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by Rabbi Yaakov Finestone

THEY GAVE UP ON HER, BUT SHE PERSEVERED!

PARSHAS SHMINI

Chen Miller is a special education teacher in Israel. During her first year of teaching, she entered a second-grade classroom. A little boy sitting in the center of the room, cursed, spat, and screamed at her. She went over to him and said, "I know that you have a big heart. I know that you are clever. I know that you are a good boy." He responded loudly for the entire class to hear, "Stupid teacher, you don't know anything! I am a disturbed boy. Everyone knows that I am disturbed. The teachers say that I am disturbed. The principal says that I am disturbed. Even my parents say that I am disturbed!" Ms. Miller repeated, "You have a big heart. You are clever. I know that you are a good boy." Hearing that, the little boy ran out of the classroom. The second week when she entered the classroom, the exact same thing occurred. The little boy cursed, spat, and screamed at her. She took a deep breath and whispered to him, "You have a big heart, you are clever, and I know that you are a good boy." In the third week, when Ms. Miller entered the classroom, the little boy was sitting quietly in a desk next to hers. On that day, that little boy chose her to be his teacher.

Towards the end of the year the little boy asked her how she knew that children are good. She told him that when she was a child, she thought that **she** was stupid and that nothing good would come out of her. She, herself, was a student of a special needs class and others were ready to give up on her. She could not even read or write until she was in 5th grade!

Ms. Miller became a special education teacher to help others. The point she made in her story was that **words matter!** The words that teachers, principals, and parents say to a child become the words that the child perceives about himself. Negative words foster negative self-images and make a child feel that he is a failure. Positive words foster positive self-images and can encourage a weak student to become a successful one.

This week's *parsha* discusses which animals are kosher and which are not. An animal that chews its cud and has totally split hooves, is a kosher animal. Most animals do not have any kosher signs at all. There are four animals that exist, that

"... The camel—it chews the cud, but its hoof is not split, it is unclean to you... and the pig— its hoof is completely split but it does not chew the cud, it is unclean to you." (Vayikra 11:4,7)

have only one kosher sign. Many of the commentaries question why we need to know that these animals have one kosher sign. After all, it really makes no difference. Since they do not have both kosher signs, they are not kosher. The Torah first says that a camel chews its cud before it says that it does not have split hooves. The Torah says that a pig has totally split hooves but is not kosher because it does not chew its cud. Why does the Torah say this at all and why does it list the kosher characteristic first?

The rabbis who teach us *mussar* share a very important message based on this. When giving constructive criticism, one should first say something positive about the person before mentioning the negative. That is why the Torah mentions the positive characteristic of the four animals before mentioning their non-kosher characteristics. **This message is important for everyone** and especially important for parents and teachers. ([Rav Pam on Chumash](#) by Rabbi Sholom Smith)

Words can build and words can destroy! Let us choose to use our word in a positive manner.

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Rabbi Yaakov Finestone is the director of JEP Queens. For almost 50 years JEP Queens has been in the forefront of kiruv. JEP has changed the lives of thousands of Jewish children enrolled in public schools and kiruv schools. Many are *shomrei Torah* and *mitzvos* today because of JEP.

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