

Yom Kippur 5782
Words Build Worlds
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Gmar Hatimah Tovah.

Recently I was putting my son to bed when he said something that was equally gratifying and disappointing.

As usual, I turned off his light, put away his book, helped him under the covers, and started to talk about his day. He turned away from me and said, "I'm tired and ready to go to sleep now."

"Okay," I said, "I'll just sing your *Shma* and *Hamalach* and that's it. Because the Hebrew means, 'I love you.'"

"Dad, I already know you love me. You don't have to tell me every night." His tone of voice told me he was sincere, not annoyed. Maybe this happens to most parents, but it was the first time someone said it to *me*. I wasn't quite sure what to say. So I continued, "but I *want* to tell you every night because it's important to me that you *know* every day. *Laila tov.*"

Later on, I felt my answer was correct but incomplete. So a few nights later at bedtime, I reminded him of what he said and then continued: "The reason I tell you every night is because words build worlds. I want your world to be one in which you know every day that you are loved, and that every day there are people who you should love. I want your world to be a world of love, so I use those words every night."

His response to my words of wisdom? A big yawn! He may be too young to understand why so many parents and grandparents say this reflexively. But he is old enough to realize that the words we use make a world of difference.

The foundation of Yom Kippur is words. We observe this holiday because of verses in the Torah. All day long we immerse ourselves in the words of the Mahzor prayer book. We sing together the words of prayer. We tell each other, "I'm sorry, please forgive me." Our goal is to have our names sealed in the symbolic Book of Life. In the Yom Kippur *Viddui* Confessional, we articulate our sins - which overwhelmingly refer specifically to the *words* we spoke that harmed.

But on *this* Yom Kippur I also want to speak about words that heal. Words destroy, but they also build up. Indeed, the very beginning of the Torah teaches that words possess the power to create.

Consider the opening Genesis story. G-d creates the universe by *speaking* it into existence. G-d said “Let there be light!” and there was light. Days 2,3,4,5, and 6 begin “G-d said, Let there be X,’ and there was X.” In the religious sense, words are the molecules of the universe.

Words build worlds.

Today, on this ultimate day of words, I will speak about the most powerful words we can utter - for bad and for good. I group them into three distinct categories of speech. The first is *Lashon Hara* - evil speech. The second is its opposite - *Lashon Hatov* - speech for good. And the third is a special category - *Lashon Shel Ometz* - words of courage. If we can master these three specific areas of speech, we will be utilizing our words for the good. Saying the right things and biting our tongues on the wrong things every single day is so challenging for all of us, myself included. But the more self-aware we are of the words we use, the better we will be at using words constructively. We may not attain perfection, but we can aim for better.

We are probably aware of the expression *Lashon Hara* - evil speech. If you have ever been the subject of a rumor or gossip, you know firsthand how categorically destructive lies and falsehoods can be. For further reading about Judaism’s perspective on *Lashon Hara*, check out Rabbi Ben Kramer of Moriah Congregation’s terrific essay in the book [The Observant Life](#).

I wish today to share a new insight to this well-known category, specifically the worst possible language we can hurl at another person - true “curse words.” I learned this from Rabbi Ari Hart of Skokie Valley, so I quote him directly:

“We’re very particular about what we think are ‘curse words’ in our society, but the list is all wrong. The famous 4 letter words, the ones that get bleeped out, those aren’t *actually* curse words. I’m much more worried about my kids hearing - or even worse, using - some six letter curse words: s-t-u-p-i-d; r-e-t-a-r-d; Say a 4 letter word that you can’t say on TV to someone, and it probably won’t change their life. Say one of those words to a child who makes a mistake...or someone struggling with a learning disability, and it just might. *Those* words have power.”

Real curse words are words that curse.

In the year ahead, you might get angry at somebody, and they might have even made a mistake. But not even then may we ever take personal shots at somebody that crushes their self-esteem. I'm not accusing anybody here of doing such. But I share this insight on what I believe should be included in teaching what *Lashon Hara* is.

Just as words have the capacity to tear down, so too can they build up. The antidote to *Lashon Hara* is *Lashon Hatov* - speech for good. After all, words can repair and forgive. Indeed, that's what Yom Kippur is all about: forgiveness from G-d and from each other. We do all we can to hear the words, "*Salachti* - I forgive you."

I go back to the Joseph story in Genesis. Recall that Joseph's brothers sell him down to Egypt as a slave, never expecting to see him again. Years later, Joseph has risen to be Egypt's second in command, and the brothers approach him seeking food to survive the famine in Canaan. While Joseph recognizes his brothers, they do not recognize him. Finally, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers saying, "*Ani Yosef Ahihem* - I am Joseph your brother... Do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me here. Rather G-d sent me ahead of you to save life." (Gn. 45:4). "I am Joseph your brother." These simple words helped to heal this painful rift that endured for decades. Rabbeinu Bahya of the Middle Ages interprets this in the following way: Joseph means that, "even though you sold me as a slave, I still feel connected to you *as a brother*." Joseph lives up to those words, truly forgiving his brothers *as evidenced by his actions* - inviting them and their father to live out the famine under his graceful watch, and never taking revenge. Those are words that healed.

Four thousand years later, in 1960, the late Pope John XXIII met a delegation of visiting rabbis and Jewish leaders. He was a Pope who sought to heal the long-standing and deep rupture between the Church and the Jewish community. This Pope, among other things, was instrumental in bringing about the Vatican II reforms that would ultimately clear Jews of deicide. In this meeting, what words would signal his honest intention to repair and to seek forgiveness? The Pope's secular name was Angelo, or Joseph, and his opening gesture to this Jewish group came straight from Genesis: "I am *Joseph* your brother."

Those words healed as well. Here are other words that restore: "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me. I forgive you." These simple words can be *so difficult* to say, but they are oxygen for healing.

Lashon Hatov can also instill confidence.

I remember that I so admired my day school Torah teacher, Rabbi Steve Ballaban. The morning after my 8th grade graduation, my mom *made me* go back to school to say goodbye to my teachers. *Mom, do I have to?*

I forget what I said to him; it was probably something generic, like, "Thanks for a great year." But I'll always remember what he said. He told me, "I expect to hear great things about you in high school. I know you'll stand out." I remember thinking, "Me? I don't even stand out in my class of 20, and I'm going to a high school with 2000 kids! I'm just hoping to *fit in*. But if *he* believes in me, then maybe I *can* leave a mark." Those two lines carried me for a long, long time, giving me confidence when I really needed it.

In the year ahead, you will have interactions with younger people who look up to you: as a parent, a boss, a coworker, a teacher, a coach, or a trusted friend. You too can do a world of good by sharing some honest praise for them, especially when it's not expected. That's *Lashon Hatov*.

There is an ultimate level to using words for good. I call it *Lashon Shel Ometz*, words of courage. The opportunity may not present itself this week, this month, or even this year. But when a moment arises to speak up or to remain silent, to courageously take a stand or to silently withdraw, our tradition proclaims "*Hazak Ve'ematz!*" be strong and courageous.

This reminds me of the Book of Esther, and it answers the following question: Why isn't the Purim scroll called Megillat Mordecai, the Book of Mordecai? After all, he is quite the role model. It's Mordecai who refuses to bow down to wicked Haman. It's Mordecai who discovers the plot against King Ahasuerus and saves his life. It's Mordecai who raises Esther as his foster daughter. And it's Mordecai who convinces and instructs Esther to boldly confront the king and demand that their people be saved from destruction. Mordecai does no wrong, so why isn't the book named after him?

First the traditional answer: The story itself says that "*Queen Esther...and Mordecai the Jew, wrote...to confirm this second letter of Purim*" (Es. 9:29). This means that *Esther* initiated the festival's annual celebration. The Talmud reiterates this (Megillah 7a). Since *she* established the holiday for the future, Esther is rewarded with the book being named for *her*.

Here's my own interpretation of why the book is named for Esther: Because Mordecai is on the sidelines, merely the manager in the dugout. While Esther is in the game itself,

standing in the batter's box with the game on the line. Esther fully risks *her own* life by speaking up for the Jewish people. She knows this because the king had not summoned her personally in 30 days, and anyone who approached without a personal invitation risked their life. But she musters up the courage to confront the king. She tells Mordecai, "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days...Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!" (Esther 4:16). I believe the ancient Rabbis wanted to reward Esther's *courage* by naming the scroll in her honor, Megillat Esther.

Fast forward 2500 years to 1948. This is a true story about another Jewish hero speaking words of courage. As some of us know, Israeli independence was significantly bolstered by President Harry Truman's endorsement at the outset. But Truman himself later said that credit should not go to him but to a Jewish personal friend named Eddie Jacobson. Long before Truman became President, he and Jacobson were business partners in Missouri, and they remained lifelong dear friends. In 1948, the Zionist lobby was so overly aggressive about its cause that Truman actually had enough of them and at a crucial moment refused to listen to them.

When all hope seemed lost, Eddie Jacobson barged into the Oval Office and insisted that Truman see Chaim Weizmann, who made the trip all the way from Israel. Jacobson said: "Your hero is Andrew Jackson. Well, Harry, I too have a hero - a man I never met, but who is, I think, the greatest Jew who ever lived ... Chaim Weizmann. He is a very sick man ... but he traveled thousands of miles just to see you ... Now you refuse to see him. It doesn't sound like you, Harry."

Silence. Then Truman replied, "You bald-headed -----. You win. I'll see him." The following meeting with Weizmann convinced Truman to endorse Israel in the opening minutes of its independence. And the rest is history. Eddie Jacobson risked his lifelong friendship because his community - *our* community - was in a dire position. Channeling Queen Esther's courage and bravery, Eddie Jacobson spoke up for Israel in a moment of urgent need. That's *Lashon Shel Ometz*.

In the year ahead, I don't expect us to have the fate of the Jewish world on our shoulders like Queen Esther or Jacobson. But there may arise an issue of great consequence, and we may be in a position to speak up for our personal values, for our community, or for Israel. There will be risk involved. When the opportunity comes, find that Jewish courage to speak up.

Lashon Hara, Lashon Hatov, and Lashon Shel Ometz are distinct categories of speech. But together they demonstrate the endlessly potent power of language.

On this holy day of Yom Kippur, we contemplate death and life. We should recall the wise guidance from the Book of Proverbs: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (18:21). Indisputably, we will all talk to others in the year ahead. Will our words cut down or build up? Divide or unite? Harm or heal? It’s truly up to us alone. Nobody else can take responsibility for the words we say.

I told my son at bedtime that I want his world to be a world of love, where he is loved and loves others in return. I am not naive to think everybody in the world operates like this. But neither am I discouraged. Every relationship we have is a world unto itself. How others talk does not have to impact how I talk.

I conclude with fitting words from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who was a master of weaving words to create and to inspire: “Never take language lightly, implies the Torah. For it was through language that G-d created the natural world, and through language that we create and sustain our social world. It is as essential to our survival as the air we breathe.”

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