

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates

Coat or jacket? Submarine sandwich or hero? Sometimes, where you live can define what words mean. There may be no clearer example of this than whether you say pop, soda, or Coke. In some parts of the country a soda is called a pop (or vice versa), and in other regions all pops (or sodas) were referred to as a Coke, even when it's a Pepsi. Bert Vaux, a linguistics professor at Harvard University, says many Americans are overly passionate about how they refer to the popular beverage family. "For reasons that are unclear to me people feel they have license to attack those who say pop as stupid or illogical," Vaux said. "I use Coke because I grew up in Houston. They're not too fond of that around here. However, it's not as stigmatized as saying pop."

The pop-soda-Coke divide has always created vague, and usually incorrect, assumptions about who says what where. But for the first time, Internet technology -- and a Web site -- offered a definition of the debate's borders. The site, created 13 years ago as a college project, asked visitors to enter their childhood zip code and the soft drink term they use. Their vote was then placed on a map as a colored dot. What emerged is a swath of Coke votes across the South, pop votes in the Midwest and Canada, and soda votes in the Northeast and California, and — curiously — in St. Louis and Milwaukee. Who's won? It was, um, bottle neck and neck. Pop and soda each had about 39% of the vote. Coke had about 15%.

The Talmud says, "An unrefined word should never pass a man's lips, for the Torah (in the story of Noah) goes out of its way and uses eight extra letters to avoid an unpleasant word." And since the Torah is always as concise as possible, the message of the more elaborate phrase is that one's speech should be at all times free of improper expressions. Pop, soda or Coke? It may not matter much. But in many cases, the words we choose make a difference. Strive to be refined in the way you speak.

Parshas Beha'aloscha Numbers 8:1 - 12:16

Beha'aloscha (Hebrew for "when you step up") is thematically diverse, and begins with the daily lighting of the golden menorah in the Mishkan. The Levites are initiated into the Tabernacle service. The Torah then describes the celebration of Passover in the second year in the desert, complete with the bringing of the Korban Pesach (Passover offering). Some men could not bring the offering due to ritual impurity, and were thus commanded to celebrate Pesach Sheni, a 'make-up Passover' a month later. Lesson: second chances are available. Additionally, the standard procedure by which the Jewish people would break camp to travel in the desert is described.

Soon after leaving Mt. Sinai, the people begin to kvetch (to complain and grumble incessantly, as in the title of the classic novel 'Kvetcher in the Rye'). Spurred by the mixed multitude of insincere converts who joined the Jewish people upon leaving Egypt, the complaining is directed toward the manna, their daily miraculous portion of heavenly bread. G-d sends a large flock of quail, which the people gather to eat; those who had complained about the lack of food stuff themselves and die during this supernatural event. The portion concludes with Miriam speaking loshon hara (defamatory words) to Aaron about their brother Moses. She is punished by G-d with tzaraas (a skin condition indicating a spiritual deficiency) and is quarantined outside the camp for seven days.

Rabbinic Ruminations

How big is the smallest fish in the lake? You catch one hundred fish, all of which are greater than eight inches. Does this evidence support the hypothesis that no fish in the lake is much less than eight inches? After we buy a new car, we inexplicably start to see the *same car* virtually everywhere. Did we purchase a wildly popular type of auto? *Selection and Observational Bias* are the effects that limit what reasonable inferences can be drawn from how we collect data or suddenly notice things we didn't notice that much before. If your net can't catch fish smaller than eight inches -- you won't catch the smaller fish that are most likely in the lake! Seeing the same type of car on the road as yours happens because you have selected that auto in your mind, and in turn, notice it more often.

In 1936, the *Literary Digest* conducted a poll to forecast the result of the upcoming presidential election. They predicted that Alf Landon, the Republican candidate, would win by a large margin. In the actual election, the incumbent Franklin D. Roosevelt won a landslide victory. The *Literary Digest* had harvested the addresses of the people they sent the survey to mainly from telephone books and motor vehicle registries, thereby introducing an important *selection bias*. The poor of the depression era, a group where

support for Roosevelt was especially strong, often did not have a phone or a car. A common *observational bias* happens to pregnant women who suddenly notice a lot of other pregnant women around them.

The human brain is capable of far more processes per second than any computer currently in existence. But that doesn't mean our brains don't have major limitations. John Reader said, "It is remarkable how often the first interpretations of new evidence have confirmed the preconceptions of its discoverers." Every person is subject to cognitive biases, those annoying glitches in our thinking that cause us to make questionable decisions and reach erroneous conclusions. Where can we find objectivity? "The Torah of G-d is perfect," says King David in Psalm 19:8, "restoring the soul; the testimony of G-d is trustworthy, making the simple one wise." Let your compass for truth be the Torah.

Quote of the Week

People seem not to see that their opinion of the world is also a confession of character -- *Emerson*

Joke of the Week

Chaim and Yankel are walking home from shul one Shabbos morning. Suddenly a cab speeds past, and their friend Shmerel is running frantically behind it, flailing his arms wildly.

"Well," said Chaim, "I never imagined our good friend Shmerel was a Shabbos violator! Look at him running for that taxi."

"Wait a minute," Yankel replied. "What about giving him the benefit of the doubt? I'll bet we can think of dozens of excuses for Shmerel's behavior."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Maybe he's sick and needs to go to the hospital?"

"Come on! He was running 60 miles an hour after that cab -- he's healthier than Arnold Schwarzenberger."

"Maybe someone in his family is sick, and he needs a doctor."

"He *is* a doctor!"

"Well, maybe he forgot that it's Shabbos."

"Of course he knows it's Shabbos. Didn't you see his tie? It was his paisley beige 100% silk Giovanni tie from Italy. He never wears it during the week."

"Wow, you're really observant! I didn't even notice he was wearing a tie."

"How could you not notice? Didn't you see how it was caught on the back fender of the taxi?"