Some words get overused, misused and abused. The words become degraded so that they no longer can be taken at face value.

The word “kosher” is an example of a word that has become compromised.

The packaging on kosher foods reflects the problem. The word “kosher,” by itself, seems no longer to indicate that a product is actually kosher. Much packaging states that the product is under “strict rabbinic supervision,” or that it is “strictly kosher,” apparently, without the words “strict” or “strictly” we couldn’t trust its kashruth. Some packaging now states that the product is under the “strictest rabbinic supervision,” implying that just being “strict” or “strictly kosher” isn’t kosher enough. Only “strictest” should be trusted.

To complicate matters, we often find products that are under multiple rabbinic supervisions…as many as four or five different hashgahot per item. Does having multiple hashgahot make the product more kosher? Are those items with only one or even two hashgahot not kosher enough?

The word “kosher” has been degraded; many people apparently don’t trust the word unless it is accompanied by “strict,” “strictly” or “strictest;” or unless it is authenticated by multiple hashgahot. This may be the fault of manufacturers, or of kashruth agencies, or of consumers…but the result is to downgrade the word “kosher” and to confuse the public.

The word “major” is another example of a compromised word.

We receive notices from various congregations and organizations announcing lectures, shiurim, and a variety of programs. Apparently, it is felt that just announcing the topic is inadequate to gain people’s attention. So we are told that the upcoming lecture/shiur/program is “important.” But since everything seems to be “important” these days, the announcements inform us that the upcoming event is “special.” Recently, I’ve begun receiving notices for upcoming lectures/shiurim that are “major.” But if these lectures/shiurim are “major,” does that imply that they are more significant than if they were just “special” or “important?” And does that imply that all “non-major” lectures,
shiurim/programs are “minor?” When hyping events as “major,” the result is to downgrade all other “non-major” events…and ultimately to downgrade “major” itself.

Another phrase that has been popping up is “extremely brilliant.” It seems that just being smart, intelligent or even brilliant is no longer enough; one needs to be “extremely brilliant.” Yet, if so many people are upgraded to being “extremely brilliant,” then the phrase loses its significance. If you really want to stand out, you’ll need to find a phrase that goes higher than “extremely brilliant.” But then, many others will adopt that new phrase too, in a never-ending effort to outdo others. The more hyperbole we use, the less the words really mean.

The latest hyperboles include "legendary" and "iconic." Newcasters and sportscasters increasingly describe outstanding individuals as being legendary. Noteworthy institutions aren’t just noteworthy--they are now iconic. By using such superlatives so freely, the result is to degrade the terms. If so many people are legendary and so many institutions are iconic, then these terms don’t really reflect the absolutely best and unique few.

One of my pet peeves is referring to rabbis as "HaGaon"...even if they are simply fine rabbis but not extraordinary geniuses worthy of the title "gaon." Indeed, the very word "rabbi" has been so degraded and compromised that many rabbis (at least in the Orthodox world) prefer the title of Rav. But "Rav" may soon also be not enough, so that other grander phrases (such as gaon) will become more prevalent.

Wouldn’t it be nice if people used words carefully, without need for hyperbole? It would be a very strictly, major, and extremely brilliant thing to do! It would be a legendary, iconic step forward, worthy of a gaon!!