

Al Het She-Hatanu b'Dibur Peh- For The Sin Of Thoughtless Speech

Have you ever noticed just how much of our prayer service is written in the plural? With almost any blessing we say, we hear the word “eloheynu,” **our** God. As we stand up and confess our misdeeds we begin: *Asham**nu**, Bagad**nu**, Gazal**nu**, Dibar**nu** Dofi...**we** have trespassed, **we** have betrayed, **we** have stolen, **we** have slandered.* What is all of this “we,” we think to ourselves? **I** didn't do any of that! Al Chet She-**Hantanu**, we continue in the next, longer confessional. For the missed marks, for the misdeeds that **we** have done throughout the year.

We, together, all of us.

There is an **insistence** from the poetry of our prayer that we are all in this together. Even if we weren't directly responsible for some of these mistakes, our liturgy argues we are still culpable. It is an echo of the famous line from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, when explaining his involvement in the protest against the Vietnam War. He said:

“...in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, **some are guilty, while all are responsible**. I did not feel guilty as an individual American for the bloodshed in Vietnam, but I felt deeply responsible.” ¹

¹ Heschel, Moral Grandeur And Spiritual Audacity, *The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement*

I wonder if today any of us could honestly say we feel deeply responsible anymore, for anyone or anything beyond our own, individual, personal concerns? When terrible things happen in the political arena, for example, do we feel a sense of responsibility? Or are we so angry, so frightened, so frustrated, that we allow those emotions to cloud our judgment, and the responsibility that our Jewish faith demands of us?

A few weeks ago, on the eve of September 11th, conservative political activist Charlie Kirk was assassinated when giving a speech at Utah Valley University. Much ink has been spilled over Charlie Kirk's murder in the past few weeks, including many people who have focused less on this horrible act of violence, but instead on their disagreement with Kirk's perspectives.

The morning after the assassination, media personality Sarah Tuttle Singer wrote the following:

I've noticed people — even some I admire — reacting to Charlie Kirk's death with a kind of glee. And I understand why some folks despise him. He caused real harm in communities I care about, and his rhetoric often deepened division rather than healing it. To acknowledge that is not unfair; it's honest.

But here is the paradox: he also has a family. He has two little kids. They are small, still growing into the world, and they will now grow up without a father. If we condemn him for lacking empathy, what does it mean when we abandon it ourselves in the wake of his death?

We don't have to sanctify him. We don't even have to mourn him. But we can resist celebrating the loss of a human life, if only to preserve our own humanity.

It's easy to meet cruelty with cruelty, mockery with mockery. It is harder — and more urgent — to hold on to compassion even when it feels undeserved.

Sarah Tuttle Singer concluded with the following thought:

*"That is the paradox I'm sitting with today: the recognition of the damage Charlie Kirk caused for many people I love, **and** the refusal to lose my own empathy in response."*

How do we hold onto compassion even when we feel it is undeserved? How do we avoid allowing anger to poison our speech? How do we engage with others even if and when we fear that their words will lead to violence?

Just listen to these phrases from the al chet, which should haunt us, as individuals and as members of a collective society:

עַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטְאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּדַעַת וּבְמַרְמָה וְעַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטְאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּדַבּוּר פֶּה

We have sinned against you knowingly and deceitfully, and we have sinned against you by **the way we talk....**

עַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטְאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּחֵזֶק יָד וְעַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטְאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּחִלּוּל הַשֵּׁם

We have sinned against you by **resorting to violence** (lit. the strength of our hand), and we have sinned against You by public desecration of Your name.

עַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטְאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּטִמְאַת שְׁפָתַיִם וְעַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטְאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּטַפְשׁוֹת פֶּה

We have sinned against You through **foul speech**, and we have sinned against You through **foolish talk**.

עַל חַטָּא שְׁחָטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּלִצּוֹן וְעַל חַטָּא שְׁחָטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּלִשׁוֹן הָרַע

We have sinned against You by **clever cynicism**, and we have sinned against You by **speaking ill of others**.

וְעַל חַטָּא שְׁחָטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּשִׁנְאָת חֲנָם ...

We have sinned against you through **baseless hatred**.

עַל חַטָּא שְׁחָטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּתַשׁוּמַת יָד וְעַל חַטָּא שְׁחָטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּתַמְהוֹן לִבָּב

We have sinned against You by betraying trust, and we have sinned against you by succumbing to confusion.

In this time of great division and distrust, this time of fear and uncertainty, these verses just leapt out at me. The myriad descriptions of the different ways we cause harm through the way we speak to one another. Foul speech, speaking ill of others, baseless hatred...and all of it leads us to a place where there is no trust among citizens; no trust between citizens and our elected officials; and often even a lack of trust between family and friends. We are all suffering from tremendous confusion when it comes to remembering basic manners, respect, and the proper way to behave.

As I have said many times, the term “chet” is an archery term that describes when a marksman takes aim at a target and “misses the mark.” I think it's fair to say that as a society today, we are collectively way off target. As Jews who take these matters seriously, we must acknowledge the ways we have allowed ourselves and others to veer so far off course. We must acknowledge the lack of basic respect and dignity, the lack of civility, and the hostility that we express, when speaking to someone on “the other side.”

Ask yourself how you reacted when you heard that news about Charlie Kirk? Did you say, or even think, some version of “well, he deserved it for his views.” And if so – **really**? Judaism allows and even encourages us to challenge one another with different ideas. We are not afraid to speak, even with strong language, in opposition to one another. But it must be done with respect and consideration, with recognition that all human beings, regardless of their political beliefs or social concerns, are made in God's image.

It's so easy to ignore opportunities for respectful disagreement, and instead get sucked into the blame game, pointing fingers and absolving ourselves from responsibility? “It's the fault of our leaders! It's the fault of the politicians! It's the fault of social media! It's the fault of the Republicans, MAGA, the Democrats, the Far Left, the progressives, the conservatives, etc...” We can blame all sorts of people, but at the end of the day our tradition urges “*B'makom she'ein ish*,

hishtadel lehiyot ish," in a place where no one is stepping up, we have to be the ones to step up.

We, all of us, have to remember that our words, the ways we speak to each other, have consequences. And on Yom Kippur, we cannot get away with blaming others. We won't get off that easily today.

על חטא נשחטאנו—It's our fault.

Our American society is not well. This assassination of Charlie Kirk is, distressingly, just one in a long list, as political commentator Ezra Klein summarized:

In 2020, a plot to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, the governor of Michigan, was foiled by the F.B.I. In 2021, a mob stormed the Capitol in an effort to overturn the result of the election and pipe bombs were found at the Democratic and Republican National Committee headquarters. In 2022, a man broke into Nancy Pelosi's home, intending to kidnap the then-speaker of the House. She was absent, but the intruder assaulted her 82-year-old husband, Paul, with a hammer, fracturing his skull. In 2024, Donald Trump was nearly assassinated. That same year, Brian Thompson, the chief executive of UnitedHealthcare, was murdered.

In 2025, Molotov cocktails were thrown into the home of Gov. Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania during Passover. Melissa Hortman, the former House speaker of Minnesota, and her husband were murdered, and State Senator John Hoffman and his wife severely injured, by a gunman. And now,...Kirk, the founder of Turning Point USA, was gunned down during a speech at Utah Valley University.

This is out of control.

Just yesterday morning, Michelle Goldberg's OpEd in the NY Times focused on James Talarico, a member of the Texas house of Representatives who is running for a seat in the U.S. Senate. After Charlie Kirk was killed, Talarico said something that I have heard from so many of you, on all sides of the aisle, this past year:

There is something broken in this country. Our politics are broken. Our media are broken. Even our relationships with each other feel broken."

He continued:

"The billionaires who own the social media algorithms, who own the cable news networks, who own the politicians fighting on our screens, they want us at each other's throats," It's been more than 10 years of this kind of politics — politics as blood sport, politics as professional wrestling. It tears families apart. It ends friendships and it leaves us all feeling terrible all of the time."

And yet, as a religious person himself, Talarico still has faith:

If your heart is breaking right now, it means you still have a heart," he said. "It means you're still human. Protect that. Trust that. That is what will get us out of all of this."

Everyone here still has a heart, and I know so many of them are breaking. That is why, on this holiest of days, surrounded by our liturgy as we must confront our responsibility in all of this.

As horrible as these public acts of hate and violence are, and as horrible as the politicians who are screaming at each other on social media and calling each other names like school-children seem, it's easy for us to consider ourselves

blameless. But today we all must push back on these initial instincts, and instead consider *our role* in all of this; *our culpability and our responsibility*. Not only what we might have said, done, supported, or promoted that contributed to this broken culture. But also what each one of us can and must do differently moving forward.

An example of the dangers of speech that hits home for us as Jews: when we see people protesting against Israel; when we hear people chanting "From the River to the Sea," or "Globalize the Intifada," one of the reasons why we get upset is because we know that these words lead to violence against Jews, like the May killing of two Israeli Embassy staffers in DC. **We know** that words have power, and that they are not to be thrown around lightly. This is exactly why the many problematic ways we might speak feature so prominently in the longer vidui, the al het.

I know that I have spoken about this before. I gave a sermon about civil discourse early in President Obama's first term, and have repeated it a few times since then. They say that rabbis only have a few sermons that they give differently, year after year, with the same topic. Perhaps this is one of mine. But I honestly can think of few things more important, more dangerous, more troubling right now than the ways that people in our country are speaking to each other. No problems can ever get solved by shouting, screaming, and

demeaning one another. Not in a marriage, not in a friendship, and not in a country.

If you find yourself, as I am speaking, shaking your head and engaging in “*what aboutism*,” ask yourself why that is. I know there are people whose ideas you and I might find detestable. I know there are individuals whose politics we simply cannot understand. But our tradition obliges us to take a step back, and remember that even if others are missing the mark, we must consider carefully the ways that we speak to them, the ways that we speak about them, and the ways that we engage with them.

All of the yelling and mutual disdain for people on “the other side” did not emerge in a vacuum. One of the reasons for all of the toxicity, the anger, and the violence is because many people are, quite simply and sometimes even understandably, afraid. And when people are afraid, the instinct to protect and defend oneself can lead us to lash out, verbally and otherwise.

But even when our fear is justifiable and understandable, we are reminded over and over again in Judaism to be courageous, to hold onto hope, even in times of uncertainty. This is actually one of the main themes of the psalm that we say during this time of year, Psalm 27. This Psalm focuses on the author's fear of enemies, war, and harm, but concludes with the words:

קִּוְיָ אֵל דַּ חַזַק וְיִאֲמָץ לְבָבְךָ וְקִוְיָ אֵל דַּ

Hope in Adonai, be strong, take courage, and hope in Adonai.

Fear is normal, but we must never give in to our fear completely; we must not allow ourselves to be paralyzed. Sure, many of us would prefer just to look away from all of the challenges in our country and in our world. To stay home, turn off the TV, put away our phones, and hide under the covers. Understandable, perhaps, but not productive. We must hold onto hope, and then we must move forward, striving to make a difference, in small ways and large ways, beginning with the most basic foundational element of a society: the way that we interact with one another. In some senses, we have to go back to those social skills that we learned in Kindergarten about listening, sharing, saying we are sorry. And one of my favorites that my mother used to say to me: “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it.”

On this Yom Kippur, let us pledge to cleanse our speech from the hatred and vitriol that we see all around us- both in content, and in tone. Remember when parents or teachers threatened to wash our dirty mouths out with soap? In a sense, that’s what our tradition is asking of us today: to wash our mouths out with soap, to cleanse ourselves, and to begin again.

Ashamnu, **we are guilty**: of hateful speech, of failing to listen, of playing the “blame game,” of accepting false binaries. But if we have the power to make mistakes, we also have the power to correct mistakes. If we have the power to divide, to foment anger and resentment, and to sow the seeds of division through our speech, we also have the power to unite, to promote opportunities for peace and forgiveness, and to create opportunities for unity and rebuilding, starting with our speech.

I know this may sound hopelessly naïve, *but we must not give up*. The more stuck we get in the quicksand that is our modern day polarization, the more we must double down on our efforts to get “un-stuck.” There are lives, literally, at stake.

Where to actually begin? A few practical suggestions. First, as I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, just be nice! To everyone you encounter, every day, in person and online.

Next, remember that it is ok to be uncomfortable. I will give you a small, somewhat quaint, Jewish example from a few summers ago at our summer camp, Camp Yavneh.

Late one evening, I was invited to be a part of a group of rabbis sharing thoughts on various Jewish topics. There was one more classically trained

Orthodox Rabbi, one Rabba (a female Orthodox rabbi, a recent phenomenon in the modern Orthodox world), a Reform rabbi, and me. On some issues we were on the same page, and on others we had very different takes. We shared. We listened. We agreed. We disagreed. But more significant than what each rabbi had to say about each specific issue, we found a deep connection in a room full of Jewish seekers, all of us, looking to bring a deeper sense of meaning into our lives and into the lives of our communities. We were not as different as we might have appeared on the surface to others, or even to ourselves. But in order for us to understand our shared purpose, **we had to make a conscious choice**; to put the things we share before our differences.

This is something critically important that we all need to do as Americans. We need to choose and commit to speaking to others with respect and care, no matter how much we disagree. We need to decide that we are going to put aside the hot coals of anger that we are ready to throw at our neighbors, because they are really just burning our own hands. We need to decide that we are better than this, that we will just have to agree to disagree about some things, and that we can get uncomfortable without demonizing one another.

Maimonides famously taught:

The middle way.... is the line that a person should follow in all of their tendencies. If a person has distanced him or herself to the extreme, he/she should remove him/herself to the extreme end of the other way

and follow that point up a long way until he or she returns to the good way- which is the middle standard, in each and every tendency.²

So many people feel pulled to one extreme or another in society. This year, on this most sacred day of the year, I want to invite all of us to make the conscious choice to turn away from the extremes, and to move with intention and commitment back to the middle. I invite each one of us to make the brave choice to purposely engage with those who we are sure we totally disagree with. And I want to challenge each of us to do it face-to-face, with real human interaction, with members of our families, among friends, and with neighbors and community members of different backgrounds, beliefs, and ideas.

I don't mean that we need to engage people who just want to scream at us and insist on being right- that is not productive. But we can and must commit to starting with those who are willing to listen, and we must be equally willing to listen to them. And we need to engage others from the standpoint of values, not politics.

The point here is that **we have a choice**. With every interaction, we have a choice. As Jews, right now, particularly in certain spaces, I understand that this is incredibly difficult, and perhaps even in some spaces impossible. Nevertheless,

² Mishneh Torah, Human Dispositions 2:2

we can't give up, and we must do our best to try to speak with, and listen to, those with whom we can try to find common cause.

This is the only way to do teshuvah and to return to the best of our humanity.

This is the only way to return to a path that might lead to a better future – for us and for our children and grandchildren.

None of this is to say that we can't have our convictions. But we have a choice in terms of how we express them. We can choose to shout, literally or digitally; or we can choose to speak softly, and to listen. We can choose to build walls, or we can choose to build bridges. But if we, as people of faith, do not actively champion the message of our shared humanity, of our shared frailty, of our collective responsibility – then the walls of our societies, of our communities, and even of our families will continue to come tumbling down. Like our sages taught about the destruction of the second Temple, it is *sinat hinam*, *senseless hatred*, that brings about destruction.

It is time to come to our senses. Now. Before it is too late. We owe it to ourselves, and we owe it to future generations. So make that lunch date with that family member or friend who you haven't spoken to in recent years because you are convinced they have been "brainwashed by the other side." Go out to a meal, talk about what's important to you and what worries you, and then LISTEN.

Come to synagogue, and join us for Shabbat kiddush, a perfect place for gathering with, listening to, and building relationships with community members who may see things differently.

This is not about “changing minds,” this is about “opening hearts.” Ashamnu, Bagadu, Dibarnu Dofi- we have sinned towards our fellow human beings, we have abused them with our feelings and demonstrations of contempt, we have spoken horribly towards one another. Sometimes out-loud. Sometimes in private. Sometimes on-line. And other times in our hearts. It is time for each of us, and all of us, to engage in *teshuvah*, to turn around, to switch directions, to begin again.

We can make that choice.

We must make that choice.

Otherwise we, as God's flock, will eventually forget that we all share the same Shepherd, and we, like the goat we read about in this morning's Torah portion, will lead one another right off the cliff.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah, May this be a meaningful Yom Kippur for all of us.