

Words Matter
Kol Nidre 5778
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A priest friend of mine told me a story about a group of monks who lived in a faraway monastery deep in the woods. This religious order traced their roots all the way to back to the fifteen hundreds. The men lived simple, solitary, quiet lives, their days filled with prayer and meditation.

In the dark, dank cellar of the monastery, in a room closed off by a heavy steel door was the original manuscript, written hundreds of years before setting forth the mission and vocation of this pious group of dedicated men.

Over the years they grew curious and no longer able to contain himself one of the monks approached the abbot and asked if it might be possible to re-read the sacred text describing their origins. The abbot thought about it, and finally agreed. After dinner the next day, he took a candle in hand and made his way down the dark rickety steps to the dungeon where the manuscript was kept.

The monks all stood at the stop of the stairs...waiting with anticipation to hear the words that had set forth their mission.

A few minutes became a few hours, and the monks grew worried, "What could have happened to our dear abbot?" they wondered.

Not wanting to disturb him if in fact he was deep in prayer, they chose two representatives to determine the abbot's wellbeing. They gingerly made their way down the stairway, following the faint flickering light of the abbot's candle. As they approached the open door of the chamber that held the sacred text, they were shocked by what they saw. There stood the abbot, the sacred manuscript strewn on the dirt floor, the abbot banging his head against the wall, crying, "The word was ***CELEBRATE!!!***"

Words matter. What we say and how we use the divine gift of communication can change the face of history

One of the most vicious and boorish anti-Semitic myths is that Jews have horns. The falsehood was perpetuated in Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses. Coming out of the prophet's head are two small horns, most likely the result of the sculptor's reading the mistaken translation from the Hebrew of a verse from Exodus.

In the Latin Vulgate the word “kareenim” is rendered horns, it actually means two rays of light, a glow which emanated from Moses as he descended Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments in hand. My late father described his first day of basic training at some base deep in the south having to take his hat off to prove to his relatively, but terribly uneducated bunk mate that in fact he did not have horns.

Words have power...they can be as sharp and lethal as a sword.

During the next twenty four hours we will repeat over and over again, a list of sins...always in the first person plural. Though none of us has committed them all, each of us is guilty of some. If there is one category in this long litany of our failings, that far outnumbers them all it is transgressions related to speech.

No less than a quarter of the traditional forty-four sins for which we seek forgiveness on the High Holy Days have to do with the words we speak. The rabbis understood that as it says in the Book of Proverbs, “*mavet v'hayyim b'yad ha-lashon,*” “death and life are in the power of the tongue.” From “deliberate deceit,” to “the impurity of our lips” from “deliberate lying” to “scoffing,” from “slander” to “hasty condemnation.”

“We lie, we gossip, we insult, we jeer, we mock, we quarrel.”

An eighteenth century rabbi, Abraham Danzig wrote:

“O God you created my mouth and tongue. I am grateful for the blessings of language and speech, by which I praise you and connect with all human beings. But raising my voice in anger and saying things I regret have diminished my soul.”

Words have real power.

There is a legend that man became a ‘living being’ when he became a ‘speaking soul.’ In the beginning of the Torah, we learn the importance of language. “God said...Let there be...” and there was. Creation occurred at the behest of a word.

Later, when the people became bold and self-important and decided to build a tower to the heavens—the famous Tower of Babel—God grew angry, frustrated with the people’s arrogance and pride, and so He confounded their speech. The people were unable to communicate with each other. They grew frustrated with each other, their words had no meaning and the entire enterprise collapsed...hence the term “to babble.”

As the Jewish year ends, we find ourselves reading the last chapters of the Torah in the book of *divarim*, or in English, “words.” The text is filled with Moses’ last orations, some of loftiest and most beautiful words to be found in the entire Torah. When you think about it, it’s kind of ironic. For when Moses was called by God to lead the Israelites, he originally did not want the job, claiming he was inarticulate; he stammered and stumbled over his words. But near the end of his career, and his life, language was flawless, his words profound, and his message eternal.

In recent months we have become accustomed to harsh and personal attacks, cutting invective, from Washington, expressions that are undignified and unbecoming the people we have elected to represent us, as well as the talking heads we listen to on our way to work.

But as I said on Rosh Hashanah, I am an optimist, and I believe in the wise and sage words of Ecclesiastes, *ain chadash tachat ha-shemesh* ...in a kind of twisted irony, I take comfort from the fact that in some ways, history is simply repeating itself for there is really nothing new under the sun.”

In the late 1800’s in a pitched battle for readership between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer the truth was often sacrificed on the altar of sensationalism and fictional drama concocted by each paper to draw readers.

In fact, Hearst’s oft quoted charge to his journalists was, “You provide the pictures, and I’ll provide the war.”

While the tone of public discourse, the willful disregard for provable facts may not be new, most of us have not experienced this level of discourse in our lifetime.

According to Larry Sabato

Jennifer Sclafani, a linguist at Georgetown University, says our president maintains a certain appeal to a segment of the American politician, jaded and disillusioned by politicians who make promises they cannot keep, pander to one special interest group or another, making commitments they never intend to honor.

The president Professor Sclafani says is a “unique” politician because he doesn’t speak like one. On the surface, that might to be a welcome change from what we have come to expect from our elected representatives. She continues, “He creates

a spectacle in the way that he speaks,” she said. “It creates a feeling of strength for the nation, or it creates a sense of determination, a sense that he can get the job done through his use of hyperbole and directness.”

The problem is, our nation needs words of healing and hope. At the very moment we need reassurance and inspiration, sometimes the noise from Washington only increases the acrimony and leads to even greater discord.

Tim Sutton, a county commissioner from North Carolina, was a relatively obscure and unknown local politician, until he boldly and confidently declared that African Americans were actually not “slaves,” but humanely treated “workers.” One need only visit the Museum of African American History in Washington DC, and walk past the stone block upon which human beings were catalog as chattel to see that he was wrong. Mr. Sutton refused to disavow his claim.

Comments like that belong in the sad catalogue of Holocaust denial and other wildly outlandish allegations by the increasing number of conspiracy theorists who would never allow facts to get in the way of their beliefs.

In the Book of Proverbs we read, “Life and death are in the power of the tongue.”

Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia’s Center for Politics writes, “The old method of dealing with scandal was fervent apology—sometimes tearful, occasionally accompanied by a full apology tour. It’s...no longer necessary.”

One of my favorite late night talk show hosts is Trevor Noah. His humor is clever, funny, and very current. He was born in South Africa to a white Swiss-German father, who ultimately abandoned the family, and a black mother. His very existence at that time broke the law against interracial coupling. As he said, he was neither black nor white, Indian nor that uniquely South African label, “colored.” “Though I did not belong to one group, I could be part of any group that was laughing.”

In his recent autobiography “Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood,” he tells how his mother eventually remarried; a charming man who turned out to be a mean drunk. His mother complained to the police but they did nothing. One day in a drunken stupor he tried to kill her. She woke up in the hospital, Trevor sitting by her bed crying. Trying to comfort her son she said “My child, you must look on the bright side.”

“What!!!” Trevor cried, “you were shot in the face...there is no bright side!”

“Of course there is,” she responded, “Now you’re officially the best looking person in the family”

Words have the power to hurt or heal, a comment can tear upon an old scar or soothe a broken heart. There is an old proverb...I’ve heard it attributed to many different traditions, that says we were created with two ears and one mouth for a reason. So that we would listen twice as much as we would speak.

The liturgy of the holy days fast approaching encourages us to take a break...to take stock, ask where we’ve been, where we hope to go. It’s a time to listen to what is in our hearts, and make a pledge that this next we will try, as the Psalmist wrote, to

נָצַר לְשׁוֹנֶה מִרָע וּשְׂפָתָיִךְ מִדַּבֵּר מְרָמָה

“Guard our tongues from evil and our lips from deceit.”

They say Yom Kippur is somber and sad, a time for denial and affliction not for frivolity or merriment ...and yet in truth there is something magical about this day; something liberating, optimistic and redemptive.

We are given yet another chance, this time to get it right, to be honest, never afraid of the truth, if we can find the words to convey our love for our partners, say the things that express our pride and our unconditional love for our children, affirm the joy we feel in having deep and meaningful friendships.

As these next hours unfold, my hope is that our prayers restore our weary spirits. That in this New Year we can find within our hearts the will to live with dignity, mindful of the many blessings that have found their way into our lives. And may words of love and gratitude flow from our lips as we open our eyes to a world filled with beauty, forgiveness and grace.

*Titchadashe alaynu...*renew us this day, O ’God, and let us say:

Amen