

## EREV ROSH HASHANA—THE POWER OF WORDS

In Lewis Carroll's book *Through the Looking Glass*, which is the sequel to the more famous *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Humpty Dumpty and Alice have quite a puzzling conversation about names and unbirthdays and the meaning of words in general, when Humpty Dumpty defines the word glory as a "nice knock-down argument." Poor Alice is rather puzzled and points out that "knock-down argument" is not a proper definition for glory, to which Humpty-Dumpty responds:

When I use a **word**," **Humpty Dumpty** said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make **words** mean so many different things."

I think the answer to Alice's question about whether words really can mean different things is a resounding yes. More and more, we are having trouble communicating with one another because we have turned into a society of Humpty Dumpty's, where the words we choose to use and hear are more a matter of choice rather than trying to listen to what our fellow human beings are actually trying to say.

Before getting into all that, let me say the very important words *l'shana tova*, welcome to the New Year, 5778. Once again, I marvel at the fact that we have all made it through another year, but particularly this year, given all that is going on in our troubled world. Take a deep breath. I marvel that we are here at Temple Beth Abraham in Oakland for our 17<sup>th</sup> High Holidays together as rabbi and congregation. The word gratitude continues to come to mind when I appreciate these 17 years together.

As I have been doing for the past several years, I will once again be linking all my High Holiday sermons to a common theme. To refresh your memory, last year's theme was balance—trying to bring a sense of balance to an increasingly unbalanced world. For dramatic effect, I had a fiddler on the roof, Debbie Spangler playing her violin from up on the balcony. Perhaps Humpty Dumpty falling off the wall would have been a better symbol, given the lack of balance that still plagues our world, but just because we are not there doesn't mean we should stop trying. But that was last year. This year, *à la* the conversation between Humpty Dumpty and Alice, the theme is words, and more particularly, the sacred power of words. Words have incredible power—the power to shape and to shift opinion, the power to harm but also to heal, the power to twist and

transform the meaning of things, ourselves, and even the entire world. After a general introduction to the concept tonight, tomorrow I will delve specifically into words that harm and heal. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> Day of Rosh Hashana, I will delve into the seemingly unJewish concept of lack of words, or, silence, in our tradition. On Kol Nidre, I will be talking about the meaning of those very specific words, Kol Nidre, and finally, on Yom Kippur morning, I will talk about just how harmful words have been to the Jewish people over the centuries and today, when I address the subject of anti-Semitism in detail.

Let's start tonight by returning to the Rosh Hashana greeting, L'shana tova, which literally means "to a good year." L'shana tova is actually a shortened form of two longer greetings, l'shana tova umetuka and l'shana tova tikateivu, and they mean two very different things. Let's start with the easy one. L'shana tova u'metuka, which means to a good and sweet new year. It's symbolized by dipping the apples in the honey, where we literally taste the sweetness we hope is coming our way. When we say l'shana tova umetuka we hope that the recipient has a year filled with health and prosperity and friendship and all good and happy things. That idea is certainly part of the Rosh Hashana experience. But so is l'shana tova tikateivu, which means to a good year and may you be written in the Book of Life. And that is a much heavier idea. Even if you don't relate to the metaphor of the Book of Life, that greeting alludes to forces us to think about life, as well as death and judgment, and whether or not our behavior affects that judgment. It also makes us think about the Unetaneh Tokef, the prayer where it says "who shall live and who shall die, who by fire and who by water," which, tragically we have seen both of in recent weeks. And even the things that are said to temper the severity of the decree, teshuva, tefila, and tzedaka, are layered with multiple meanings. Tzedaka—we translate it as charity, but it actually means something closer to righteousness or social justice. Tefila clearly means prayer, but is prayer for us or for Hashem our God? And does prayer have efficacy? In other words, do you believe that payer "works," on any level? And teshuva, which we translate as repentance, but it literally means return. Return to what or whom? To services for the first time in a year? Are we talking about returning to God, to the Jewish people, to ourselves, or all of the above? These are heavy, burdensome things to think about, and they are all implied in the greeting "L'shana tova." And you thought I was just wishing you a happy new year!

Yes, the power of words is a crucial concept in Judaism. Pesukei d'Zimra, the warmup part of the service begins with the words "Baruch she'amar v'haya ha'olam, blessed is the One who spoke, and the world came into being." This

follows Genesis Chapter 1, where it says: “Vayomer Elohim yehi or, vayehi or, And God *said* “Let there be light, and there was light.” Words bring order to the chaos, to the *tohu vavohu*. The idea is that God created the world by speaking it into being. And if we are supposed to be created in the image of God and are God’s chosen people maybe that’s why Jews talk so much.

Speaking of order out of chaos, Israelis have some wonderful words in Modern Hebrew which flow from this concept served up with a side dish of biting irony. When you ask someone how they are doing in Hebrew you say “ma nishma” or “ma shlomcha,” or “ma shlomech,” which literally mean, what is the state of your soul or what is the state of your peace. The main answer given is “b’seder,” I am “in order.” In a society that chaotic that the main answer to how are you is “I am in order” says quite a bit. By the way, if you don’t know Hebrew but the word sounds familiar, it is indeed the same word that you use to describe your Passover meal—the Seder. It means the order of the Passover meal. The same word with different vowels, Siddur, is the word used for prayerbook, where it means the order of the prayers. Except that you won’t hear that word for the next 10 days, because on the High Holidays the prayerbook is called the “Machzor,” which means cycle, or return to the new cycle, since we are returning once again to the beginning of a new cycle. But perhaps the most powerful word in Modern Hebrew is Neshek, which means both kiss and weapons. Israel is a society that is perpetually at war but longs for peace and sings of peace. All the best Israel songs are about peace. That’s because in Israel the line between the hoped for ideality of the kiss of peace and the harsh reality of a weapon of war is razor thin.

Likewise, in American English, the words we use says a lot about our society, particularly the pace of change. This is true in both the highbrow and lowbrow sense. Take the word good for example. Look at some of the words that have been used over the decades to mean some form “really good:” In the 70’s it was cool, bad, far out, and out of sight. In the 80’s it was radical or rad. In the 90’s it was phat, fresh, or da bomb. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century it is wet, dope, sick, lit and litty. For the most part I don’t want to be bad, sick, tight, phat, or a bomb. Yet all these things are meant to refer to a state of goodness. From lowbrow to highbrow, take a look at a word like candidate. Candidate means someone aspiring for a job or running for office. Candid means open, outspoken, and frank. Tell me, is open and frank what we think of when we hear a candidate running for office? Words morph; they become manipulated and twisted to the point where their original meaning becomes the opposite, sometimes to the point of absurdity. And

sometimes the twist is deliberately cynical and pernicious, as epitomized by George Orwell in 1984, where the party's slogan was "War is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength." Famous for its exaggeration, and yet sometimes, we fear, closer to the truth in today's world than we could have ever imagined.

So we will be exploring the power of words and the many ways we use them over the next 10 days, their power to shape opinion, to harm and to heal, to twist and transform, the meaning of things, ourselves, and our world.

I have one final story I would like to tell before we conclude tonight. Whenever I am in Jerusalem, I always buy challah at the same place, a little bakery in the Machane Yehuda Shuk market in Jerusalem called Ugat Chen. It has the sweetest challah in the world; it is so sweet it is literally dripping in honey. One Shabbat I was trying to pay the shopkeeper, but I was hesitant and not just because I am cheap, but because my hand was surrounded by bees, and I was afraid of getting stung. Seeing my hesitancy and wanting to get on to the next customer, the shopkeeper said to me "al tifchad, al tifchad, there is nothing to be afraid of." The fact was that if I was going to get to taste the sweetness of the challah I would have to endure the sting of the bee. And so the rabbinic sages in Devarim Rabba, commenting on the Biblical book of Devarim, which means words but we call Deuteronomy, point out that the Hebrew word Devarim, words, could be read with slightly different vowels as "Devorim," which means bees. So they ask: how are the words of Torah like bees? And the answer they come up with just as the bees' sting is sharp yet its honey sweet, so, too, the words of Torah can sting, but they can also add incredible sweetness to our lives. How sharply they sting or just how sweet they can become is mostly, but not entirely up to us.

I would like to invite Becca Rosenthal, Jill Rosenthal, Jeanne Korn, and Judy Bloomfield to come up and finish the service with one of my favorite Israeli songs by the great Naomi Shemer, a song called "Al Kol Eleh." The chorus goes like this:

Al kol eileh, al kol eileh, shmor na li Eli hatov, al had'vash v'al haaketz, al hamar v'hamatok.  
For all these things, O God, watch over me, for the honey and the bee sting, for the bitter and the sweet. May 5778 be a sweet new year for all of you.