

On The Power Of Words: Kol Nidrei

There was once a great debate between the different parts of the body -- hands, feet, ears, eyes, and tongue -- as to which part had the most power. "We have the most strength because we are double," said the hands. "So are we, so are we," shouted the feet, and the ears and the eyes, echoing each other. "That is so much more in my favor," cried the tongue. "I am alone, and I am convinced I have more power than all of you twins." Every day, the arguments between them continued, and each member of the body claimed superiority over the others as fastest, the most important, the most useful, which could do the most harm and which the most good. Whatever claim one presented, the others rejected just as quickly countering with another claim.

Once, the King of Persia was stricken with a mysterious disease. His physicians examined him and announced: "Your majesty, the only thing that will heal you is impossible to obtain: It is the milk of a lioness." And they despaired of ever obtaining this necessary medicine. For what human can get close enough to a lioness to milk her? As a result, the King expected to die. But as a last resort he announced: "Whoever obtains a lioness' milk will be greatly rewarded."

In the Persian kingdom there lived a young man, a brave young man who loved the King and would do anything possible to save his life. He determined that he would get the milk of the lioness. When the parts of the human body heard about this young man's intended adventure they agreed that it would serve as a test of which part of the body was the most powerful in helping this young man with this impossible task- to deliver the milk of the lioness to the ailing King.

The young man knew he would never be able to approach a lioness directly, for a lioness who is nursing her young would feel threatened and attack immediately. So what did he do? When he found a lioness, he threw her some goat meat. He repeated this for several days. After a while she became used to him and he managed to get close to her and finally he was able to get close enough to milk her. This accomplished, he returned to the palace with the jug of precious milk.

On the way to the palace, the body's organs and limbs began to argue over who had contributed most to the young man's success. "**I** made it possible for him to see where to find the lion's den and where to throw the meat," claimed the eyes. "**I** made it possible for him to hear the lion's purr or roar, and to know when it would be safe to approach," argued the ears. "It was **we** who got him there and brought him safely back to the palace," insisted

the feet. "Thanks to **us**," cried the hands, "he was able to draw the milk from the lioness and carry it back to the King without spilling any of it."

In all the discussion, the tongue was ignored. "Wait, just wait," the tongue said under his breath. And aloud he said, "This episode is not over yet. What would you do without me?" But the others scorned him.

When the young man came before the King, the tongue took over: "Your Majesty, I have brought you what you asked for and what I set out to get *especially* for you- the prized milk **of a dog.**" "*What?*" cried the King angrily. "How dare you come before me with such insolence. Hang him and let his tongue hang out." And the tongue turned to the other parts and laughingly said "Don't you see that without me you have no power? I can *undo* with *one* word and in one *second* what all of you have worked so hard to do for days. Admit that I am *superior* to you all, and I'll save us all from death."

The eyes, ears, hands, and feet agreed, and quickly too. Then the young man spoke again, "O Majesty, in my haste I stumbled over my words. The milk is that of a *lioness*. Drink it, Your Majesty, it will truly heal you. My life is at your mercy." There was something in the voice of the young man that moved the King to believe him. He drank the milk of the lioness and, as

predicted, recovered from his illness. Great was the reward to the young man from a thankful King. But greater still was the tongue's reward when the members of the body admitted, "Yes, you, "O tongue, hold the greatest power for good and evil." (Schram, *Jewish Stories, One Generation Tells Another*, 315-317)

The Book of Proverbs teaches this same message in a clear and direct way: "Death and Life are in the power of the tongue" (18:21). The lesson on the story, and from Proverbs, is clear: the tongue has great capacity to do good, or to do harm, and we must always be mindful that the words that we speak, and write, and type, and post, and tweet are not to be produced in haste, carelessly, without forethought.

As we gathered here this evening, we began the Yom Kippur experience focused on the power of our words. We begin our service declaring that our words have the power to be so important, so significant, so forceful and incriminating, that we wish them to be declared null and void.

Kol Nidrei ve-esarei va-haramei, v'konamei v'khinnueyei, v'kinnusei, u-sh'vu-ot....

All vows, renunciations, bans, oaths, formulas of obligation, and promises that we vow or promise to ourselves and to God from last Yom Kippur to this Yom Kippur, to next Yom Kippur (depending on the version of the prayer), we hereby retract. May they be all undone, repealed, cancelled, voided, annulled, and regarded as neither valid nor binding. Our vows should not be

considered vows; our renunciations shall not be considered renunciations; and our promises shall not be considered promises.

We begin Yom Kippur thinking back to the times we shouldn't have said "that" outloud, or shouldn't have made "that" promise to someone. We begin Yom Kippur remembering the times we hit send too quickly in an email, or posted something online without forethought. We begin by reflecting on all of these words we spoke, lines that we typed, posts that we shared, and tweets that we sent out -- and we take them all back.

Perhaps they were said or written in haste. Perhaps they were said or written without forethought. We are sorry. Our words caused pain. Our words caused harm. Our powerful words were wielded without any forethought. We made promises we couldn't keep. Please, O compassionate and forgiving God, please erase the record, please delete the posts, tweets, emails from our record. Please let us begin again.

Some have suggested that the fact that the prayer asks God to erase our promises and vows signifies that our words were empty and meaningless in the first place. What do our words really count for if they can be discounted so quickly? But I would argue that it is just the opposite. Aware of our mortality, standing in Judgment before the Ruler of the universe- the first thing we say, like the kid who knows that he has been caught saying

something wildly inappropriate to their parents is: "I take it back." Please, God, let me take it back.

We want the promises annulled precisely because we realize the importance of our words and the fact that we misused them.

We understand this basic Jewish concept this from many different sources. From the very beginning of the Torah when we learn that words have the power to create:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ-לֹהִים יְהי־אֹר וַיְהי־אֹר:

And God said let there be light, and there was light (1:3). God spoke the world into being.

And also, from the very beginning, that words have the power to destroy.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ-לֹהִים לִנְחַם כָּל־בֶּשָׂר בְּאֵל לִפְנֵי כִי־מָלְאָה הָאָרֶץ חָמָס מִפְּנֵיהֶם וְהִנֵּנִי מַשְׁחִיתָם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ:

God said to Noah: I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth (6:13).

Words are so important to our tradition that the Ten Commandments are not even referred to as commandments. What do we call the Ten

Commandments in Hebrew? *Aseret Ha dibrot* The ten utterances; the ten things that were spoken. Notice that they are not referred to as mitzvot, commandments in the Hebrew. Why? Perhaps because by referring to them

as **words** that were spoken, we are emphasizing the power of God's word. And by extension, as beings made in God's image, the power of our own words.

Rabbi and Psychologist Ruth Durchslag points out that the Talmud is even more precise about the enduring power of our words. In Bava Metzia 58b, she describes how *the Rabbis compare financial and verbal damages. Rabbi Yochanan considers verbal wrongdoing more serious than cheating a person in business. Rav Shmuel bar Nachmani explains: in commercial damages, restitution is possible; there is no easy restitution for words.* (Hoffman, Kol Nidrei, 139)

And so, we come before God on this Erev Yom Kippur, we stand before our Sovereign understanding that there is no easy restitution for the words we fling about so carelessly. We stand before our Sovereign, before a symbolic court no less, with every Torah taken out to emphasize that in the weight of this moment, we want to start over.

We want the record erased. We want to take back the words that were *spoken* in haste, the words that were *written* in haste, the words that were posted, shared, typed, or tweeted in haste.

With all of this emphasis on words, and the power of words, as we approach this day of forgiveness, we ask God to help us find the strength, the forethought, and the wisdom to use our words with as much care, thought and consideration as possible. We must ask forgiveness from those who we have directly offended with our words. That was the work of the last few weeks, and will remain the work moving forward.

But tonight, as we begin Yom Kippur, we are asking God to help us look inward, to not only help us gain insight into our own past shortcomings when it comes to the use of our words, but also to help us discover the strength within to live up to our best selves as we move forward. As we beg for the record to be erased, as we pray for a chance to begin again, how can we make sure in the days and weeks and year ahead we are more deliberate and careful with our words?

Our tradition has volumes and volumes of wisdom on this subject. For tonight, I offer the following three pieces of practical guidance, as explained by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin:

1. Rabbi Yossi taught, "I never made a statement for which I would have to turn around and check whether the person about whom I was speaking was present (Arachin 15b). Rabbi Abraham Twerski [therefore] advises, "...A reliable rule of thumb is to ask: 'Do I need to look behind me before I say it?' If the answer is yes, do not say it."¹

¹ **Telushkin, A Code Of Jewish Ethics 348**

2. Choose one day, perhaps the first day of each month, as Speak No Evil Day. For twenty-four hours, guard your tongue from saying anything negative about or to anyone. And on other days of the month, choose a two-hour period each day when you will be particularly careful to speak no *lashon hara* (gossip). Some people agree to do this, then jokingly resolve to carry out their commitment between 3:00-5:00A.M. It is best to schedule the two hours during a period that includes a meal, for this is when many of us are likely to speak lashon hara.²

3. Before saying something negative about another, ask yourself three questions:

- Even if what I am saying is completely true, is it fair?
- Does the person I am speaking to need to know this?
- Is there positive information about the person's actions and/or motives that I am omitting?³

Part of the challenge of this entire venture of watching our words, guarding our tongue, deliberating before we speak, is the speed with which we communicate today, both verbally and virtually. Our communication does not lend itself so easily to making careful and thoughtful choices. In fact, particularly in our virtual spaces, information is designed to be shared in an instant.

² **Telushkin, A Code Of Jewish Ethics, 348**

³ **Telushkin, A Code Of Jewish Ethics, 395**

The problem is, that when it comes to watching our words, we need more than an instant. The question I pose to us all: can we be brave enough, and self-disciplined enough, to be counter-cultural the next time (likely in the next 24 hours) that we are tempted to speak or type words that, at best, might not be well thought out, or worse, might even be harmful?

As we gather on this sacred evening, cognizant of the power of our words, pleading for a chance to begin again, let us remember one final piece of advice shared by Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement who said this about the spoken word:

Not everything that is thought should be said. And not everything that is said, should be repeated, and not everything that is repeated, should be remembered.

Adonai who remembers all of the words that we said, all of the words that we wrote, and all of the words that we shared during this past year, be with us as we strive to do better in this coming year. May the vows that we made in haste, the words that we shared all too quickly, angrily, rashly, and thoughtlessly, be set aside from our permanent record so that we can start once again with a clean slate, a blank page. On this most sacred evening, as we turn to a fresh page in our Book of Life, may we be reminded to wield one of our most precious gifts, the gift of written and spoken communication, with forethought, intention, and care.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah, May you have a meaningful day and an easy fast.