

Let There Be Light: Reclaiming the Power of Speech

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Rabbi Jennifer Feldman, Kehillah Synagogue

Gut Yuntif everyone. At this point in the High Holy Day season many, many words of prayer have passed our lips. So I'd like to break it up a bit. Introduce something new. Please repeat after me: Abracadabra. (Give time for everyone to repeat).

No, I'm not now going to pull a rabbit out of my *machzor*, or a bright bouquet of flowers from the sleeve of my kittel. ...Not yet at least.

As good scholars of Harry Potter know, Abracadabra is actually Aramaic, the lingua franca of the Jews of Palestine and Babylonia, the language in which the Talmud is primarily written. Literally, *Avara* (I will create) *k'dvara* (as I speak).

This simple magical phrase names a deep truth: words have tremendous power -- the power to create, and to destroy.

Judaism makes this abundantly clear. God creates the world through speech: And God *said*, "Let there be light. And there was light." Our received tradition, Torah, comes to us through words. Drawing on the work of Prof. Susan Handelman, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner points out that in Judaism, words "create, characterize and sustain reality." And he points to a conversation with Prof. Michael Fishbane, "through interpreting the Bible [with words] Jews create themselves all over again."

Indeed, language is not exclusively the province of the divine in Jewish life; in Judaism it is a bridge between the heavenly and earthly realms. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: "We can enter into a relationship with God, even though [God] is infinite and we are finite, because we are linked by words. In revelation, God speaks to us. In prayer, we speak to God."

In addition to being a means of reaching out to the Divine, words serve as a means for us to bring godliness to our world. Imitating God, through speech we can call into being beauty, creativity and holiness. Under the *chuppah*, a loving couple exchange rings, and speak words -- "you are sanctified unto me..." -- creating the union of their souls. When we join our voices in HaMotzi, expressing gratitude through blessing, we transform the everyday act of eating into a sacred occasion. And throughout this High Holy Day season we voice words of regret, apology and forgiveness to renew, re-create and repair our relationships with others and with God.

As we see each election year -- and as is stunningly clear this year -- words can be used to harm, demean and destroy. It is no wonder that many political commercials are called "attack ads." Words, wielded like weapons, have relentlessly streamed across our computer screens, TV sets and newspapers. Sadly, we know such words can be effective, even when they are not true.

We can't control the vitriol in the political arena, but we can each become more attuned to our own words. Now, more than ever, it is up to us to reclaim and re-sanctify the power of language: to help, not harm; to build, not destroy; to create and not to condemn.

Rabbi David Teutsch points out in “The Ethics of Speech” that we live in a society that places enormous value on free speech, individual autonomy and self expression. In contrast, Judaism balances this with a great emphasis on the communal life. “...unrestrained speech,” Teustch writes, “in forms of criticism, gossip, lying and argument can tear the fabric of community.”

To preserve community, we have a long ethical tradition of guidance on forbidden speech, known as “lashon hara,” and the imperative to guard and be vigilant about what we say -- “shmirat halashon.”

There are three subcategories of *lashon hara*, which literally means “the evil tongue.” The first is *rechilut*, which means peddling in gossip. A person acts like a traveling saleswoman, telling an individual what others are saying about him or her. The motive: creating ill will and strife among people. In the words of Mark Twain, “It takes your enemy and your friend, working together to hurt you to the quick; the one to slander you and the other to get the news to you.”

A second form of forbidden speech is *motzei shem ra*: spreading rumors that are false with the intent to harm, to damage someone’s reputation or livelihood. Regarding this form of slander, you may recall one of the many variations on the chasidic story of a nice man with a nasty problem of getting a kick out of tale-bearing. One time he spread lies about a local businessman, completely destroying that man’s livelihood. When the village rabbi learned of this he ordered the slanderer to his study and asked him to bring a pillow. He then split the pillow, sending feathers flying everywhere throughout the study, out the window and swirling all over the village. Then, the rabbi instructed the slanderer, to collect each and every one. “Impossible!” cried the talebearer. “Aha!” said the rabbi, “That is my point: just like you cannot collect every feather, so too you cannot take back the damage you have done by spreading falsehoods.”

Both *rechilut* and *motzei shem ra* involve intention to do harm. And *motzei shem ra* requires the conscious work of creating and disseminating lies. In contrast, the third category of forbidden speech is about sharing any statement about others that is true, but lowers the status of the person about whom it is being said. This subcategory of *lashon hara* is called... *lashon hara*. That's right: it's both the general name for destructive speech and the name of one of the subcategories. (No one ever said our tradition was easy to follow!)

This category of forbidden speech may seem less nefarious than the others: the speaker may not intend to do harm. But this is the one that I venture we all struggle with the most. When we talk about other people in ways that lower their status or esteem -- even when those statements are true -- it's *lashon hara*. I spent hours of my sabbatical quietly studying the intricacies of the laws of forbidden speech, only to walk out the door, start talking to others and fall short time and time again. It might even be a Yom Kippur challenge to see if all of us could make it from our seats in the sanctuary back to our cars without somehow speaking an ill word about another. The Talmud itself concedes that virtually everyone will violate laws of speech (BT Baba Batra 164b-165a). And yet the tradition takes this offense very seriously:

Lashon hara is worse than bloodshed [said the rabbis], for whoever kills takes one life, but whoever speaks *lashon hara* takes three lives: the one who speaks, the one who listens and the one who is spoken about.

Midrash Tanchuma

Let me be clear that of course our tradition permits and encourages us to warn when someone is dangerous or is likely to do harm. If, for instance, you know that your company's prospective new accountant has a history of embezzling, it's appropriate to say so.

But it's the other kind of negative speech we're talking about here – the kind I venture most of us know too well: With one keystroke we inadvertently sent an offensive e-mail to the wrong someone, or mid-conversation turn around to suddenly see the subject of our conversation or critique standing right there. We recoil, we feel horrible, we wish we were anywhere else. We feel this way in part, because in the presence of the other person we recognize the harm we have caused them and our relationship. But the e-mail and the conversation are damaging *even if the subject never reads or hears about them*.

Lashon hara is corrosive to our souls. It trains us to the negative, narrowing our vision of others and the world. It can blind us to an awareness of the divine spark in others. It can fill us with bitterness and disappointment.

Thankfully, Judaism gives us a way forward. It isn't all "thou shalt not" regarding the ethics of speech. Rabbi Joshua Boettinger, drawing on the wisdom of Rabbi Ira Stone, writes beautifully about the mitzvah – the positive commandment – of guarding our speech, *shmirat halashon*:

Psalm 121 reads: "The guardian of Israel [*shomer Yisrael*] never slumbers or sleeps." Our goal then, is to learn to be *shomrim* for each other, or, as Rabbi Ira Stone puts it, "to be awake to the needs of the other... we can learn that when we speak, we are always making choices and that we do so as *shomrim*, as guardians who are always in relationship to another in our care. One way to gauge whether our speech is skillful is to ask ourselves if what we say is in the service of the other."

Reclaiming the sanctity of speech is an ongoing journey, and it takes care, attention, and nurturing.

The ancient rabbis ask a remarkable question. What could God, the Source of All, need or want from us? Listen to the words they imagine God speaking in answer to their question:

"My beloved children, am I lacking something that I must ask you to provide it? And what do I request of you? That you love each other, that you respect one another and that you show reverence for one another."

The awareness that we are *shomrim*/guardians for one another is grounded in love, respect and reverence. You might say: but we can't force ourselves to feel love and respect for others. But we can nurture a habit of looking for the good in others rather than immediately scanning for faults. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin quotes Dennis Prager:

“...If you know any person intimately, you can cite five qualities that can make the person seem kind and extraordinary, and five more that can make him or her seem cruel or pathetic.”

So where do we focus our attention? Or, knowing our own faults (as we do so well on Yom Kippur especially), when we're inclined to criticize another person, can we pause and make the effort to recognize their good qualities?

On Yom Kippur, we ask humbly *asei imanu tzedakah va'chesed* (God temper justice with mercy) *ki ein banu ma'asim* (for our deeds come up short). What we ask of God, can we find in ourselves? Can we judge others – despite their shortcomings-- *b'chaf zechut*, on the side of merit?

In the coming year, I venture that none of us will declare complete victory in our struggles with *lashon hara*. But we can all experience using our words to care for each other, acknowledge the good in one another, and seek the wholeness of the people we might be too quick to judge. In doing so, may we reclaim language's life-giving power. And know that our words bring sanctity, love and compassion into our world.

G'mar chatimah tovah everyone. May we have a good signing in the book of life and Tzom Kal – for those who are able, may it be a meaningful fast.