

Parsha Story

Stories and Parables from
the famed Maggid of Dubno
by Rabbi Chanan Morrison

Time for Straight Talk

NO'ACH

Reb Yossi the Scholar and Yossi the Ignoramus

In a certain Jewish town, there once lived two wealthy men – both named Yossi. One was Reb Yossi, a learned Talmudic scholar with a large and impressive library of holy books. The other was, well, Yossi the am ha'aretz – Yossi the ignoramus. He was wealthy, but his appreciation for books was largely limited to the decorative value of their bindings.

It would have been confusing to refer to them both as Yossi, so the townspeople had long ago settled on an easy distinction: Reb Yossi the scholar, and Yossi the ignoramus. Not the most flattering, but it did the trick.

One day, a visitor arrived at Reb Yossi's house and knocked on the door. The butler opened it.

"I'm looking for Yossi", the visitor said.

"Ah", the butler replied, "You want Yossi the ignoramus. Two streets down."

From inside the house, Reb Yossi overheard this exchange and frowned. Later, he called his butler aside.

"In this house", he said, "we do not speak that way about our neighbors. Yes, others may call him Yossi the ignoramus, but we do not. I will not have it said that I look down on my neighbors."

The butler, properly chastised, nodded.

As luck would have it, not long after this, a matchmaker came to visit Reb Yossi. The matchmaker beamed as he announced, "Reb Yossi, I have an excellent match for your daughter. The son of Yossi the ignoramus!"

Reb Yossi nearly choked on his tea. "My daughter should marry the son of Yossi the ignoramus? Over my dead body!"

The matchmaker, not being entirely clueless, made a hasty exit.

The butler, however, was confused. "Forgive me, sir", he said hesitantly, "but just last week you scolded me for using that very term. And yet you just said it yourself..."

The scholar sighed. "Don't you understand the difference? If someone asks you where someone lives, he is not asking for an assessment of his character and

scholarship. All you need to do is provide his address. Anything more, if it is uncomplimentary, is simply lashon hara – uncalled-for gossip.

"But when a match is proposed for my daughter, I must be clear in explaining why I object to such an arrangement. It is my duty to clarify in no uncertain terms that I will not allow my daughter to marry the unlearned son of an ignoramus."

A Time for Niceties and a Time for Plain Speech.

When the Torah describes the animals that entered Noah's Ark, it avoids calling them "impure" (tamei). Instead, it uses a more delicate phrase: "animals that are not pure". The Sages saw this as a model for refined speech, avoiding blunt negativity.

Yet, this principle doesn't seem to hold across the Torah. Later, in the dietary laws (Vayikra 11, D'varim 14), the Torah doesn't use euphemisms. It states plainly: "These animals are impure to you." No softening, no polite detours – just the unvarnished truth.

The difference?

In the story of No'ach, the distinction between "pure" and "not pure" is incidental – it merely identifies which animals boarded the ark. Since no law hinges on it, the Torah chooses a

gentler form of speech.

But when it comes to the laws of Kashrut, the stakes are different. This isn't a historical detail – it's a commandment. Here, clarity is essential. The Torah doesn't mince words because, when it comes to guiding our actions, truth must be told with absolute precision.

Words matter. The wise know when to soften their speech – and when to speak with unflinching clarity.

Adapted from The Maggid and his Parables, pp. 125-127