

Words of Love  
Kol Nidre 5779  
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After returning from Church one Sunday morning President Josiah Bartlett, my favorite president of all time – real or fictional – was lamenting the pastor’s sermon. “He felt the homily lacked panache”, said his wife Abbie. President Bartlett replied, “Hackery! He was a hack! He had a captive audience. I know because I tried to tunnel out several times. He didn’t know what to do... Words. Words when spoken out loud for performance are music. They have rhythm and pitch and timbre and volume. These are the properties of music. Music has the ability to find us and lift us up in ways that literal meaning can’t.

Abbie retorts, “You are an oratorical snob!”  
“Yes and God loves me for it”, says Bartlett.

Words matter. Words have power.

In an interview I saw taped with Aaron Sorkin, the show’s creator and head writer for 4 seasons, he waxed philosophical about this idea as well, nearly quoting the lines from the script verbatim. For anyone who is familiar with Sorkin’s work -The West Wing, Sports Night, A Few Good Men, The American President, The Newsroom – to name a few – you know the power of a well written line of dialogue. Indeed, this congregation has been privileged for the last quarter century to hear regularly from one of the best sermonizers in the country in Rabbi Lucas. The Temple Beth Sholom community understands the impact that words and language can have on our thinking, on our actions, on our feelings, on our lives. In this aspect we are truly blessed.

As a Rabbi, I think about words constantly. In fact our training in school is fundamentally about being sensitive to the language we find in our sacred texts. Our entire interpretive tradition is rooted in the notion that the words of the Torah are not incidental or accidental but filled with purpose and meaning. We teach that there are no extra words in the Torah, and that each sentence, each word, each syllable, each letter, and each crown on those letters contain messages about the nature of the world and about our responsibilities to each other and to God.

As a husband and a father, especially in those roles, the right words spoken with the right approach can make the difference between a temper tantrum or blow-up and a more positive interaction between family members. Likewise, as a co-worker, supervisor, team-member, our words matter. They matter a great deal.

But most of us are not as skilled with words as Aaron Sorkin or Rabbi Lucas. I suspect that most of us have struggled with our words at one time or another.

Has this ever happened to you? A friend posts on Facebook a meme about the President, or gun control, or Israel, or immigration – pick your topic. You reply with some snarky comment and then get back to your day. Then the back and forth begins. Maybe someone else jumps into the fray with his or her own commentary, and you’re off to the races. Not commenting at all might have been a more useful strategy at that moment, but hey it’s only Facebook.

Or maybe you read an article that you found to be important and timely. So you share it on your twitter feed or other social media. Before you know it, the trolls have come out from hiding and you find yourself under attack. Do you respond in kind? Do you ignore it? Do you engage the person in conversation?

Maybe you have found yourself needing to confront a friend or family member about a wrong you have suffered at their hands. Maybe, you seize a moment to express how their behavior has affected you and has made you feel. What was your approach? How did it go? If you were successful, why was that the case? And if it could have gone better, what would you change?

There have been various times in my own life when I fell prey to the types of scenarios I just mentioned. During those periods, I found myself to be ineffective in my interpersonal relationships, times when the gap between my intention and the actual result was miles wide. Each time I searched for a remedy, some way to use my words more effectively, to be more mindful in my speech and more careful in my communication.

One such occasion I stopped speaking entirely.

I was in my second year of rabbinical school and things had gotten really bad. At every turn and with every interaction I felt as though I was stepping on landmines. No matter if I was communicating out loud or on paper, it always seemed to come out wrong and ultimately I was the one who suffered because of it.

It was around the High Holiday time and I decided to take on a custom called taanit dibbur – a fast from speech. During any time when a person is struggling to get control over their words, one may refrain from speaking for a day – usually from first light until the stars come out. Words of prayer and Torah are permitted - even encouraged - but all “regular” conversation is to cease. By limiting what one says, the theory is that we enable ourselves to focus on the ways in which we speak and the impact that our words have on the world around us.

So that Yom Kippur in addition to the regular kind of fasting from food and drink – I fasted from words. From the moment that Kol Nidre began until that last shofar blast of Neilah the only words that crossed my lips were the words of the machzor and the prayers of my heart. I didn't catch up with friends not seen since last Yom Kippur. I did not speak about current events. I even refrained from talking about the Rabbi's sermon! To help me accomplish this, I hung a note card around my neck on which was written, “Please do not disturb. Taanit dibbur in progress.”

I'll speak more about my experience in a few moments.

As I mentioned, I think about words and language quite often. I think about it because it is something with which I periodically struggle, as we all do from time to time. It occurs to me that in our hyper-connected, hi-tech, world, we are bombarded by words almost constantly. Read this, comment on that, call this person, listen to that voicemail, look at this ad, write that email, write this article, and fill out that paperwork. Words. Words. Words. But I also think about it because of the paradox that something made of air, that has basically no physical substance to it at all, can wield so much power and influence. As I study more about words from the vantage point of our tradition I find that the old playground adage, that sticks and stones may break my bones but words may never hurt me, is a foreign concept in Judaism. In fact that could not be

further from the truth.

What does our tradition say about words and their power? What is the source of their potency?

In the second chapter of Genesis we read of the creation of the first human being: "And the Lord God fashioned the human from the dust of the earth, and blew into its nostrils the breath of life. And the human became a living spirit – a *nefesh chaya*".

Onkelos, a Jew by choice, who translated the Torah into Aramaic during the first century C.E., renders the words – *nefesh chaya* – as *ruach memalela* – the spirit that speaks. Rashi comments on the same words that "even though animals and humans are both called 'a living spirit' - *nefesh chaya*- the human version is more alive because it contains within it the power of consciousness and speech." The thing that makes us human, that makes us more alive than other creatures, is nothing less than the power of speech.

When combined with Genesis chapter 1, where people are created in the image of God, a powerful picture of humanity emerges. Namely that being self-aware with the power of speech is an articulation of being created in the image of God.

And what is that power? Is it simply the ability to form words with our mouths instead of barks and grunts? No. The power of speech is nothing short of the divine ability to create.

Indeed, in our daily liturgy, we speak of the power of God's divine speech. Psukei D'zimra, the introductory section of Psalms in our morning service begins with the words, "Praised is the one who spoke the world into being".

But speech is not only creative. It can also destroy. For example, we find statements in the Talmud such as "One who embarrasses a person in public - literally whitens their face - is considered a killer." We need not venture too far off the front page of the newspaper to know this truth as well. Words have tremendous power depending on how we use them.

About 15 years ago a group on the Internet was created called, Jewish Bloggers for Responsible Speech Online. Their goal was to ensure that when any person comments on their blogs, they do so with Jewish tradition in mind. The following statement, from Rav Yoseph Soloveitchik, appears in the comments section as a reminder to commenters:

"I may attack a certain point of view which I consider false, but I will never attack a person who preaches it. I have always a high regard for the individual who is honest and moral, even when I am not in agreement with them. Such a relation is in accord with the concept of kavod habriyot –the honor due to creation-, for beloved is humanity for being created in the image of God."

**For beloved is humanity for being created in the image of God."**

The appearance of this statement does at least two things. The first, is that it requires anyone who would post a comment to stop and think about what they might say; to wait a bit to allow a response instead of a reaction. I was told once that the word 'wait' is actually an acronym for Why Am I Talking. Sometimes, as a reminder, I write that at the top of my note pad during a

meeting.

The second thing that it does, is express a reason why one should be careful with words. It is because humanity is loved God. By creating us in the divine image, and giving us the capacity to speak, God has shown us great love. The appropriate recognition of that gift therefore is to use it to promote and grow love in our world.

These ideas occurred to me in two distinct moments during my taanit dibbur. The idea of slowing down struck as I was taking a break during mincha and sitting with a group of people resting in the courtyard of the synagogue. I don't recall what the topic of conversation was though I am sure that it had nothing to do with tshuvah or YK or anything related. But I remember the feeling of wanting to join in and just schmooze. Remembering my pledge not to speak, I stopped myself. I sometimes harness that feeling now when pausing to consider my words.

The second moment was not too long after that. I started to wonder what I would say once my fast was over. Very quickly it became clear to me. As the whole congregation sang "Next Year in Jerusalem" and after hearing the final blast of the shofar, I walked over to my wife Sari, kissed her, and said "I love you". Not speaking for twenty-five hours made me realize how many words I was wasting in the service of something other than love. I told myself that day that I would try to the best of my ability, to use words as much as I could to love. It continues to be a focus of my spiritual evolution.

When I look at our world today, especially our public conversations about things of ultimate value, I worry. I worry about how we speak to each other. I worry about the way our elected leaders speak to and about their political adversaries. I worry about the ways in which we speak about 'the other' in our midst. I worry that that we might be losing, not only any semblance of civility, but losing a foothold in the notion of the great power that we wield in our mouths. Facts don't matter. Truth is relative. Anything can be spun or taken back or reinterpreted. We talk a lot, but I wonder sometimes, how much are we actually communicating.

My experience with taanit dibbur, with not speaking, had been so powerful and compelling that I would like to invite each of us to do two things. The first is to try a taanit dibbur sometime throughout the coming days. You don't have to go for a full day, or even a half day. But if you find this persuasive, try it for two hours. See what happens? Maybe nothing will happen. But perhaps some small change will occur. Perhaps you will come to realize something about how you use words and will be moved to change that behavior.

Even if you don't try a taanit dibbur you can still do the second thing.

As you leave shul today you will see a stack of pledge cards. It is not to make a financial pledge to the synagogue or Israel bonds. Rather it is a pledge I want us to make to ourselves to be more careful with our words.

The pledge says:

"In the coming year, I will strive to live in the world as a nefesh chaya, a living soul, created in the divine image. In recognition of that, I pledge to guard my tongue, to wait and consider

what exactly I want to say and if I have to say anything at all. I will remember that the power of speech was given in love and is therefore a powerful instrument of love. When I feel myself getting out of control I pledge to..." And fill in the blank with some method you come up with to get you back on track. Then sign the card.

After signing the card, put it in a place where you will have to see it at least once a day. Maybe you want to stick it into the frame of your mirror to see when you get ready for the day? Or perhaps you can tape it to the top of your computer? You could even take a picture of it and set it as the home screen on your smart phone! It doesn't matter. Put the card in a place where it will have the most impact on you.

Perhaps seeing our pledge card everyday can make us all more conscious of how we use words. Even if it only helps a little, we will have made a big contribution to increasing love and goodness in the world.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah