

“A Call for *Lashon Hatov*”
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Temple Ohabei Shalom, Brookline, Massachusetts

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As we mark the anniversary of our world and appeal to be inscribed for a good year, let us listen to the story of the first day of the beginning.

When God began to create heaven and earth –
the earth being unformed and void,
with darkness over the surface
of the deep and a wind
from God sweeping over the water –
God said, “Let there be light”;
and there was light.
God saw that the light was good,
and God separated
the light from the darkness.
God called the light Day,
and the darkness
God called Night.
And there was evening
and there was morning,
a first day.

Whenever I study this passage with my high schoolers, I ask them to identify the first creative act in history. Usually one student answers: “It was the creation of heaven and earth itself.” “No,” says another. “It was the creation of light. “But the darkness came before the light, Replies a third student, so God must have created darkness first.” The students proceed to debate one another when a fourth student raises his hand to offer a different, and fascinating, answer. The first act of creation wasn’t making light or darkness, or the heaven and the earth. It was the act of *speaking*. First God spoke. And only then the earth became illuminated.

It’s an amazing insight, is it not? This wondrously complex and beautiful world in which we live – of mammals and reptiles, of grasslands and taiga and forests, of mountains and fjords and beaches – none of them would exist without language. Things as simple as words can build an entire universe. The spoken word is the irreducible building block of our world – no less than an atom is. Just like atoms, words can build entire worlds.

Words can build people too. Who among us hasn’t been strengthened by a compliment? Who hasn’t been heartened by the simple words “I love you?” Who hasn’t been lifted by a Psalm? Or been encouraged by a note of congratulations? Or been cheered by a good-natured joke?

But the opposite is true as well. As much as words can create, so too can they destroy. As Rabbi Dov Elkins puts it, words are like diamonds. They can shine with the most perfect beauty. Or they can cut the thickest glass and destroy it.”

That old rhyme about sticks and stones breaking bones, but names never hurting—It’s not true! Were the words in Martin Luther’s screed called “On the Jews and Their Lies” innocuous? What about the “No Irish Need Apply” signs that once pervaded Yankee Boston? Words shape attitudes and attitudes influence deeds... even to the point of determining who shall live and who shall die.

What is true for communities is also true for individuals. It happened nearly 21 years ago, but I can still remember the howling glee of some of my college dorm-mates when Mookie Wilson's groundball rolled through the legs of a certain Red Sox first baseman in the 10th inning of the sixth game of the World Series. The hit capped a three-run rally and drove in the winning run for the Mets, forcing a seventh game and allowing the Mets to clinch the Series. Less well-known, until recently, was the long-term effect of the vitriol heaped by the media upon that first baseman, Bill Buckner.

Two decades later, the pain ran so deep that that Buckner nearly turned down an invitation to throw out the first ball at Fenway. At an emotional news conference, he lamented the ridicule to which he and especially his family were subjected. “I don't think that in society in general that's the way we should operate,” he said. “What are you teaching kids? Not to try because if you don't succeed then you're going to be buried... [?]” Such is the enduring effect of the *lashon hara* we call ridicule.

Now imagine for a moment how different things could have been if instead the prevailing reaction was, “To err is human, to forgive divine?” How much better would one man and his family have felt! How much pain they would have been spared! To his amazement, when last April Bill Buckner did walk to the pitcher’s mound at Fenway Park, he received a four-minute ovation.

A few years ago there was a movie that all too painfully reminded us of the consequences of destructive words. For the words of one senator, Joseph McCarthy, inaugurated a reign of terror by accusation not seen in our country since perhaps the Salem Witch Trials. Careers were wrecked. Reputations were ruined, all by having one five-syllable word attached to your name: “Un-American.” What McCarthy did our tradition would call *Motzi shem ra* – defamation. It is so serious that our sages equate it with murder. One causes physical destruction, the other spiritual destruction. One kills the body. The other kills the soul.

In the current presidential campaign, it was recently reported by *Haaretz* that Jewish voters in Florida and Pennsylvania have been receiving telephone calls by individuals posing as poll-takers. The callers reportedly ask loaded questions, the tone of which implies that Barack Obama is hostile to Israel. For example, one question asks, “Would you reconsider your choice if you learned that Obama had given money to the Palestine Liberation Organization?” How about if “the leader of Hamas hoped for his victory?” And: What if the president of Iran supported Obama?” The aim of these false hypotheticals is all too transparent: to dupe people who love Israel and worry about her security into believing that an Obama presidency would pose an existential threat to the Jewish

state. Similarly, Nicholas Kristof wrote in the NYT last week that “almost one-third of voters ‘know’ that Barack Obama is a Muslim or that he could be.” All of these allegations are false.

In rabbinic nomenclature, *motzi shem ra* is but one member of the family broadly known as *lashon hara*, or evil speech. Within that family *Motzi shem ra* claims many siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins. There is, of course, Cousin Scoffing. Scoffing is married to Rumors. Their son is named Ridicule. Ridicule’s fraternal twin is called Contempt.

* * *

Did you know that nearly a quarter of the 45 offenses to which we confess on Yom Kippur are committed with words? *Al Chet she’chatanu l’fanecha ... for the sin that we have committed against you:*

- by speaking recklessly — ONE
- through offensive talk — TWO
- by taking vain oaths — THREE
- by deriding our parents and teachers — FOUR
- by public desecration of Your Name — FIVE
- by being foul-mouthed — SIX
- through foolish talk — SEVEN
- by scoffing — EIGHT
- through slander — NINE
- by idle chatter — TEN
- through gossip — ELEVEN

Eleven. Of the 45 sins in the *Al Cheyt*, 11 of them are committed with words. Of hundreds of muscles in the human body, just one – the tongue – accounts for a quarter of our misdeeds.

There is a Midrash – a rabbinic legend – that tells of Rabban Gamliel instructing his assistant, Tobi, to go to the market and bring back the best cut of meat he could find. Tobi obliged and brought back an animal tongue. The next day, Gamliel ordered Tobi to do the opposite – to go to the market and bring back the worst cut of meat he could find. Again Tobi obliged, and again he returned with a tongue. On seeing the tongue, Gamliel grew confused and asked for an explanation. His servant answered: “There’s nothing worse than a bad tongue and nothing better than a good one.”

I love this Midrash because it actually suggests a solution to the problem of *lashon hara*. The solution is, simply, to engage in *lashon hatov*—good—even beautiful—speech.

The solution is also available at the ready. It does not cost any money. You do not have to go to the gym for an hour a day to obtain it. You do not have to go back to school for it. You don’t have to wait six weeks for it. It just requires us to remember.

Meanwhile, we might just limit our intake of the other stuff. By letting others know we're not interested in negative speech. By changing the channel when certain programs come on the TV, by leaving the tabloid alone at the supermarket checkout.

Since my arrival two months ago at TOS, I have had many conversations about this community. Something I hear consistently is how warm, kind, accepting, real and inclusive we are.

What they do not say, but what I think is the corollary to those comments, is that we're not cold, we're not judgmental, we're not critical, and we don't speak badly of one another. I find it truly one of the most beautiful aspects of this sacred community and indeed it is a chief reason I stand here before you tonight. I want this community, as I know you do, to be a sanctuary imbued always with acceptance and love. And that acceptance and love begins with our creative acts every day.

This day, Rosh Hashana, marks not only the dawn of Creation but also the beginning of our spiritual recreation. As we begin the 10 days of repentance, I pray we will begin with an acute mindfulness of how we employ language. In this New Year, as we begin the Days of Awe and begin the hard process of *teshuvah*, may each of us guard our tongues from evil and use our speech to heal, to comfort, to encourage and to love.

Y'hiyu l'ratzon imrei FINU, v'hegyon libeinu lifanecha, Adonai Tzrueinu v'goaleinu. May the words of our mouths be ever acceptable to You, our God, our strength and our redeemer.

Ken yehi ratzon.