Thought Tools

I Hear You

June 2, 2010 19th day of Sivan, 5770 Volume III Issue #22

I told him a joke the other day. Before I finished my punch line he started telling me a better one. Another time he sought my advice but as I was contemplating my response he burst out with his own answer. In the time we’ve known one another I don’t suppose he has really heard seven sentences I have uttered.

The CEO of a medium-sized company consulted me about his ineffective leadership. “I don’t mind telling you, Rabbi, the board is getting ready to fire me!” During interviews, his associates and employees complained to me that he never listened to anything they said.

Though it afflicts far more men than women, many people suffer from this problem. It can be interesting to listen to them but it is also exhausting. Communication is only exhilarating when it is two-way. Just listening is grueling and can quickly become tiresome. More importantly, never listening erodes your relationships with others and hinders any real creativity.

I was only ten years old when my rabbi (who also happened to be my father) taught me how important it was, not only to listen, but to make sure that the other person knows you are listening. Here is what he told me:

All nouns in Hebrew have a gender. In general, most female nouns end in an aH sound. For instance, YeLeD is a boy while YaLDaH is a girl and ISH is man, while woman is ISHaH.

Verbs and adjectives match the gender of the nouns they accompany. So a big boy is a YeLeD GaDoL but a big girl would be YaLDaH GeDoLaH. A smart man is ISH ChaCHaM while a smart woman is an ISHaH CHaCHaMaH.

Cardinal numbers like one, two, three etc. occur in both masculine and feminine forms to match the gender of the noun they are describing. However, in an astonishing switch from convention, it is the masculine numbers that end with the feminine aH.

Thus three for boys is SHeLoShaH while for three girls we’d use SHaLoSH. So it seems that in a funny way, when it comes to numbering, we attach a masculine-sounding number to a feminine noun and a feminine sounding number to a masculine noun.

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“Remember,” my father stressed to me, “Hebrew grammar is just our way of trying to find the rules behind how God wrote the Torah. Exceptions to the rules are one method that God uses to reveal to us how the world really works.”

My rabbi explained that counting expresses growth and expansion. We count from $1 to $45. We count miles from here to our destination as the odometer clicks its way upward. What we may not realize is that most growth and expansion requires male and female interaction.

Obviously for our most powerful and basic form of creative multiplication, both mother and father are necessary. However, less obviously, most creativity comes about when male and female elements combine, regardless of the biological gender of the participants. Even engineers make electrical connections with male plugs and female sockets.

Brainstorming and problem solving works best when two people alternate speaking and listening. Listening or receiving is a vital feminine role while powerfully projecting a proposal outwards is more masculine. In other words, two individuals, even if both are men or both women, need to repeatedly switch gender roles. When a man and woman communicate, he must be able to receive as well as project and she must project as well as receive. Effective negotiation, collaboration, and communication depend upon the participants alternating roles.

That is why in Hebrew, “male” numbers are written in female form and “female” numbers are written in male form. Growth involves both elements. My father could have just told me, “Daniel, I want you to remember to learn to listen.” But teaching me through the magic and mystery of the Lord’s language and the secret of opposite gender numbers made sure I’d remember this timeless truth.

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Susan's Musings

To post comments and feedback, forward to a friend or print, go to www.susanlapin.com. You can also reach me at susan@rabbidaniellapin.com.

This week’s musing - A Modest Proposal

Modest: Observing conventional proprieties in behavior, speech and dress

So says my Webster dictionary. But what in the world does it mean? In today’s world exactly what are the conventional proprieties? I believe a hat is necessary if you are a lady invited to join Queen Elizabeth for a garden party at Buckingham Palace, but few of us make that list. We are more likely...
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