

The Daily Portion

- Sivan Rahav Meir

5 items regarding the Chofetz Chayim

Translation by Yehoshua Siskin

1. Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan, who passed away 89 years ago this week, was a highly esteemed rabbinical leader and teacher who came to the conclusion that insufficient attention had been paid to one especially critical area of daily living: the content of our speech. He wrote "Chofetz Chayim" (and was subsequently known by that name), a book whose title was taken from words in Psalm 34: "Are you someone who desires life, who loves days of seeing goodness? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceitfully." (Chofetz Chayim means 'one who desires life'.)

2. His students emphasized that he was extremely careful regarding the laws of gossip and lashon hara (insulting or negative speech) and yet, perhaps surprisingly, he was not a quiet person. He proved that it's possible to be talkative, but still speak in a consistently positive manner.

3. It's fascinating to see how a lone individual can become an icon,

symbolizing a single great idea and even start a popular movement. Just looking at the widely seen picture of him reminds us of his life's work on the subject of proper speech.

4. He taught that lashon hara is a complex subject and that proper speech may include sharp words, if they are beneficial, and that sometimes the best policy is simply to remain silent. The intricacies of lashon hara demand rigorous study which is why the Chofetz Chayim wrote voluminously on this topic.

5. His workshop on proper speech was prepared long before the era of social media. Today, Internet shaming may occur as the result of baseless rumors. If once people would gossip by the town river, our speech today has a much wider reach. The Chofetz Chayim wanted us to understand the awesome power of speech and taught us how to utilize it in the best possible way.

In his memory.

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