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What then is the Jewish attitude to words? First let us understand that Israel's greatness can benefit the world only through words. We have never been a numerous people. We have never, except in the most restricted sense, been militarily significant. We have usually been diplomatically weak. Therefore, our message to the world has been transmitted only through the power of the word. Ever since our father Isaac said ha-kol kol Yaakov, ve'ha-yadayim yedei Esav, "the voice is the voice of Jacob and the hands are the hands of Esau," our tradition has maintained that Yaakov kocho be'feh -- that the strength and the might of Israel lies in its mouth, in its words. The message of Torah is referred

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to as divrei ha-berit, "the words of the covenant." What the Western World calls the "Ten Commandments," and our tradition refers to as aseret ha-dibrot -- the "ten words." And when Jews speak of a spiritual gem, they say in Hebrew, a devar Torah, "A word of Torah," or, in Yiddish, a gut vort -- "a good word." The word is the medium of spiritual enlightenment, of the message of Israel.

But words, in our conception, have an even more universal function. Words are the mortar that binds man with his fellow men. Without the extensive use of words, human beings would never group themselves in a society. Without words there can be no communication, no study or schools, no society or social life, no civilization or business or commerce. Neither can there be any family life. When husband and wife are "not on speaking terms," that is a real danger sign for domestic health.

The great Aramaic translator of the Bible, Onkelos, had that in mind when he offered an unusual translation of a familiar verse. When the Bible relates that G-d breathed the breath of life into Adam, it says va-yehi ha-adam le'nefesh chayah, which we usually translate "and the man became a living soul." Onkelos does not translate that as "living soul." Instead he writes va-hay^vet ba-adam le'ruach memalela -- "and it (the breath of G-d) became in man a speaking spirit." "The living soul of man is his speaking spirit. The uniqueness of man, his intellect, would be muted and silent were it not for his ability to use words and thus articulate his rational ideas and the feelings of his heart. A word has a life and biography and character and soul of its own. And the word can give or take life to the human being. A word can kill and a word can make alive. One word can give a man the reputation for wisdom; one word can mark him in the eyes of his peers as a fool. The

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speaking spirit has a profound effect upon the living soul.

Because of this, Judaism regards words as more than mere verbal units, as just another form of communication. In Judaism words are, or should be -- holy! When the Torah commands a man that he not break his word, it says lo yachel devaro. Our rabbis noted that yachel ^{is} was an unusual word and so they explained it as lo yaasenah chullin -- he shall not profane his word, not desecrate it. Only that which is holy can be made unholy. Only that which is sacred can be desecrated. Man's words therefore must be holy.

If our word is to be holy, we must keep it, honor it and revere it. Indeed the sanctity of a man's word is a measure of the confidence he deserves, whether in business or in family. If he keeps his word holy, people will confide in him and trust him. If he desecrates his word, if he makes it chullin, then he does not deserve the confidence of his wife, his partners, his fellow men. Many many years later, Oliver Wendell Holmes was to put it this way: "Life and language are alike sacred ... Homicide and verbicide are alike forbidden."

It follows therefrom that we must be careful and discriminating, not casual, in whatever we say. When the Israelites conquered the pagan Midianites and destroyed them, the Torah bade the Israelites not to use the vessels of the Midianites until they had been purified and cleansed, so that even the atmosphere or memory of paganism and idolatry be banished from the midst of Israel. The Torah puts it this way: Kol davar asher yavo va-esh ta'aviru ba-esh ve'taher -- any vessel that is normally used over an open flame must be purified by passing it through fire. Our rabbis of the Talmud (Sabbath) asked this interesting question: What of a metal megaphone, an instrument devised for magnifying the voice. Can that contract impurities, and if so how can it be purified? Yes,

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answer our rabbis, it can become impure, and must be purified by passing through fire. For they played cleverly on the one word kol davar. Not only, they said, kol davar but kol dibbur -- not only every "object" but every "word" must be passed through fire. Therefore, a megaphone, used to magnify words, is included in the laws of the impurities of the vessels of Midian.

Our rabbis meant, I believe, to refer more than just to a megaphone. They meant kol dibbur -- every word spoken by human lips must be passed through the fire of the soul before it is spoken to the world at large. Every ^{word} flame must be passed through the flame of integrity, of sincerity, of consideration for others and the effect that the word may have on them. A word untempered in the furnace of integrity and wisdom is like a table unplanned and unfiled: its splinters and rough edges can injure far more than the table can serve. A word not passed through the fire of consciousness is the master and not the servant of him who speaks it.

Furthermore, we must be not only discriminating in our words, but sparse as well. Our words must be few and scarce. In all of Judaism, the principle of Kedushah is protected from the danger of over-familiarity. When man has too much free access to an object or a place, he gradually loses his respect and awe for it. That is why, as you may have noticed, the reader of the Torah will use a silver pointer. That is not used for decorative purposes. It is ^{employed} because of the Halakhah that kitvei kodesh ^V metam'in et ha-yadayim, that we are forbidden to touch the inner part of the Torah scroll. The reason for this is a profound insight of the Torah into human nature: if we are permitted to touch it freely and often, we will lose our reverence for it. The less we are permitted to contact it, the greater our respect for it. Similarly, the Holy of Holies in the

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Temple in Jerusalem was preserved in its sanctity by our tradition when it forbade any man other than the high priest to enter its sacred precincts; and even he might not do so except for one time during the year -- on the Day of Atonement.

And so it is with words. The more we use, the less they mean. When our rabbis investigated the first portion of Genesis, they discovered that the world was created by G-d ba-asarah maamarot, ⁱⁿ ~~by~~ ten "words." Only ten words to create an entire universe! And yet our rabbis were not satisfied. And so they asked ve'hale be'mamar echod yakhol le'hibarei? -- could not the world have been created with only one word? Why waste nine precious words? Indeed, for with words, quantity is in inverse relationship to quality. If there are so many words that you cannot count them, then no individual word counts for very much.

In our Sedra this morning we read va-yavo Avraham li'sepod le'Sarah ve'livkotah, that Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. If you have read the portion carefully, you will have noticed something strange about the word li'vkotah, "to weep for her." The letter khaf is smaller than usual. It is a khaf ketanah, a miniature khaf. Why is it? The commentator Ba^al Ha-Turim explains she'lo bakhah ela me'at, that Abraham did not weep or speak too much. Of course Abraham said something. There had to be some weeping and mourning and eulogizing. He had to give some articulate expression to the grief that ~~swelled~~ up in his breast. For a man who cannot speak out his grief is like a man who cannot sweat -- the poison remains within. It can be psychologically dangerous not to mourn. But it must not be overdone. Abraham realized that if words are too many, then words are an escape, an escape from the confrontation with reality. He realized that with too many words he would dissipate the real feelings he contained within himself. He wanted something to remain,

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something deliciously private, painfully mysterious, some residue of memory and love and affection for his beloved Sarah that he did not want to share with the rest of the world. And so the khaf ketanah, indicating that he knew how to limit the outpouring of his words.

Oh how we moderns need this lesson of making our words sacred by making them scarce. How we need that lesson of the khaf ketanah. How we must learn to pass our words through the flame of wisdom. Modern life seems centered so much about words. We are dominated by a communications industry. We veer constantly between meetings and discussions, symposia and forums, lectures and sermons, public relations and propaganda. We are hounded continually by radio and television, telephone and telegraph. We are the "talkingest" civilization in all of history. How desperately we need that khaf ketanah. Some time ago, Jewish leaders, with all good intentions -- that of enhancing the appeal for refugees and immigrants -- announced to the world that Rumania was opening its doors and letting its Jews out. And how tragically that torrent of words backfired, provoking the Arab States and causing Rumania to shut its doors in the face of thousands of unfortunate Jews who must now remain unreunited with their immediate families in Israel.

Only two weeks ago one of the most important leaders of Israel made the announcement that he expects Soviet Russia to open its doors in from one to five years. Here were words that kindled a spark of hope in us, but at the same time caused a shadow of fear and the whisper of terror to pass over us. Perhaps those very words will cause the good news to be revoked. Perhaps because of the words, Russia will close its doors for more years to come.

It is about time that all of us, and especially Jewish agencies learned that we ought not be dominated by the public relation machines.

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It is about time that we learned to respect the khaf ketanah. Moses himself was a stammerer and a stutterer, and so he spoke few words -- but whatever he did speak was engraved in letters of fire upon the consciousness of the race. David told us, "commune with your hearts upon your beds and be silent." Shammai reminded us "speak little, but do much." Other rabbis told us that the way to wisdom is through silence. The great Besht meant the same thing in a comment upon G-d's command to Noah, tzohar taaseh la-tevah -- thou shalt make a ^{light} ark for the ark. Besht pointed out that the Hebrew word tevah means not only "ark," but also "word." Make each word brilliant, alive, shining, sparkling, and illuminating. Use it to enlighten, not to confuse. All of these knew the secret of Abraham, that of the khaf ketanah.

Words are important and powerful, therefore they are sacred. Because they are sacred, they must be issued with great, extreme caution. They must be tempered in the fire of one's character. And because they are holy and purified in fire, they must be few, choice and scarce.

When we will have learned this, we will have learned a great deal indeed. So that ultimately, we will be able to say to G-d, with David; ki lekha dumiyah tehillah. Almighty G-d, our very silence is praise unto Thee.