the Babylonian Talmud's claim that scholars from the Land of Israel treated each other graciously and with respect, while scholars from Babylonia treated each other harshly and with derision (SANHEDRIN 24a). The pernicious effects of *lashon ha-ra* justify the punitive measures legislated by our sages. The equally efficacious force of sweet speech, however, supplements Judaism's understanding that words so affect reality that God is described as speaking the world into existence. May the publication of this text help all of Israel reclaim the legacy of *lashon ha-arev*, sweet speech.

Come and hear: Why does the giving of the Torah happen in the portion of Jethro? R. Yossi b. David says: The Torah was cut the way the Torah was cut! It just so happened that the first words of this portion included the name of the righteous gentile, Jethro.

An objection is raised by R. Shulamit b. Chaya: If so, why not cut eight verses earlier where it is written: "Amalek came and fought with Israel at Refidim?" (Ex. 17:8) God forbid we should name our portion after the cursed Amalek, may his name be blotted out!

Says R. Rachel: It is a case of measure for measure. Just as Jethro blessed the Holy One, so did the Holy One bless Jethro by giving his righteous name to this portion, as it says, "Blessed be the LORD who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh." (Ex. 18:10)

Rivka the Righteous refutes: If so, why did not Malkitzedek get a portion named for him? For he said, "Blessed be God most high!" (GEN. 14:20)

Further, lest you think that everyone who blesses the LORD receives a Torah portion as a reward, doesn't Eliezer say, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master, Abraham?" (GEN. 24:27) Yet, Eliezer has no portion of the Torah in his name.

Shaye b. Shira suggests in the name of Rav Rachmuna: The portion in which the Holy One, the Bounty of All Blessings, reveals the Torah is named after Jethro because he accentuates the positive, eliminates the negative, latches on to the affirmative, and doesn't mess around with Mr. Inbetween.

R. Tuvia responds: It is fine that Jethro accentuates the positive, for it is written, "And Jethro rejoiced over all the kindness that the LORD had shown Israel." (Ex. 18:9) But, from where do you know that Jethro eliminated the negative?

Is it not written, "Moses then recounted to his father-in-law everything that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how the LORD had delivered them"? (Ex. 18:8) What are hardships if not negative? And, yet, Jethro only rejoiced!

But when did Jethro latch on to the affirmative?

The verse says, "And he kissed him." (Ex. 18:7) Wherever there is kissing, there must be hugging, as it is written about Jacob, "He kissed them and hugged them." (GEN. 48:10) So Jethro latched on to Moses who answered in the affirmative when God called to him out of the burning bush. (Ex. 3:4)

And what of Jethro's dealings with Mr. Inbetween?

Not a difficulty. It is written, "And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God." (Ex. 18:12) Jethro himself brought the sacrifice and not a priestly intermediary.

R. Aryeh Dov wonders: Does accentuating the positive, eliminating the negative, latching on to the affirmative, and not messing around with Mr. Inbetween really cause the Divine Presence to dwell upon you, as was the case with Jethro?

Batya b. Kol responds in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai: "Just as a man is punished for the evil word that he utters, so is he punished also for the good word that he has the opportunity to speak but does not speak." (ZOHAR III:47a) If one is punished for the good word that one does not speak, all the more is one rewarded for the good word that one does speak!

Three commandments bring the Divine Presence near and guarantee one a portion in the world that is coming: faithfully loving the LORD, faithfully loving your spouse, and enhancing life. Sweet speech is equal to them all. (cf., B. ARAKHIN 15b)

All those who engage in sweet speech with another, the Divine Presence dwells between them. (cf., AVOT 3:3) The only difference between sweet speech and sycophancy is the intention. Sweet speech is for the benefit of the listener. Sycophancy is for the benefit of the speaker.

Kol Yisrael arevim zeh l'zeh (B. SHEVUOT 39a). All of Israel are responsible for one another. But *arevim* can also be read as "sweeten," hence: All of Israel shall sweeten one another.

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