

Rosh Ha'shanah Morning - 5785
October 4th, 2024

Is it True, is it Kind, is it Necessary

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” I know our kindergarten teachers meant well when they taught us this rhyme, that they intended to try and help us solve our childhood disputes with words rather than physical violence.

But they lied to us.

I was 19 years old, in the midst of basic training in my elite unit in the IDF and I was suffering from hair fractures in both my legs, the kind that inflicts tremendous pain with every step, but not enough to make you complain, especially if you are a young, motivated paratrooper trying to make it in a unit-only few get to enter.

A unit with the culture of “real men don't express pain.”

So, I kept silent.

One day in a routine drill, we were carrying heavy gear, from point A to point B and back.

We were given a very short time to complete the task as a unit, and needless to say, if you don't complete the task on time, you do it again, and again, and again...

And because I was in so much pain, and was very slow that day, we did it again, and again and again... and again.

It was one of the hardest days in my life.

Later that night on my way to the showers, I passed behind two guys from my unit, they didn't notice me, and I overheard them say, "That Kapitunlik- what a S.O.B., he doesn't belong here, that lazy, privileged, BEEP F BEEP. I hope they kick him out of here. Without him, we would be better off."

Ouch.

That hurt. Really hurt.

Words might not be able to break our bones literally, but they can crush our hearts. They crushed mine.

I felt like I didn't belong and never would.

I felt defeated, deflated.

All the efforts I have made for months, to belong, to be one of the guys, were washed away like footprints in the sand, erased by the tide of hurtful words.

Those words hurt more than the pain from what would soon become actual fractures in both my legs.

And those cruel, untrue, unkind words, those words that broke my heart, were the reason that after recovering at home from my fractures, and given the opportunity,

I asked to be transferred to a different unit.

Words are powerful. In this case they just altered my life, in other cases words can be deadly.

Maimonides teaches that a person's tongue is more powerful than his sword. A sword can kill somebody who is nearby; a tongue can cause the death of someone who is far away...

Many of you remember the case of Michelle Carter who two years ago, was convicted of involuntary manslaughter of her 18-year-old boyfriend Conrad Roy.

Roy, who was struggling with mental health and suicidal thoughts received over 1000 text messages, in which Michelle repeatedly urged him to “do it”. Eventually, he broke down and took his own life.

She pushed him over the edge with the power of her words alone.

Words are powerful, they stick with us, they can cause despair, ruin relationships, alter lives. They can be dangerous.

And lately, I've been thinking a lot about the power of words.

I've been thinking about them in the context of the approaching elections. As the rhetoric I hear in the political arena is getting more and more vicious, venomous and dangerous - words that intentionally or not, are pushing people to feel that violence is an acceptable form of opposition.

I've been thinking about the power of words in the context of social media platforms which are like fuel for the flames of divisiveness and hate. I find myself in disbelief of how much evil, how many lies, how much intolerance and damage can be displayed in a single banter of 140 characters.

I've been thinking about the power of words in the context of ignorant students on campuses shouting, "From the river to the sea." Not realizing what those words truly mean to you and me. About what a college student feels when the person he believed to be his friend, or when her teacher is now saying "I wish Hitler would have finished the job."

I've been thinking about the power of words, in the context of the one-year anniversary of October 7th. Of all those last phone calls and text messages sent from the party at the Nova festival or from closed secured rooms in the kibbutzim around Gaza. Last words of farewell and love, of courage and despair as the reality of what was about to happen closed in.

And I've been thinking about the power of words in the context of our own temple. How angry, hurt and disappointed people can say things that rather than heal, add pain to insult. How words spoken in haste, without thought or lack of words altogether can lead to unexpected and unwanted outcomes.

I've been thinking a lot about words in the context of their negative power, But I am a rabbi, it is my role to try and see good wherever it can be found, and so as I feel a sense of despair sneaking in, I find that I must remind myself also of the goodness that can be found in uplifting words, in words of love and encouragement.

After all, some of the most beautiful and powerful moments and memories we have are connected to words; the first time our child said Mama or Aba, the first time we found ourselves saying "I love you", that moment she said "Yes", I will, or when he said, "yes I do." And those last, last sacred loving words whispered into the ear of a loved one as they closed their eyes in peace.

So, I want us to begin this new year with a renewed understanding of both the negative and positive power our words have. I want us to pay better attention to how we use words this coming year.

And it makes sense to do this today, as we celebrate the birthday of our world, for it is not a coincidence that the most powerful use of words ever was the creation of the world.

The world itself came into existence through the power of words.

“And God said, 'Let there be light'—and there was light”

This act of divine utterance underscores the fundamental principle that words can manifest reality.

The creative power of words is magical, really magical.

When magicians want to create an illusion, to have a rabbit or a pigeon magically appear from a hat - they say “Abra Ka’dabra” - I wonder how many of them know that this combination of words is actually a mispronunciation of “אברא כדברא” - the Aramaic saying for “I will create with words.” אברא כדברא

Words are powerful, they are magical but above all, in Jewish tradition words are holy.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that: “Judaism, like other religions, has holy places, holy people, sacred times, and consecrated rituals. But that what made Judaism different, is that it is supremely a religion of holy words.”

What exactly does he mean by that?

I think he is trying to tell us that in a religion in which God is invisible, in which God cannot be represented in images. In such a religion words have a unique power, for

it is through words that God reveals itself to us, and thus words become our means of revelation and holiness.

God spoke. He spoke to Adam, Noah, Abraham, to Moses. And to the prophets. If we listen carefully, God still speaks to us, although it is mostly, as the prophet Elijah describes - in the sound of silence.

And because words are holy it is no surprise that Leviticus 19:16 commands us, with no exceptions: "... to not go around as a slanderer among your people."

And the rabbis understand that as a commandment against all manners of negative speech, not just slander but also gossip, rumors and words can cast negativity.

They gave all these forms of negative speech one name - "*Lashon Hara*."

And the Talmud warns that *Lashon Hara* is akin to murder because it destroys a person's dignity and character.

As Jews we are commanded to use our words to bless each other, to uplift each other, to support, and bring positivity.

And if language itself is holy then *Lashon Hara*, the use of language to do that which is not holy, to hurt and harm, is not merely a minor offense. It is a desecration of the holy.

Our rabbis teach that *Lashon Hara* kills three people: the speaker, the listener, and the subject... but it's also an offense towards God.

In Psalm 101 there is a phrase in which God says, "I cannot dwell with him." The rabbis interpret this as God saying, "One who slanders his neighbor... him I cannot tolerate."

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism teaches that every person is allocated a set number of words to use for our entire lifetime.

Once we reach our quota, we depart from this world. Different studies show that on average we all speak 6000 words a day (I wonder if it's an average between married Jewish man who don't speak and their wives who use 12000 words a day)

I find this imagery - of a limited number of words per person - very compelling. How would our everyday speech change if we embraced this idea? If we truly didn't know how many words we have left? Would we spend those words sharing gossip we just heard? Would we spend them calling other people who don't agree with us names? Would we use them to communicate feelings? Needs? Explain our emotions?

How are you using our allotted words?

Do you speak to encourage or to crush, to spread positivity or negativity, to express gratitude or complain, to abuse or to heal?

This teaching of the Baal Shem Tov reminds me of the story of a man who joined a monastery, where monks are only allowed to say three words every five years.

At the end of the first five years the man stood up and said, "Need new shoes" At the end of the second five years, he stood up and said, "Need new mattress"

After fifteen years had passed, he stood up and said, "I am quitting!" The Abbot said, "It's probably for the best. You've done nothing but complain since you got here."

Let's all make a pledge to try and use our words carefully - and it has to be a conscious decision because like breathing, language seems to come naturally to us. It seems as if it has always been with us.

Just as we often don't pay attention to our breath, we allow words to slip out without thought and intention.

Let's PAY ATTENTION to our words. Let's remember that one word can make a huge difference in a sentence.

How different does it sound when you say:

"My kids versus our kids,"

"My house versus our house,"

"My plans versus our plans,"

Which sounds more loving to you?

What happens when you use “never” or “always?” When you say you **never** help in the house, or you **always** complain. Can we say the same thing without always and never?

How an apology sounds so different with or without the word “but”. I’m sorry versus “I’m sorry...but I...”

Let’s pay attention to our words. Let’s choose them wisely.

To conclude, I want to share with you a teaching from my mentor and colleague, Rabbi Amy Schwartzman - she introduced a spiritual practice in her congregation that I hope we can embrace as well.

Please don’t worry -for this spiritual practice you don’t need a special set of clothes, a yoga mat, or a tallis. This is a discipline that each of us can claim, no matter the depth of our Jewish knowledge or our belief in or questions about God.

This practice is based on the teaching of Rabbi Salanter who is known as the father of the Mussar movement. He suggests that before speaking we pause and ask ourselves three questions:

Is it true? Am I sure that what I am about to say is accurate? Sometimes less is more. If I am not sure, is there a way I can learn more, understand more, before I say what I have to say.

Is it kind? Could what you are trying to say or how you say it be interpreted as being rude, mean and judgmental, as disrespectful or insubordinate? And even if what you have to say is unpleasant and hard, is there still a kind way to say it?

Is it necessary? Are you about to say something that will lead to a positive interaction rather than a statement that will lead to a dead end in the conversation? And is this the right time to say what you want to say? Remember what Benjamin Franklin said: “Remember not only to say the right thing in the right place, but far more difficult still, “to leave unsaid the wrong word at the most tempting moment.”

When you are about to call all the people who vote differently than you racists or crazy - communists or deplorables. Ask yourself:

Is it true? Are they really all racist or communists?

Is it kind? Will what you say make them want to engage in conversation? Have a relationship?

Is it necessary? Will it change anybody’s mind?

When you are about to tell six million Jews if they are good Jews or bad Jews based only on who they vote for. Stop, ask yourself:

Is it true? Is there anyone who can give grades on one's Jewishness?

Is it kind? Does calling someone a bad Jew make you a kind Jew or a mean Jew?

Is it necessary? Is there more than one way to be a Jew who adds positively to the world?

When you are arguing with someone you truly care about and bring up a mistake they made in the past, when you point out a weakness they display, time after time:

Is it true?

Is it kind?

Is it necessary?

Before you make that very public post on social media, the one that can never be retrieved...pause to ask yourself:

Is it true?

Is it kind?

Is it necessary?

When you walk up to your rabbi after services on Friday to complain that the chocolate cake at the Oneg was too dry ask yourself:

Is it true?

Is it kind?

Is it necessary?

And maybe it's time that we start reading this poem to our little kindergarten kids- Ruby Redfort writes:

“Sticks and stones may break my bones,
but words can also hurt me.

Stones and sticks break only skin,
while words are ghosts that haunt me.

Slant and curved the word swords fall,
it pierces and sticks inside me.

Bats and bricks may ache through bones,
but words can mortify me.

Pain from words has left its scar, on mind and heart that's tender.

Cuts and bruises have long been healed, it's words that I remember.”

Is it true?

Is it kind?

Is it necessary?

What a simple and helpful, clear and compelling guideline.

Yihyu l'razon em-ray fee, v'hegyon li-bi lifanecha.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be true, be kind, be necessary and be acceptable unto – my friends, my family, my community, and of course, my God.

Shana Tova