

Parallel Thinking Part 26: Speech

by Rabbi Dr Moshe Freedman, New West End United Synagogue



The last article analysed the creation of Adam as a spiritual change in humanity, as opposed to a new physical creation. In light of this, the account of creation in Bereishit can be viewed as a theological

text, rather than an historical or scientific account of mankind's creation. This idea is further supported by a careful reading of the Torah's account of God creating Man. The Torah says: "And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a *nefesh chayah*, a living soul" (Bereishit 2:7).

While man is formed from the "dust of the ground", the same physical material as the animals, he is given a special "breath of life". The Aramaic translation known as *Targum Onkelos*, attributed to a Roman convert to Judaism, translates the phrase "*nefesh chayah*" (living soul) as "*ruach memalelah*", which literally means a 'speaking spirit'.

Speech appears to be a defining characteristic of human beings. Yet if speech means the ability to communicate through sounds or words, many animals also do that. Birds tweet to attract mates and warn others away from their territories; dogs bark when they sense a threat; meerkats yelp to warn others of danger. Yet from the Torah's perspective, speech is not merely about communication.

While humans can also use speech to attract a mate, mark their territory or warn others of danger, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (d. 2005) explains that speech is much more than that. He explains: "Speech is like a violin. The beautiful sound of the violin is not produced by the strings alone, but from the echo produced by the box upon which those strings are strung. So too, the tone of the speech does not come from the words alone, but from the soul which makes a unique impression on the words".

Speech allows human beings to express their innermost thoughts and feelings, thus conveying the depths of their soul to others. It is more than mere communication. Speech is the medium through which two humans souls can touch and influence one another in profound ways. Speech therefore has the capacity to facilitate the formation of deep, meaningful relationships with one another, allowing us to become social beings who have the capacity to share our innermost world.

Speech also allows us to form a deep and meaningful connection to God. Rabbi Wolbe explains that this is why prayer and repentance, through private verbal confession, utilise speech to form, maintain and repair our relationship with God.

It is also why negative speech, such as *lashon hara* (unnecessarily saying something true about someone which casts them in a negative light) and *motzi shem ra* (slander) cause so much damage to personal relationships and communal unity. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagen (known as the Chafetz Chaim, d. 1933) led a movement to train others in the art of positive speech. Speech can be used as a powerful tool for building, or as a weapon of great destructive force.

Thus the Torah's emphasis of Adam being given this gift of speech can be seen as stressing a crucial spiritual change, and not just as a historical record.

