



WE STOPPED THE TALKING IN SHUL

BY RABBI YOSEF GESSER

It seems like a faraway memory, but for those of us who are fortunate to live in vibrant Jewish communities, COVID-19 provided an unprecedented experience, an opportunity. We were denied access to our shuls and *batei medrash* — seemingly at the behest of government authorities. Of course, we know that was a misperception. The *Ribbano shel Olam* was closing the doors and sending us messages.

We are in the month of Tishrei, a time of coming closer to Hashem, a time when things slow down and there is an opening for introspection and self-improvement. What better time than now to review these messages?!

In my own shul, *Khal Chizuk Hadas Radichov*,

led by Harav Yisroel Gornish, *zt"l*, the *tefillos* were inspiring and held with utmost decorum. Absolutely no talking took place during *davening*, something the Rav emphasized time and again and worked to maintain. (It was uplifting as well, in large measure due to the Rav's abilities as a superb *baal tefillah*.)

When shuls were reopened after being closed for many weeks due to the pandemic — ours among them — the Rav was still compelled to *daven* upstairs due to his delicate state of health. Yet, on that first Shabbos after reopening, he descended and spoke from the stairwell in what was likely the last Shabbos *drashah* of his life and longtime *rabbanus*.

The Rav's message was short but powerful. Firstly, he expressed his *hakaras hatov* to



Hashem that the shuls were once again open and that *tefillah b'tzibbur* could resume. He then tearfully called for a renewed commitment to avoid speaking in shul and maintaining proper standards of *kedushas Beis Haknesses* — the shul's exemplary record in that area notwithstanding. Now that Yidden worldwide had a reprieve, it was up to us collectively to seek ways of betterment in this area.

It was reminiscent of a previous occasion, at a shul *melaveh malkah*, when the Rav offered perspective and advice on how to do so. He then explained that the *Shechinah* that rested in the Beis Hamikdash, which was incredibly powerful due to the presence of the *Aron* and the *Keruvim* and the rest of the components of the Beis Hamikdash, was a source of *shemirah for Klal Yisrael*. In our times, after the *Churban Beis Hamikdash*, the *Shechinah*, albeit on a much lower level, is present in our shuls and *batei medrash*, and that too serves to shield us. The *Gemara* in *Brachos* tells us the *Shechinah* comes and waits for the *minyana* to arrive. If people talk during *davening*, the *Shechinah* leaves, and they forfeit the protection it provides.

So, desisting from talking allows the *Shechinah* to rest in our shuls and safeguard us.

How can we strengthen ourselves in this area so that the *Shechinah* remains between us?

Making it Real

Harav Moshe Tuvia Lieff, Rav of Agudas Yisroel Bais Binyamin, said when Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, *zy"ta*, needed a *toke'a*, he interviewed a number of candidates. The first few candidates waxed poetic about the sublime Kabbalistic *kavanos* they would have when blowing the *shofar*. However, one candidate told him, "I have seven daughters to marry off, and I need to put bread on the table. While I blow the *shofar*, I contemplate that Hashem is the One Who can provide for me." That Yid was Rav Levi Yitzchok's choice to blow the *shofar*.

The Maharal says the *avodah of tefillah* is to feel completely dependent on the *Ribbono shel Olam*, akin to a servant who is fully dependent on his master. That should be our attitude — to go back to basics. We cannot go it alone; we need His help.

When I asked Rav Lieff how people can desist from talking during *davening*, he shared the following:

"When we truly believe our *tefillah* works," said Rav Lieff, "it saves lives, it earns a fortune and it cures what ails us. If so, how can one talk during *davening*

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and interrupt or, worse, sever that Divine flow and connection? It is completely illogical, even irrational — if you truly believe it!

"Have you ever observed a *chozer b'teshuvah daven*?"

"They have no time to shmooze. They are too busy talking to Hashem!"

"It takes a lot of *chutzpah* to ignore the generous Benefactor as he is granting your request and giving you millions of dollars.

"Where is your self-dignity? Where is your gratitude?"

Respect the Respondent

You are a member of royalty.

Act like one. Especially in the Royal Palace.

This writer once heard an unusual *eitzah* a Rav suggested to those who persistently talk in shul — resolve to refrain from speaking at least for one part of the *davening*. For example, if one talks during *Krias HaTorah* on Shabbos, one should at least remain silent for the duration of the first *aliyah*. Then he can expand and undertake to abstain from speech for the first two *aliyos*. It sounds almost absurd, said the Rav, but by committing to improve in small steps, one can hopefully attain the desired goal of no talking during the entire *leining*.

It is somewhat similar to the *eitzah Gedolei Yisrael* have offered to those who work on Shabbos.





Determine what activities are not absolutely needed for one's job. In this way, people have gradually come around to become complete *shomrei Shabbos*.

Harav Noach Isaac Oelbaum, Rav of Khal Nachlas Yitzchak in Kew Gardens Hills, Queens, shared, "This tendency is prevalent even among people who know better and who will admit it is wrong. The problem is they're drawn after the masses who do it. It is similar to *shemiras halashon* about which great *tikkunim* have certainly been made, but still and all, when someone gossips, there is a tendency to copy him. They follow the flow and become desensitized to the problem of talking."

Harav Oelbaum shares a noteworthy *eitzah*: "To ensure one refrains from talking, *daven* in a shul where there is a Rav who takes *davening* seriously. An important part of being *mechanech* one's children is to *daven* in a shul where there is a Rav. Noted *mechanech* Rabbi Fishel Schachter once spoke at our *melaveh malkah*. He said in his remarks that he can tell which *talmidim* in his class *daven* in a shul where there is a Rav and which don't, based on their *hanhagos* and attitudes. The Rav himself needs to muster the *koach* to set the standard in this area. He may be afraid of losing *baalei battim* if he speaks up strongly about it."

Rav Oelbaum recalled that when he started his shul in 1975, there was not as much sensitivity to the problem as there is today, although the issue

was not more acute in his shul than in other places. "Intellectually, people know they shouldn't talk, but they don't see their friends during the week; on Shabbos they want to catch up. I tried a number of things, including giving *drashos* on the subject, with little improvement.

"One Shabbos, I announced that we were closing the shul. I said it would reopen in two Shabbosos but only for those who were ready to seriously commit to a new *mehalech* of no talking. Everyone returned except for two people. We didn't allow speaking in *divrei Torah* even between *aliyos*. *Baruch Hashem*, we have come a long way in this regard."

The president of one of the older shuls in Boro Park told *Inyan*, "Our steady *mispallelim* know we have a zero tolerance policy for talking in shul. Sometimes an issue comes up when there is a *simchah*, and we have outsiders present. In that case, we make sure to announce that in our shul there is no talking whatsoever until after the last *Kaddish*. We also have a policy that when a *kiddush* is held, nothing is to be brought into shul until after the last *Kaddish*, after *Anim Zemiros*. If people do talk, they are respectfully asked not to; if they continue, they are asked politely to please find a different place to *daven*."

Reb Moshe Metzger, legendary *gabbai* of Khal Shomrei Shabbos, a shul known for the wide range of *minyanim* that takes place there each day, *leins* several times each Shabbos morning. These

"Does this person know what he just lost? This man could have possibly received all that he needed, and he lost it by answering the phone."