

The Power of a Good Word

Draft by Rabbi Michael Schwab RH 5779/2018 for speaking purposes

As the summer ended on my staffing experience with USY Teen Poland Pilgrimage in the summer between my Junior and Senior year of college, I was helping to run the closing ceremonies, during which we made personal presentations to every participant, helping each of them to reflect on their amazing summer trip. Recounting those special moments reminded me how meaningful it had been to teach, counsel and inspire these wonderful teenagers to find relevance and meaning in Judaism and in Israel. When the last presentation had been made to the teens, my friend and fellow staff member, David, pulled *me* aside and he shared the following with me: “Schwab”, he said, “you need to be a rabbi. I can see the passion when you teach, the way the teens responded to you and the manner in which you lead all summer. I think this is what you were meant to be”. I was flattered, of course – how could you not be after someone says something like that to you? But I was also very surprised. I honestly hadn’t really thought about that as a serious option. Yes, I had a couple of rabbis in my extended family but

it wasn't a path I had imagined for myself. Regardless, looking back, it is clear that because of David's words a process in my brain was set in motion and things started to click and turn in my head even though on the surface I was still not convinced.

Several months later I had another discussion, this time with a housemate of mine: I lived with ten guys in large house off-campus my senior year – some were Jewish, some were not. The housemate in question was not, his name is Chris Delmasto. As background, all of my friends knew I was an observant Jew. In the house I had my own set of dishes and cookware and even made Shabbat dinner for whoever was around, which my housemates definitely loved, Jew and non-Jew alike. They saw me go to shul, celebrate the holidays, leave to lead Jewish conferences and generally busily participate in organized Jewish life. During this conversation Chris and my own respective religious backgrounds came up and I remember that Chris said the following to me: “Schwab, I never really thought about it but you are very lucky. Growing up, your religious tradition actually *respected* you, even though

you were a kid; *and* it *expected* a lot from you. You were asked to prepare all that stuff when you were 13 and speak in front of others and lead the congregation in prayer; you told me that you held leadership positions in your *youth* group which had conferences that you and the other teens *planned* and ran, and now you are *still* being asked to lead all sorts of activities for teens and fellow college students. I had almost none of that growing up and I am frankly, jealous. It was amazing that you had so much exposure to leadership and learning when you were young and it is really cool that you are now helping other Jewish kids to have that experience as well.”

Another unexpected conversation and another surprise. I was touched again, of course, but more importantly Chris’s kind and insightful comments helped me see my life differently. Because of *that* conversation I reflected on my upbringing and saw the Jewish background I had taken for granted in a new light – appreciating the great positive impact of the Jewish tradition on the creation of who I was *as a person*. I had been brought up to naturally feel that practicing

Judaism was simply what one did and what one *had* to do. I enjoyed it but never really thought about it too much. Now I saw it as a gift -- a gift that not only gave me a sense of spirituality, a rich culture of holidays, rituals and beliefs, as well as a set of ethical values, but also a gift that gave me tangible benefits as a human being and incredible leadership skills. Chris pointed out what I didn't even *think* to appreciate previously: the intrinsic desire of the Jewish community to cultivate the best of who I could be, from an early age, so that I could then make a positive impact on the world, as soon as possible. The reflections Chris shared with me changed my perspective on my Jewishness and helped shape how I saw my future involvement in Jewish life in a new and positive way.

And therefore once more, this time *overtly*, my brain started buzzing, reflecting and considering. And while it was not quite that simple, as nothing is, essentially after those two conversations I told the chair of the history department that I was putting a pause on my PhD program applications and I made plans to study in Israel instead, with

the idea that if I enjoyed my studies I would apply to rabbinical school in the following year. I didn't think it was a done deal, then, but as you can guess, the rest is, well history.

Two conversations, a dozen sentences, is what opened a pathway for me that I may never have walked. The thoughtfulness of other people and the positive power of their words literally changed my life. Those words, at least in part, are what enables me to stand before you today. And when I think about it *that way*, I am amazed at the power, of kind, intentional and wise *words* to change the course of a human life.

On the High Holidays our prayers, and sometimes our teachings, focus a lot on the power of words. However, often it is to warn us of their *negative* power – the hurt they can cause. Simply look at the *Al Het* prayer, when we tap our chests. We say, “For the sin of foul speech, for the sin of deceit, and for the sin of speaking ill of others, etc. etc.. In fact, eleven of the forty-three sins we confess have to do with evil speech, including tale-bearing and rumor. And it is 100% true: speech *can* have a very destructive power. But the holidays, and our tradition in

general, *also* venerate the incredible *positive* power of words: good, encouraging, loving, insightful and thoughtful words from someone who notices us and takes the time to share a reflection, praise, or advice that they believe expresses love and a sense of caring for us – like what David and Chris did for me, as well as so many others in my life, most especially my parents and now my wife.

It *is* true that we live in a society where there are *too many* words and our reaction to that phenomenon has sometimes been to say things like “talk is cheap”; “words are meaningless”; “actions are the only thing that matters”. But these phrases are only *half*-truths – only *some* talk is cheap. And only *some* words are meaningless. Others, however, are very, very powerful – some words are deeds in and of themselves, akin to an action, which changes life for the person saying them and receiving them.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once wrote a reflection on the double Torah portion *Tazria Metzora* from which we derive the prohibition against evil speech. He wrote: “From time to time couples come to see me

before their wedding. Sometimes they ask me [for] . . . advice . . . as to how to make their marriage strong. In reply I give them a simple suggestion. It is almost *magical* in its effects: They have to commit themselves to the following ritual. Once a day . . . they must each **praise the other** for something their partner has done *that* day, no matter how small: an act, a word, a gesture that was kind or sensitive or generous or thoughtful. The praise must be focused on that one act, not generalised. It must be genuine: it must come from the heart. And the other must learn to accept the praise. That is all they have to do. It takes at most a minute or two. But it *has* to be done, not sometimes, but every day.”

Sacks is making the claim here that above all else the key to the success of one of the most important relationships one could have, is found in the power of a positive word. He prescribes to each couple the requirement to take the time each day to reflect on the other, and to name out loud, in their presence, something they love, appreciate or value about what their life partner has done, said, or modeled that day.

He adjures us to believe that this one intentional moment of sharing some kind and thoughtful words can do wonders for any relationship.

He then goes on to say something more. Sacks claims to have learned this insight in an *unexpected* way, from a speech therapist named Lena Rustin who specializes in helping children who stammer. Rustin founded the Michael Palin Centre for Stammering in London, and she publicizes that she takes a unique approach to her work. Sacks describes the uniqueness of her method by saying that most speech therapists, at least with younger kids, focus on speaking and breathing techniques. As he wrote it, “Lena did more. She focused on *relationships*, and worked with parents, not just children. Her view was that to cure a stammer, she had to do more than help the child to speak fluently. She had to change the entire family environment. . . . If a child stammers, everyone in the family adjusts to it. Therefore if the child is to try to *lose* its stammer, *all* the relationships within the family will have to be renegotiated. Not only must the child change. So must everyone else.”

But how does one effect such a constructive change? For change

at such a fundamental level is always hard. “We tend to settle into patterns of behavior until we become comfortable - like a well-worn armchair”. The answer, Lena discovered, **were words of praise**. She told the families with which she was working that every day they must catch each member of the family doing something *right*, and say so: specifically, positively and sincerely. Every member of the family, but especially the parents, had to learn to give and receive praise. We humans are *amazing* at noticing and often calling out our loved ones for what we think they do *not* do well; What Rustin and Sacks are suggesting is that we learn to utilize the power of telling others what we *love* about who they are and what we *appreciate* about what they do.

Sacks writes, “Watching her at work I began to realise that she was creating, within each home, an atmosphere of mutual respect and continuous positive reinforcement. She believed that this would generate self-confidence . . . for *all* members of the family. The result would be an environment in which people felt safe to change and to help others do so likewise.” Sacks learned from Rustin the demonstrated power of

positive speech, when utilized with thought and intention. This speech not only could strengthen relationships, not only could aid in therapy, but could help an entire family change for the better.

And this *is* the project of these High Holidays: *teshuvah* and positive change. Yes, we need to identify our faults and where we have gone wrong, but we also need to be reminded that we are *worthy* of redemption, *capable* of great things and therefore are important to the world. Consequently it really does matter who we are and what we do – our lives *are* incredibly important and are actions do count. At the core of our ability to change, and to believe that such a change matters, is our capacity to believe that we are valuable, loved and significant. Once we understand that, we have the capability to make new choices and to improve.

So Lena Rustin's rule of praise is the positive flip-side of the prohibition against *lashon harah*– evil speech. It is "*lashon hatov*": good, positive, encouraging and compassionate speech. Speech that can

literally change the world. Our tradition certainly believes that, and so do I. And I think you should too.

In *Pirkei Avot*, our two thousand year old book of wisdom, it states, I quote: “*Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai* had five disciples, namely Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi Joshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yose the Priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh. **He used to recount their praise**”. In that last phrase, the Mishnah is actually telling us *how* to create positive relationships. In this case, the Mishnah models that a Sage will be most effective in teaching his students and training the next generation of leaders when he utilizes the power of focused praise. As the quote continues, “Eliezer [he said] was like a plastered well that never loses a drop. Joshua: happy is the one who gave him birth. Yose: a pious man. Shimon: a man who truly fears sin. Elazar: an ever-flowing spring.” About each he verbalized their particular strength and made them feel good about who they were, building their confidence and inspiring them to believe in themselves and their work.

Further, according to Maimonides, one of our greatest medieval philosophers and legal authorities, to speak in praise of people is part of a **Biblical** command, as he wrote: "It is a mitzvah from the Torah to 'Love your neighbor as yourself', meaning that we *must* speak of people in praise". It is positive commandment 206 in his code of law. This is not "kumbaya wisdom", this is about the behavioral, meaningful, intentional use of words to build relationships, generate confidence, facilitate constructive change and create meaningful tangible positive impact on our lives. This is about using a power that almost *all* of us possess; a power that can, if we decide to wield it, be used on a *daily* basis. It is a power that can be employed in almost *every* situation without regard to age, gender, socioeconomic status or any other distinction, in order to make a difference in the world and in the lives of those we love. There are many things in this world on which we cannot have significant or direct impact, but positive speech is a powerful tool that *can* change the life of a fellow human being and sometimes a whole community.

Let me give you a real life and local example. In the early 1980s James J. Liautaud was a trouble-making student from Arlington Heights at Elgin academy who ranked near the bottom of his High School class. He drank, he smoked and he skipped class. His teachers were so exasperated they even asked the principal, Mr. James Lyons, to expel him. No one believed he would make anything of himself. The principal would have *none* of it. Mr. Lyons told them *he* would work with young James. Years later, in a reflective statement, James, who is now better known as Jimmie John, the founder of a sandwich shop empire with over 800 stores, stated, “Mr. Lyons spent a lot of time with me and he would **say to me** over and over again that I could whatever I wanted in life. And by the time I was a senior I started to believe him”. Liautaud literally credits his principal’s repeated kind and encouraging words for getting him to graduation and for helping him to believe he could be successful in the future. As Mr. Lyons wrote, “When [Jimmy’s] academic world was sputtering, he came to my office in need of direction and purpose. . . I noticed in front of me, a gentle giant with an equally big heart. It was so clear to me that if Jimmy channeled his

tremendous energy and allowed his instincts to triumph over others' judgments, his achievement would be significant. . . ." Kind words when he needed them most. Jimmy's father was so encouraged by his son's turn-around, he lent him \$25,000 after high school graduation to start a business and Mr. Lyons turned out to be right, as Jimmie John Liautaud not only became a successful and famous businessman but also became a generous philanthropist who gives back to the community through his foundation and even with a great deal of his own personal time.

As it says in Proverbs, "Life and death are in the power of the tongue" (Prov. 18:21). The compassionate words of another can turn a life around. The Jewish tradition does not follow the saying "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." To the contrary, we believe in the real damage words can cause: emotional injuries that are as painful as physical ones, maybe even more so. But perhaps more importantly, consequently, we believe in the converse: the real power of words to heal, to save and to guide – changing the course

of a human life.

In Oxford anthropologist Robin Dunbar's famous book, *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* she argues that in nature, groups are held together by devoting a considerable amount of time to *building* relationships and alliances. Non-human primates do this by “grooming,” stroking and cleaning one another's skin (hence the expression, “If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours”). But this is very time-consuming and puts a limit on the size of the group one can build. Plus, it's application for us humans is . . . questionable at best 😊

Humans though developed *language* as a more effective form of grooming. You can only pet one animal at a time, but you can talk to several *people* at a time. The original specific form of language that bonds a group together, says Dunbar, was gossip - it was the most primal of all uses of speech. But the same insight that helps us understand why gossip became so prevalent can lead to profound wisdom about how we should relate to each other *instead* – that thoughtful intentional *positive* words should form the backbone community. Thus, our tradition, Rustin, and Dunbar all taught people to develop the habit of speaking well of

one another; to praise, daily, specifically and sincerely. This works not only for individuals, or in marriages and families, but also in communities, organizations and businesses. As Sacks concludes, “So: in any relationship that matters to you, deliver praise daily. Seeing and praising the good in people makes them *better* people, makes *you* a better person, and strengthens the bond between you. This really is a life-changing idea.”

As we enter into this High Holiday season and begin this period of introspection, it is important to remember that we are beloved to God and deserving of praise. Our invitation to return to God is simultaneously, therefore, an invitation to show love for ourselves and for each other. We do this through acts of kindness **and the way we speak to one another**. In a community such as ours, we express love by actually seeing in each other the beautiful traits we display and by encouraging each other with compassionate, thoughtful and uplifting words. In so doing we strengthen our relationships to one another and help each other grow in every way possible.

So, on this Rosh Hashanah morning, let us each make a decision to begin the spreading of *Lashon HaTov*! And our Jewish tradition is here to help! Holidays and other ritual moments make taking the time to express our emotions easier and more natural. As it may feel awkward to say such things at other times (though the more you do it the less awkward it will feel). For example, it is quite normal to all of us that positive complimentary emotional language is expressed from one to another, whether formally or informally, at a baby naming, Bar Mitzvah or a wedding – just conjure up the image of a speech given by the father of the bride.

But we don't need to wait until such a singular moment to share. In fact, as I presented, we shouldn't! On Thanksgiving, for example, many of us go around and express what we are thankful for. Using that as a model, perhaps even this afternoon or evening at your Holiday table, you can usher in the New Year by sharing something you are grateful for about the *people* sitting at the meal with you, highlighting something positive about who they are or something nice you know they

have done. In fact you can do this at *any* holiday or Shabbat meal. And, perhaps this Friday night and Saturday you can start the tradition of utilizing the great rituals of Shabbat to speak *Lashan HaTov*. On Friday nights when we say the ritual blessings over our children at the dinner table, because of the preparation for this sermon, as I recite the traditional words while placing my hands on their heads, I now have started to whisper kind words in their ear about their character or a positive reflection on something I saw them do that week. The Schwabs have another tradition you can borrow that we learned from friends many years ago: to give our children blessings after Havdalah each Saturday night. We peer into each of their eyes and share words of encouragement for the week ahead. This doesn't have involve only children but can be done with spouses or with whomever else you might share these rituals. And then we can work on expanding: perhaps *lashon ha-tov* for our employees, or our co-workers, or our bosses? Our neighbors? And *all* those we care about? We should pledge today to find time to do this on a regular basis moving forward!

To start us off, therefore, I would like to share some praise of *you*. I am so grateful to be part of a congregation with so many kind people who give so much of their lives to so many wonderful causes. I am so grateful to be part of a community for whom Jewish tradition is so important. I am so grateful to be a Rabbi at Beth El which serves people ages 0 to over 100 in such an enthusiastic, dynamic and compassionate way. I am so grateful to be part of a synagogue where *mitzvahs* and good deeds are done energetically and in great number every single day. And I believe with all my heart that we will continue to be a wonderful influence on each other, the broader community and dare I say, the world, in the years to come!

It is not always easy to figure out how to change our lives, help the ones we love or, all the more so, affect the way of the world. Yet, with a good word, used generously, thoughtfully and as often as possible, I believe we can do all three. The positive power of words really *does* have the ability to change lives. The proof? I am standing before you today, as your rabbi, for better or for worse, because two people who

cared took the time to say something positive, wise and kind to me at a crucial point in my life. I believe - I am utterly convinced - that the same can happen in all of our lives, if we will just use the power of words." *Shanah Tovah U'metukah* – I pray that you have a year filled with goodness, sweetness and the blessing to know that there are others around you who would gladly share a kind word with you when you need it most. Amen