



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Speech as a Spiritual Practice

I heard them talking as they washed their hands - three women at the sinks in the temple bathroom one Rosh Hashanah: “Can you believe that usher wouldn’t let us save extra seats? Who cares about the rules! That usher is such a jerk. She takes that job too seriously. She probably has nothing better to do, no other place to wield her power.”

It only took a few seconds for me to realize that they were talking about my mother. In the bathroom stall I felt my heart start to race and tears begin to burn in my eyes. So mean, so hurtful. My mother didn’t need to exert her power at services. She had plenty of places to do that – in her therapy practice, on the boards on which she sat and of course in our busy home where she was definitely in charge and yes, she did expect everyone to follow the rules.

That bathroom had pink and grey tile, with pink walls. I was wearing a navy blue skirt, a flowered sweater and blue shoes. I remember this like it was yesterday although it was nearly 40 years ago today. I can call up the pain of those hurtful words without too much effort. I waited until they left and tried to pull myself together. I never told my mother.

I suspect that many of you have some story like this one, some moment when a comment, critique, or criticism seared into you. That moment and those words created a scar that may not ever fully heal. Something said in seconds can leave a wound that lasts for years.

Words are so powerful. They can sting and pierce and harm us but of course they can also expand our hearts and open our souls. Words have the ability to save lives, to transform relationships, to create new realities; through them we forgive, we surprise, we praise and we love.

For some time I have been reflecting on the impact of the words we use. It's no shock that this has come in the wake of the presidential campaign and all of the 'words' that have been spoken, or sometimes yelled or maybe even spewed out at us. It saddens me that it has become acceptable for our candidates to label a group of citizens as corrupt or dishonest. Do we really believe it is necessary to curse during a political event? Have you wondered how is this style of speech affecting our society - especially our younger generation? How are they impacted when they constantly hear abusive language distorting the truth, inciting anger and flaming fear?

As our High Holy days approached, I've tried to drown out the political rhetoric and supplant it with more inspirational voices – “Let justice well up as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream.” “Do not harden your heart against your neighbor, open your hand to all in need.” Micah, Isaiah and Amos, they inspire me. Their words point me towards kindness. I need them to push back against the judgmental statements of intolerance and animosity that seem to be everywhere.

Today, our New Year is our time to think about how we might improve, how we might change for the better. More than ever before I believe we need to begin with a careful and caring look at our own words. Yes, we can scrutinize our public figures; but today is really about each one of us, the choices we make, our impact on our community, the imprint we leave on those we love. I believe that upright, thoughtful speech has the ability to elevate our capacity for good. I believe each of us can become a more positive force, indeed changing the world for the better, by being more purposeful with what we say.

Thinking back to my mother, I know that she was quite purposeful with her words. She always said: “You make me so proud.” She didn’t say: “I’m so proud of you.” While we never parsed this phrase together, I now understand the intention of her words – empowering, strengthening, sometimes healing – a gift.

One does not have to look too far into Judaism to discover that our tradition puts a huge value on the power of speech. Let’s begin at the very beginning. Of course, God created the world with words. We all know the line...”And God **said**: Let there be light.” No throwing of thunderbolts, or cosmic wars...a word, an utterance and it was.

A bit later in our story, when the first person, Adam, is created the Torah calls him a - *nefesh chaya* - a *living soul*. Such a beautiful term, and yet the rabbis of the first century decided to rewrite it. Instead of the calling us *nefesh chaya* – *living souls* they decided to call us – *ruah memalela* – that’s Aramaic for – *speaking spirits*. As if to emphasize that the very essence of our humanity is our ability to speak. We are like God because we share the capacity to create and transform with our words. I love the image of us as *speaking spirits*. I imagine our words lingering long after conversations end, leaving our creative impact in every room – maybe for days, maybe for generations.

There are literally thousands of Jewish texts that relate to the power – good and bad – of our words. There are Midrashim and mystical theories. There prohibitions against gossip and instructions on criticism. One of my favorites from the Talmud instructs us to always **say**: ‘the bride is beautiful.’ Why ruin the best day of someone’s life with a critique of a hair-do or a comment about a dress? It may not be a fact but it must be true, ‘the bride is always beautiful.’

In Judaism, speech is a vehicle for holiness; it can create or destroy, build up or ruin - a friendship, a marriage, someone’s self-esteem as well as our own inner goodness. What we say is who we are. For these reasons, I believe that mindful speech can be

for us one of the most accessible and important spiritual practices. Yes, speech - talking - can be a spiritual practice.

Not to worry, for this spiritual practice you don't need a yoga mat, or a tallis or hours of your day. This is a discipline that each of us can claim, no matter the depth of our Jewish knowledge or our belief in or questions about God. When our daily words create, transform, strengthen and heal, we are doing holy work. Our speech can take on new qualities and then, through this spiritual discipline, so can we.

Standing in the guidance office of my daughter's high school waiting to pick up some forms, I heard a counselor advising a student on college applications. "Since you only have a 3.1 g.p.a.," she said, "here is a list of schools to consider." I couldn't see the student, but I heard the painful silence and imagined that he was processing those words. Only a 3.1 - only? - one word turned a moment that could have been completely positive and exciting into a moment of disappointment and hurt. My heart went out to this kid.

A couple is talking to me about their honeymoon. The wedding has been a lot of work with some family strife. They are really looking forward to their trip after the event. She says: "It's going to be great." He says: "It's going to be great for us." Two extra words and he has said so much more.

Rabbi Israel Salanter, who founded Judaism's mindfulness movement, understood how weighty and important each word in a conversation can be. He suggests that in order to create thoughtful speech we need to slow down our normal pace of communication - to make time to review our words before they leave our mouths. So often, we talk just to talk. We exaggerate to make things more interesting. We speak ill of others because it gives us a sense of power. This was as true 200 years ago when Rabbi Salanter lived as it is today. And so he suggests that before speaking we pause and ask ourselves three questions:

1. Is it true?

2. Is it kind?
3. Is it necessary?

Is it true; is it kind; is it necessary? What a simple and helpful, clear and compelling guideline. How I wish those women in the Temple bathroom 40 years ago would have followed this practice.

What words have impacted you? Go to that moment in your mind. Perhaps these were harsh, cruel words – not kind, not necessary, were they directed at you or were you the one who spoke them aloud. How telling that they are still with you. Or perhaps you have recalled a beautiful exchange – true words of love and kindness – carrying that memory is a joy.

If you asked your spouse or your closest friend, or the person with whom you share an office – what words do I most often say – do you know what you would hear? Would you be pleased to know that these words are the ones lingering in your home, surrounding you for days, perhaps decades? Beginning today, before sharing a critique or a rebuke or even just a passing comment, might we pause just long enough to review this list? Is it true, is it kind, is it necessary. Wouldn't this be a worthy spiritual discipline?

Allow me to suggest another path to more mindful speech - our prayer books. While I know the prayer book doesn't always speak to us on a theological level; while I know that there are some times when we just don't identify to the ideas on the page, the prayers can help us connect more deeply with sacred speech. In reading a beautiful phrase, we are practicing articulating meaningful words and learning from carefully crafted sentences.

**each of us feels a joy no one else can share; each of us has regrets which others cannot know. (How poignantly true)*

**for the expanding grandeur of Creation...filling me with awe and challenging my imagination – I am grateful (What a beautiful affirmation)*

Over and over again I read *enduring love, sincere thanks, and expanding kindness*. I feel my tongue form those words, they become comfortable on my lips, they embed themselves into the pattern of my speech and maybe I will say them again, tomorrow, at the dinner table. Maybe I will get better at choosing the words that are true, kind and necessary and if more thoughtful speech becomes my habit, then more thoughtful actions may follow. Speech, after all, stands right at the threshold between thought and action and so it partakes of both.ⁱ Our words translate our thoughts into outcomes. In a deeply interconnected way, they filter back into our minds and influence our thinking; they motivate us, and others, to act - transforming words into deeds. The outcome of speech as a spiritual practice can be far reaching.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism provides the last lesson. He teaches that every person is allocated a set number of words to use for our entire lifetime. Once we reach our quota, we depart from this world. I find this imagery very compelling. How would our everyday speech change if we really believed this? It has changed me. Since I don't know how many words I was born to speak, and have no idea how many words I have left to speak, do I want to waste my last words saying "You idiot!" or worse?

How are we using our allotted words? Do we speak to uplift or to crush, to abuse or to heal? So many words stay with us for our lifetimes - the first words of our children; the final goodbye of a parent or spouse or friend. And so many words in-between, said at special events, unexpected moments and throughout the most mundane hours of lives. What are the words by which we will be remembered?

Our ancient tradition says, "words are like arrows, once released they cannot be taken back, and arriving at their target, they burrow deep inside." Like a sword, they can do terrible damage. But like a seed planted in deep in fertile ground, they can cultivate something beautiful and new; something that comes from love and offers love.

In the coming year, may speech become our spiritual practice - a way to lift up those around us with the integrity and thoughtfulness of our words.

Yihyu l'razon em-rayfee, v'hegyon li-bi lifanecha.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable unto – my friends, my family and of course, my God.

ⁱ Alan Morinis, Climbing Jacob's Ladder. Page 163