

Sermon/ Drasha Tazria "Horse Sense"
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ 2014/5774

Let's do a little horsing around and talk about some expressions related to horses.

Phrases like *beating a dead horse*, *horseplay*, and *horse feathers* are self-evident and require no explanation. Though we rarely stop to look at their literal meanings, many of these phrases embody useful information about equine behavior or the care and treatment of horses. Everyone is acquainted with the saying *You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink*, which was cited as a proverb as early as 1546, and *That's a horse of a different color*, which probably originated in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in 1601.

How about good old *horse sense*? Most of the language mavens say 'horse sense' probably originated in describing the knowledge about horses acquired by humans, not to the intelligence of horses. In order to buy, care for, train, handle, breed and work with horses, one must know a great deal about them.

Before the beginning of the common era, Greek writer Xenophon wrote *The Art of Horsemanship*, which covered such topics as how to avoid being cheated when buying a horse, and how to train, groom, mount, ride and stable a horse.

But some suggest that *horse sense* can describe the awareness or intelligence of a horse.

A current program in Ohio is called "Equine Guided Coaching and Experiential Learning with Horses." What kind of learning do you do with horses? By developing a sensitivity to the body language of horses, humans may better understand how to communication with each other.

How does it work?

It starts with a 15-minute lesson in horse communication—the meaning of ear positioning, swishing tails, and handling a face-to-face welcome. Can you imagine standing nose-to-nose with a one-ton Clydesdale?

No one rides the horses; it is about engaging in a relationship with the horses and team members. And then the program teaches you how to go from greeting the horses, to creating respect and trust to leading a horse through an obstacle course

After a while, you begin to notice how the horses respond to your attitude. The horses will approach if they sense you're excited to see them and are passionate about previous group program discussions. The horses will shy away or retreat if they sense your disinterest.

If this sounds a bit wacky, some program clients are Ohio Mutual Insurance, the American Heart Association, and the Israeli Defense Force. They recognize that horses can send a powerful message. So, good ol' *horse sense* can communicate not only what horses think of you, but how you communicate with others.

The theme of *Tazria*, this week's Torah portion, is communication. We find a detailed description of the laws of *tzara'as*. *Tzara'as* is sometimes translated as leprosy, but the Oral Torah informs us that it is not the bodily disease known as Hansen's Disease; rather, it is the physical manifestation of a spiritual malaise, a punishment designed to show the sinner that he must mend his ways.

The primary cause of *tzara'as* is the sin of *loshon hara*, or slander. But less well known is that *tzara'as* was a sign of several other spiritual maladies, the causes of which were the abuse, or misuse, of the power of speech. One of the most common forms of the misuse of speech is grumbling, affectionately known as kvetching.

Joe was travelling on a train about to fall into a sweet nap when he was suddenly jolted awake by the sound of an old *zaide* in his compartment, saying, "Oy, am I thirsty, Oy, am I thirsty!"

This is repeated over and over again every few minutes. "Oy, am I thirsty. Oy, am I thirsty." Finally, Joe gets up and brings the *zaide* a bottle of water and goes back to his seat to relax. The bus is quiet again and Joe is just about to nod off when all of a sudden he hears from his compartment-mate: "Oy, vas I thirsty... Oy, vas I thirsty...."

Grumblers. Complainers. Chronically resentful people who seem to look for things to kvetch about. Who wants to associate with them? They can drive you out of your mind. We know that if you want to get along with people, don't whine and complain. As we say in the Smason household, "No whine, just grape juice!" Whiners and complainers exude a victim-mentality -- life isn't fair. Whining is a destroyer of respect and a killer of relationships.

What causes people to complain? What creates a grouching grouch?

In Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Peale talks about a couple he meets in a railroad dining car.

"The lady was expensively dressed, as the furs, diamonds, and costume which she wore indicated. But she was having a most unpleasant time with herself. Rather loudly she proclaimed that the car was dingy and drafty, the service abominable, and the food most unpalatable. She complained and fretted about everything.

Her husband, on the contrary, was a genial, affable, easygoing man who obviously had the capacity to take things as they came. I thought he seemed a bit embarrassed by his wife's critical attitude and somewhat disappointed, too, as he was taking her on this trip for pleasure.

To change the conversation he asked what business I was in, and then said that he was a lawyer. Then he made a big mistake, for with a grin he added, "My wife is in the manufacturing business."

This was surprising, for she did not seem to be the industrial or executive type, so I asked, "What does she manufacture?"

'Unhappiness,' he replied. 'She manufactures her own unhappiness.'

Kvetches are in the manufacturing business; they manufacture their own unhappiness. The words we choose create our reality. Our words are transformative, shaping us into the personalities we verbally express.

All decisions regarding the status of *tzara'as* must be pronounced by the Kohen. Even though everyone is eligible to inspect the suspect blemishes, the status of rendering someone impure or pure is solely dependent upon the pronouncement of the Kohen. Hypothetically, even if a Kohen was ignorant of the technical laws of *tzara'as*, his decision would still be binding. This Divine mechanism was set up to impress upon us the power of mere words, and to recognize that words create a reality.

"Positive thinking" is undoubtedly helpful in shaping our attitudes. Having an attitude of gratitude and counting one's blessings makes for optimistic perspectives. However, another key ingredient in creating an optimistic personality is the choice of explanatory styles we use to express ourselves. Our *horse sense* -- our style of communication -- can be the difference between shaping ourselves into grumbling kvetches, or becoming positive optimists.

Let's look at three examples.

1) Project positive expectations.

An optimistic person doesn't say, "I'll try to get back to you next Tuesday." An optimist says, "I'll get back to you next Tuesday." Using "I'll try" gives you an 'out' so that you've permanently excused yourself from performing as promised. When you eliminate the 'try', you're making a commitment. Even more than the commitment the listener hears, is the one you give yourself. After all, a mitzvah is a commandment, not an option or suggestion.

2) Don't say "I can't" when you mean "I choose not to"

For example, don't say, "I can't come to synagogue " when you mean, "I choose not to go to synagogue because I'd rather sleep late." Or, "I hate my job, but I can't afford to give it up now."

What you really mean is, "I hate my job, but I choose the security of it over the risk of having to find another one." Maybe you don't feel you have any other choice, but you are choosing.

You'll be more powerful and honest if you change your language and admit that you do make certain choices and that you have the freedom to choose.

Honesty begins with being honest with ourselves.

3) Say "when", not "if"

For example, when you're talking to your children, don't say, "If you clean up your room, you can go out and play." Say, "When you clean up your room, you can go out and play." If you say "if", you're already allowing for the possibility that they may not clean up their room, but when you say "when", the result is expected.

So too with yourself, expect great things and hold yourself to a high standard. Say, "When I start being more observant of Shabbos", "When I become better husband/ wife", "When I give more tzedaka."

Can you see how useful understanding the power of language can be in making an impact on ourselves -- and by extension, others? We can take control of our language, and thus take control of our lives. Don't use 'victim language'. Constantly grumbling, complaining, and being the victim is the type of language used by people who feel that they're completely out of control of their lives.

Granted, it's not an easy thing to stop kvetching.

In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey compares the breaking and making of habits to the launch of a spacecraft like Apollo 11. To get to the moon, those astronauts literally had to break out of the tremendous gravity pull of the earth. More energy was spent in the first few minutes of lift-off, in the first few miles of travel, than was used over the next several days to travel half a million miles.

Habits, too, have tremendous gravitational pull -- more than most people realize or would admit. Breaking deeply embedded habitual tendencies such as kvetching involves more than a little willpower and a few minor changes in our lives. "Lift off" takes a tremendous effort, but once we break out of the gravity pull, our freedom takes on a whole new dimension.

1) Project positive expectations.

In the Star Wars sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda, the Jedi teacher, tries to implant into Luke Skywalker the means of engaging the "force" that is the greatest power in the universe. He says to his pupil, "Luke, there is no try, there is either do or not do."

2) Don't say "I can't" when you mean "I choose not to", or "I don't really want to."

3) Say "when", not "if"

If you're going to have an impact on the world and others -- and upon yourself -- you'll need to express yourself properly. You'll need to speak powerfully and optimistically. If you study the language of optimistic people, you'll see they have positive explanatory styles. Learn to harness the power of language. After all, to do so is just good 'ol *horse sense*.