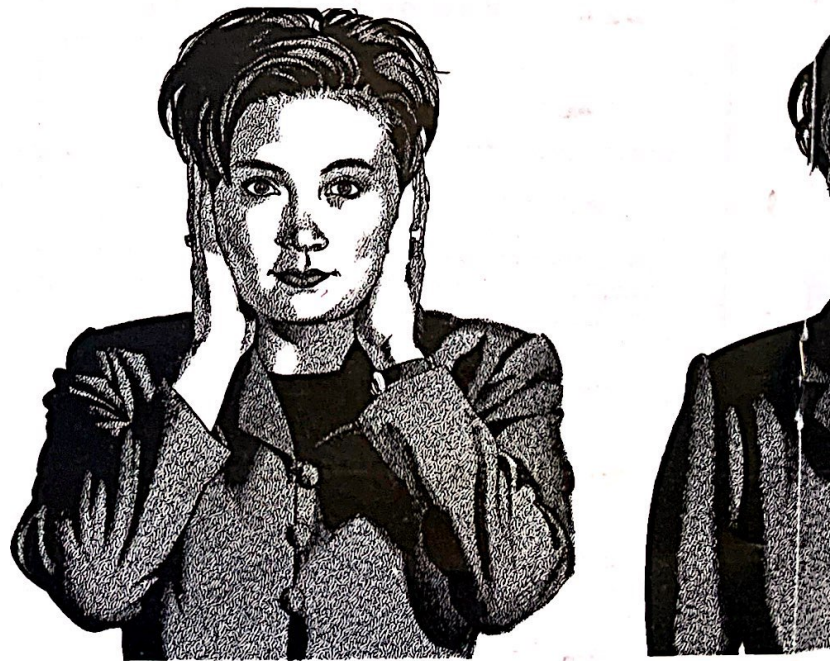

TRUE TO OURSELVES

Molly Resnick



Author's note: For the purpose of this article the words 'speaker', 'shliach' or 'shlucha' should be taken to define all Lubavitchers who in the course of their daily life find themselves involved in hafotza especially discussing delicate matters pertaining to taharas ha'mishpacha and intimacy.

Teire sisters, teire sisters, with regret I bring up an epidemic in our Lubavitch world that is very painful to behold. Some of our hardworking, well prepared (and certainly well-meaning) Lubavitch speakers are laboring under the misconception that to reach our not yet frum brothers and sisters we have to address them in their "language," that we have to use words that we would never use if we were speaking in front of the Rebbe, our ancestors or even our family members. In other words we have to speak in a way that can be described, at best, as explicit and at worst as vulgar.

Being a Baalas Teshuva of over 20 years, I decided to investigate this matter and have discussed it with tens of Lubavitchers - Rabbonim, educators, and people of standing and influence. Here are my findings:

When the Rebbe would address Chasidim it was customary for him to use the words "Gein in vasser" i.e. immerse in water instead of using the word

Mikvah. (Rabbonim and members of the Mazkirus assumed it was for the sake of Tznius.) It was also the custom of Chasidim and pious Jews in general to talk in the same manner.

Of course, you will say:
 "But we are involved in hafotza. We are talking to the non-affiliated and must take certain liber-

ties." But note, for example, how the Torah, a book for all mankind, goes out of its way to be euphemistic. In Parshas Noah (7:2) the animals are described as 'beheima lo tehora' instead of 'tmea.' In Parshas Bereishis the Torah describes Adam as 'yada es Chava' and not any other term. And we, being people of the book who represent the Holy Torah, must strive to do the same when speaking about private matters, namely, to speak with euphemisms and allusions. "The only people permitted to speak without euphemism, who are entitled to use overt language, are doctors and then only in their professional setting, when wearing their white coats," insists a veteran educator of over 40 years.

But you will say, what about Halacha? Our Code of Jewish Law is totally specific, even graphic. A highly respected Lubavitcher possek maintains that unless the issues discussed pertain to all the women, e.g. 'sheva neki-im', 'bedika' etc. they should not be answered or discussed in a public forum: certainly not in a mixed audience but not even among women. He suggests that a speaker should start the lecture with an introduction of the rules of Tznius - modesty - and explain that all questions are valid and welcome but not all will be answered in public.

The Rebbe, in following with the Rambam's opinion, stressed that our language is called 'loshon kodesh' because it has no unclean words. Note how delicately our 'loshon kodesh' describes a ladies' room as 'beis hakiseh' - the house of the seat.

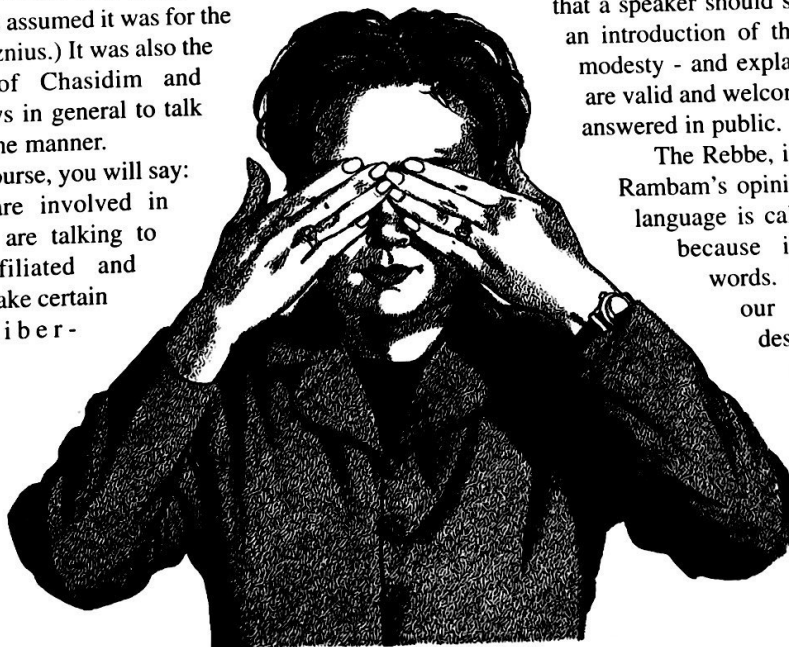
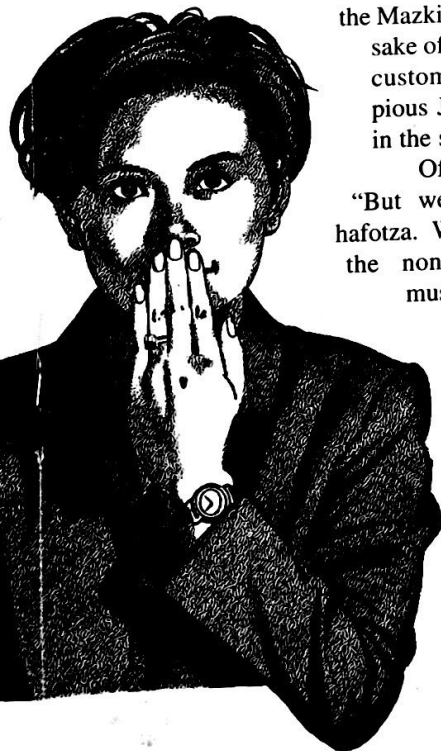
Note how the word 'erva' is euphemistic and non-descriptive.

In Medrash Rabah, 24 re:

Vayikra 'kdoshim

tihyu' 'Vehaya machanecha kodesh' - and your encampment

should be holy- in Devarim 23:15, the commentaries



expound 'Veloh yireh ervas davar' - and you will not see any 'ervas thing.' Reb Shmuel bar Nachman says 'davar' - is 'dibur' - speech - i.e. 'ervas dibur' = 'zeh nivul peh' = foul language. Since the word 'davar' is redundant, its purpose is to teach us to be careful with our speech.

"A public speaker is obligated to look for sources of guidance," continues that same possek, "from the Shulchan Aruch, from Rabbis, mashpios, and teachers. One should

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not be guided by the notion of 'what I think the people want to hear,' and since the boundaries are so fine one cannot totally trust one's own common sense but must continually check it with a reliable authority."

"To have a satisfied wife" is one of the husband's primary obligations together with food, shelter and clothing and is included in the Kesuba. Note the language which the Halacha uses to inform us that a woman should not demand marital relations from her husband in an overt direct manner: It says that she not demand it verbally '...tovaas bepeh.' Firstly the delicacy of not demanding 'it' is emphasized and then the 'it' subject that she is not to be 'tovaas' is neither defined nor described but left vague.

In the not so distant past even the secular world had some basic moral standards for speech. Let us review some of the history of permissible language in the mass media. It was less than 40 years ago that the use of the word "pregnant" was not permitted; instead, "confinement" or "in the family way" were acceptable. A married couple on screen retired to their bedroom with two twin beds, and the couple was always fully dressed. But today all these standards have fallen by the wayside, discarded for the more shocking, overt, immoral, violent images and unfortunately, 'Vas kristallzach Yidlezacht.' The world's culture affects the Jewish culture. We seem to be following the trend instead of bucking it.

I find that what has taken me years to discard and refine is now being served up to me on fine china by the best Lubavitch 'speech chefs' and all in the name of reaching the audience. Pirkei Avos's 'Umekarvan laTorah' was the Rebbe's dictum to us as to how to approach our audience (Igros Kodesh 19. Page 195, par 9, i.e. raising our audience closer to the Torah and not lowering the Torah closer to our audience.)

Are we supposed to talk differently to a Park Avenue

audience than we would to our mothers or teachers? Is being a wholesome, innocent product of Bais Rivka not something to be extremely proud of? Is blushing and discomfort at explicit language not a mark of honor instead of shame? Is being shocked by tabloid lingo not a sign of moral health rather than a symptom of prudery? We are not only what we eat, we also are what we speak, and we must never forget that we are the Rebbe's kinder.

We represent only ourselves, and by extension the Rebbe and Lubavitch, and even for the purpose of establishing credibility, we must never, ever stoop to represent our audience.

An evil man once sent his detested rival a package of Shalach Manos with the picture of a pig. The receiver responded by sending back a package with his own picture and the following note: "You sent me a picture of your face and I send you a picture of mine."

Our acts and our words reflect who we are and those we represent, not those to whom we speak, though we may pretend or wish it were otherwise. The words we choose reflect on our families, our communities, our religion, and ourselves. Even in insulting someone, the manner of doing it represents the doer.

Note how sensitivity is lauded in these two Gemora examples.

(1) Gemora in Shabbos... Page 33a

"Everyone knows why a bride enters the 'chupa:' to become married, but if anyone perverts his speech and actually expresses this, then even if the heavenly court has sealed a favorable decree of seventy years for him, it will be reversed..." The very fact that we know something is taking place (everyone knows it) does not necessarily allow us to discuss it.

(2) Gemora in Pesachim, page 3

Three Kohanim received a share of Lechem Hapanim - the showbread. One described his share as being the size of a bean, one as the size of an olive and the last one described it as being the size of the tail of an insect. This was a warning signal and consequently his background was checked; he was found to be of flawed character and dismissed from the Bais Hamikdosh. His 'Nivul Peh' literally translated, his foul mouth, the unwholesome way in which he expressed himself, was a sign that there was something flawed in his character and he was no longer permitted to serve in G-d's House.

But why am I quoting all these sources? Could it be that our speakers are ignorant of them? Perhaps, but it is highly unlikely. Perchance they feel that the task of kiruv is so important that it requires measures that are beyond the pale.

In Igros Kodesh... The Rebbe quotes the Frieddiker Rebbe as addressing this issue. In replying to the contention

For the sake of 'kiruv,' one can use any means because it is like a fire, anything is justified in trying to douse it, the Previous Rebbe replies: "But still one should not pour kerosene on the fire." Obviously, certain means do not justify the ends no matter how noble because ultimately these means do not accomplish the end.

Our Rabbis caution that sometimes one should avoid a topic or refuse to answer a question because of what it might give rise to. In Gemora Tamid (p.32), Alexander the Great asks the Chachomim: "What was created first? Light or darkness?" They refuse to answer him for fear it would lead to questions they were not prepared to discuss with him, namely what existed before the world was created and what will be after it ends.

Pirkei Avos cautions us similarly: 'Chachomin Hizaharu Bedivreichen' - Teachers beware the words you use lest your students get the wrong message. We have to be proud of the fact that there are certain areas of life that we will discuss only privately. In response to an overt question we can reply, "Judaism deals with every human aspect but some questions are like precious gems to be handled delicately and personally."

A very successful shlucha who reluctantly uses some explicit language recalled that the first time she used a certain three-letter word in public she was sick to her stomach. Today, many years later, she admitted that it is not difficult at all. Need one say more? The process of desensitization is an insidious one creeping upon us ever so stealthily. After a lengthy discussion, she conceded that maybe the time has come for us to re-evaluate the influence that the outside world has had on our public discourse in view of the avalanche of shmutz that is accosting us on a daily basis. "Maybe I should give greater scrutiny to my manner of speaking," she concluded.

A seasoned Crown Heights Lubavitcher activist who is proud when her guests address her as Mrs. Chabad told me of an incident in 1973 when she sent a flyer in to the Rebbe's office for approval. Her committee had been trying to emulate the Montreal "Brides & Grooms" program with little success and in an effort to attract a younger crowd they chose the title "Love &" It was sent back by the Rebbe's office and marked as unacceptable.

We all hold our noses when we enter a room with an unpleasant odor, but after the first few minutes we get used to it and don't even notice the stench anymore. We have to be so careful not to get accustomed to vulgarity and then justify it by calling it kosher.

Should we therefore avoid contact with the outside world? Should we reconsider going out on shlichus or pub-

lic speaking? God forbid! Would I be here today, in a position of writing this article were it not for some wonderful shlucha in Brazil who appealed to me twenty years ago and brought me home? No! It is just a red flag to ensure that the things that made us sick yesterday should continue to make us sick tomorrow and the words that we choked on last month should be just as hard for us to utter next year.

There is such a natural tendency to rationalize or succumb. "They won't understand"... "They'll misunderstand..." "I'll sound prudish, evasive"... "Should I mince words?" "How do I respond if they ask a direct question?" "Let's hear how you would answer that one," etc. The problems are endless and the pitfalls innumerable. We really should not rely solely on our own independent sense of judgement. Because none of us is immune to the influences of the world at large, we cannot count on ourselves to make the Torah-right decisions about the choice of words we make. We must consult with our Rabbonim, mashpious and teachers at every turn.

Several weeks ago a popular magazine featured an article titled "New Age Jews," describing the antics of a certain Rabbi in his indiscriminate pursuit of 'reaching more people.' but in the midst of all the disturbing information one of our own did us proud. Rabbi Zalman Shmotkin, spokesman for the Chabad Lubavitch movement, so impressed the secular journalist that he took time to notice and describe his 'eidelkeit.'

And I quote: "Shmotkin said: "I don't think writing these racy... these books..." He raised his eyebrows in italics but could not get himself to say the (three letter) word.... He

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took off his glasses and rubbed his face. "I don't think that is the way to bring people to the Torah," he said.

And the Jewish Press in an article that harshly condemned that same renegade Rabbi featured in the "New Age Jews" went so far as to avoid even mentioning the title of his sensational book and just described it as a "best selling book on intimacy."

Should we not at least aspire to the same level of sensitivity as this 'eidel' JP journalist? Is the expression 'gein in vasser' instead of 'Mikvah' to remain the exclusive domain of the Rebbe-Chasid relationship, or Chasid-Chasid relationship? Or is it to be emulated and 'sold' to our audiences and our 'mekuravim.'

It is interesting to note that in that same article in the

JP, the noted Talmudist Rabbi Adin Steinzaltz, who wrote a sefer on Tznius is quoted as saying that one who obsesses with exploring different areas involving intimacy issues begins to "lower himself subconsciously, creating a different personality." He remarked, "It works on you continuously and destroys your holiness."

How careful we have to be with these subjects of 'kedusha.' How easy it is to stumble and fall. There is a difference between sophistication and vulgarity. Sensationalism should never be acceptable but in discussing personal intimacy it is unforgivable, and we should not forget that "When in Rome do as the Romans do" is a secular expression, not a saying of Chazal. 'Al Tifrosh Min Hatzibur' - do not separate yourself from the congregation - is a saying of Chazal referring to a 'tzibur' of G-d fearing people.

Let us examine the area of conversations among ourselves. Unfortunately the kind of subjects we feel comfortable discussing and the language we choose to use is going downhill too. In my book any sentence that begins with 'pardon my French' is suspect and should probably be censored. One shlucho confided in me that when one of her mekuravim asked her how she felt the first time she went to the mikvah she quite properly replied. "It is none of your business." How comfortable should I have felt when an acquaintance said to me, "Oh we can't have that meeting tonight; I'm going to the Mickey." It literally took me a few seconds to get it.

I have done a lot of soul searching while putting together this article and I started to question the justification of showing pictures of myself posing in too close proximity to some famous secular star. These portraits have always proven a wonderful opening for every speech. They have enabled me to captivate my audience far more easily than I could without them, but in all my 20 years of public speaking I have never asked a Rav whether I am permitted to use this kiruv tool. Maybe it is time I did.

We are imperceptibly absorbing the culture that surrounds us, and inevitably and perhaps involuntarily we are adopting the vernacular and even the thought processes.

They say it takes one to know one. Having 'been one,' I think I know what appeals to our unaffiliated Jewish brothers and sisters. It is the sense of divine justice and order in our Torah way of life. It is the 'eidelkeit' and warmth of our women. It is the refinement and wholesomeness of our daughters.

Confusion, chaos and relative morality they can get out there from their own peers, and described in much more exciting, graphic and juicy language.

By speaking like them we are telling our audience that we wish we were more like them. Our audience will then view us the way we view ourselves - as inferior! Let us not be like the spies in their encounter with the giants, Parshas Shlach (Bamidbar 13:3) 'kechagovim haiynu b'eineinu' - we were as grasshoppers in our own eyes - We felt small in our own eyes and therefore we appeared small to them. We cannot and should not want to copy or compete with them.

What we have to offer is infinitely superior and far more appealing and we have to trust that they will appreciate the difference. They will be touched by our innocence, they will respond to our determined elusiveness and modest language, and we will be doing the kind of 'Kiddush Hashem' that we, Lubavitcher women, know how to do best - being out there but being true to ourselves, our Rebbe and our heritage. ❧

Postscript:

I am pleased to report that this article had a positive effect even before it went to press. Rische Deitsch told me that as she was editing this current Newsletter, she was also working on her annual comedy skit to raise money for tuition for Special Ed children. "I must say that reading your article made me revise my skit and eliminate a few humorous lines," she confessed. That is the purpose of this article. It is my hope and prayer that we will all speak and write with heightened awareness in the future.

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