



Parashat Chayei-Sara begins with the exchange between Avraham and Efron, a prominent member of the Chitite tribe and owner of the Makhpela field, which Avraham purchases as a burial site for his wife. The Talmud (Bava Metzia 87a) is very critical of Efron's handling of Avraham's request, as he initially offers to give the land free of charge (23:11) but ultimately takes from Avraham the full amount of four hundred silver coins (23:16). The Sages point to Efron as an example of the adage, "The wicked say a lot and do not even do a little." Although he speaks in very generous terms about giving the land for free, in the end he does not even grant Avraham a small reduction from the land's value. Maimonides cites this comment of the Gemara in his commentary to the famous proverb in *Pirkei Avot* (1:15), "Say little, but do much."

Interestingly enough, in his commentary a bit later in that same chapter (Mishna 17), Maimonides embarks a much lengthier discussion of the value of *shetika* – reticence. This discussion pertains to Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel's remark, "I have grown all my life among scholars, and I have found nothing better for the body than reticence." In commenting on this remark and the general value of minimizing one's words, Maimonides classifies all human speech into five categories:

- 1) that which is a *mitzva* to speak, such as words of Torah;
- 2) forbidden speech, such as gossip and slander;
- 3) futile or purposeless speech, such as meaningless, trivial matters;
- 4) speech that is to be encouraged, such as speaking about the importance of Torah;
- 5) "neutral" speech – speech about everyday concerns such as one's livelihood, food and clothing..

Certainly, he writes, the Mishna's admonition to speak few words cannot possibly apply to the first or fourth categories, as these kinds of speech are beneficial and laudable. Likewise, Maimonides contends, the Mishna cannot refer here to the second or third categories, which clearly and self-evidently one must endeavor to avoid. Necessarily, then, the Mishna speaks here of the fifth category – speech that is intrinsically neither admirable nor condemnable. Speech in these matters is clearly permissible, Maimonides writes, but nevertheless it is recommend that one limit his speech even with regard to these areas of life.

It is perhaps noteworthy that Maimonides makes no mention in this context of the aforementioned proverb, "Speak little but do much." As we saw, this adage appears in an earlier Mishna, separate from Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel's statement, and Maimonides accordingly addresses the two passages independently. The question arises, wherein lies the precise difference between these two statements – the proverb "Speak little but do much," and "I have found nothing better...than reticence"?

It would appear that "Speak little but do much" expresses a more specific value than the general merit of *shetika*. As we saw in Maimonides' commentary, Efron's handling the sale of Makhpela serves as the prototype of somebody who acts contrary to

the Mishna's exhortation, who speaks much but does little. This Mishna thus addresses the particular phenomenon of people who present themselves as somebody who they are not, who speak as though they are generous and kindhearted, but in truth are selfish and stingy. "Speak little but do much" does not refer to the general value of minimizing words; it rather emphasizes the importance of presenting oneself honestly and truthfully. It teaches that it is unethical to try to earn a person's respect, admiration or trust by speaking more righteously than one truly is, by presenting an image that does not correspond with one's true character.

Whether a person applies for a position, looks to close a deal, or simply seeks friendship, he is entitled to put his "best foot forward" – but provided that this "foot" is indeed part of who he is, that he presents an accurate image of his talents and character, rather than a false, misleading impression.