

## WORDS THAT HURT, WORDS THAT HEAL

I saw you at Kindergym this week too. Shabbat Shalom. Let's sing. Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.

Oh wait, you could hear that. My microphone was on? Oy vey. What you just heard was a reenactment of something that occurred back in May. It was the Bar Mitzvah of Ben Barnes, and he had just gotten up to read a Torah portion. I went to pay a brief visit to Junior Congregation and to Shabbat Mishpacha, our two children's services that were also meeting that day, and lo and behold, I left my microphone on. The receiver is right under my chair here, so I didn't imagine it had the range to reach through several walls, the chapel, and the mini courtyard in front all the way into that Gimel classroom. But apparently, wireless microphone from Nady is a really good one. Some people rushed to try and find me to tell me my microphone was still on, but they couldn't track me down in time. So I came into the sanctuary, and everyone was looking at me rather strangely, and it was then I realized exactly what happened. Bar Mitzvah Ben, for his part, apparently laughed for a second and, cool customer that he is, went right on reading the Torah flawlessly.

Oh, was I embarrassed. My first thought went to *Naked Gun*, the 1988 movie starring Leslie Nielsen, where he leaves the microphone he had on during a press conference on while he goes to the bathroom. The entire chamber of reporters as well as those watching on television get to hear the soundtrack of him relieving himself, and, while it is certainly juvenile, it makes for some great comedy.

My second thought was Pirke Avot 2:1, where Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi says:

Keep your eye on three things, and you will not come to sin: Know what is above you: An Eye that sees, and an Ear that hears, and all your deeds are written in a book.

According to the great rabbi, we should all live our lives imagining that someone, namely Hashem, God, is always listening and watching. If we know there is a police car at an intersection, we make sure we slow down and stop, right? Well, the same thing goes with our words. If we always act as if someone is listening to every word we say, we will choose our words carefully.

My third thought was "it could have been a lot worse." Most people jumped immediately to the bathroom example, sympathetically saying to me that "at least you didn't have it on when you went to the bathroom." But that

wouldn't have been that bad, honestly. My fear was that I could have said something into the microphone I would have regretted. I could have sworn, for instance. But it could have been worse than that. Assuming I was in private conversation with someone, I could have said something negative about someone, which would have been a terrible embarrassment to both the person mentioned and to me personally. Jobs have been lost over things like that. So, yes, it could have been a whole lot worse.

Of course, I'm the Rabbi, and so I would never use my words to hurt anyone or say anything negative about any person, right? And certainly, neither would any of you, right? We are **good** people. Well, the Yamim Noraim are a time for **honest** self-reflection, cheshbon hanefesh, literally the checking up on our souls. If you believe you are the kind of person who would never utter something unflattering about someone that you wouldn't want blasted into a microphone to a room full of people, you are either being dishonest with yourself, or you are just a much better person than I or anyone else I know. So it was a great reminder to me to always keep in mind the words of Yehuda Hanasi, to remember, with humility, "an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and that all our deeds are recorded in a book."

I suppose, given the metaphor of our deeds being recorded in book, that this is an appropriate place to pause and wish everyone a l'shana tova, a good and happy new year. As I've done over the past several years, I will be connecting all my High Holiday sermons to a central theme, the theme this year being words. Last night I gave an introduction about the power of words in Judaism, and today I want to expand on that by talking about how words have the power to both harm and heal.

This is why the tongue is compared to an arrow in Jeremiah and the Psalms. According to a commentary called the Sachar Tov 12:

Why is the tongue compared to an arrow? Why not a sword or some other weapon? Because if a man unsheathes his sword to kill his friend, and his friend pleads with him and begs for mercy, the man may return the sword to its scabbard. But an arrow, once it is shot, cannot be returned, no matter how much one wants to.

Words are as powerful as weapons; in fact, now as much as ever, words actually can be weapons—used to incite, bully, and terrorize.

I am sure many of you are quite familiar with the Hebrew phrase Lashon Hara, which literally means the evil tongue. It is primarily associated with negative words that are said about someone else, often behind their back, which have the potential to ruin a person's reputation. One of the most famous stories about this

kind of lashon hara is the story of the young man who spreads rumors about the rabbi and then, regretting it, apologizes to the rabbi and asks how he can make it up to him. The rabbi tells him to take a down pillow, open it up on a windy day, and let the feathers scatter with the winds. Then come see him again. The young man does as the rabbi asks and then returns. "Now," says the rabbi, "go and gather each and every one of those feathers." "But that's impossible," the young man says. "Exactly," says the rabbi. Once words are used to harm someone's reputation, they are irrevocable.

But, as bad as this kind of lashon hara is, this is not the kind of lashon hara I or the rabbinic sages are most concerned about, for this kind of lashon hara destroys only a person's reputation. There is a kind of lashon hara that destroys a person's soul, and that is publically insulting or humiliating another human being. This is considered the greater aveirah or sin in Judaism. In the Talmud, Tractate Bava Metzia 58b, the rabbis say that "whoever shames his neighbor in public, it is as if he shed his blood." They meant this not only symbolically, but literally as well. The rabbinic sages observed people turning ghostly white or beet red as a result of being shamed. The blood literally drains from a person's face or rushes to the face in these situations. The rabbis expand on this principle in surprising way in the gemara that follows the statement about shedding blood. "Better it is for man to cohabit with a doubtful married woman, creating a mamzer status, rather than that he should publicly shame his neighbor." The first is potentially adultery, but the second is potentially murder.

The Tanach is replete with stories where words are used like weapons and lead to actual violence. We see a prime example of words that harm in today's Torah portion, or at least the results of it. The words exchanged between Sarah and Hagar over Sarah's childlessness were too much to ever overcome, and Sarah consequently has Hagar banished from her household. We see it later in the story of Joseph and his brothers when he teases them about them bowing down to him in the future. Joseph's words have consequences, as they become violent and want to kill him. They cast him into a pit instead. And we see the Kingdom of the Jewish people split into two when the people ask King Solomon's son and successor, King Rehoboam, to lighten their yoke, and he replies, in a way that is eerily similar to words we heard in the last presidential election, "My little finger is thicker than my father's loins; My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions." And the Kingdom is torn asunder into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, never to be reconciled again.

The Talmud, too, has stories where words are used as weapons. One of the most tragic stories in the Talmud involves similarly cruel words exchanged between Resh Lakish, who was formerly a robber and a gladiator and his mentor, Rabbi Yochanan, who convinced him to change his ways. In tractate Bava Mezia 84a, they are arguing about whether certain items become tamei, ritually impure. The specifics aren't important, but all of a sudden, in the middle of what appears to be a very normal Talmudic discussion, things get heated and Rabbi Yochanan decides to remind Resh Lakish of his formerly sinning ways." "A robber understands his trade," says Rabbi Yochanan." They go back and forth with various insults, and Resh Lakish then becomes very sick and dies shortly thereafter. Rabbi Yochanan becomes severely depressed, often crying out, "where are you, son of Lakish?" That depression leads to his own death. The point is clear; words not only hurt—they kill.

Which brings us to today. We have become a culture that bullies with words. The fact that we can type something into a computer screen and don't have to look someone in the eye has led to unspeakable cruelty with words. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 73% of high schoolers have reported being cyberbullied, not only public shaming according to Jewish law, but some leading to actual death. You may or not be familiar with the names Ryan Halligan, Megan Meier, Tyler Clementi, Amanda Todd, or Jessica Logan, but all were famous cases of students who were cyberbullied by their peers who eventually committed suicide. Jessica Logan had particular resonance for me, since the events occurred at Sycamore High School in Cincinnati, where Karen taught during our time together in Cincinnati. Words have consequences, sometimes fatal ones. And those words no longer stay in Cyberspace. People have brought this kind of "dialogue" into the public square. Rallies and protests have essentially become insulting contests, and now they have moved beyond words, with people bringing weapons to rallies with intent to harm or taking their cars and driving them into crowds, as happened in Charlottesville, Virginia.

And then there's Twitter, the medium of choice for our President's insults. I am sorry for delving momentarily into politics, though this is not about his politics or policy, only his stream of public insults. He started insulting the media by calling them "fake news." Then he turned to opponents like Hilary Clinton, who he called "crooked Hilary" over and over again. Then he turned his wrath onto Republicans, saying about John McCain that he "prefers his soldiers not be captured by the enemy" and calling Republican Senator Lindsay Graham, who has incredible integrity and who I have personally met, a "disgusting liar" who was

“trounced in his election.” He insulted the hosts of the *Morning Joe* show calling them “low I.Q crazy Mika” and “Psycho Joe,” and talking about her plastic surgery. And these kinds of insults “trickle down,” to use a Ronald Reagan term. Everyone begins to think they are acceptable.

And if you think this kind of hatred doesn’t come out of the liberal progressive community as well, then you are either naïve, dishonest with yourself, or not paying attention. People calling the President “Drump” or “Orange Anus,” Comedian Kathy Griffin tweeting a picture of Trump’s head with blood dripping from it. These things are unacceptable. And beyond the president, even the words people use in regular argument. Just because someone might disagree with your position does not automatically make them a “wingnut” or on “the wrong side of history,” or a racist or a fascist. Sometimes, there actually are different approaches to societal problems. We can’t use those words, because they desensitize us to the real thing, and today, we have actual Nazis and fascists marching in the streets of Charlottesville and Berkeley. Words have consequences, and violent words have all too often led to violent action in our world. Friends, we have to change the way we speak to one another.

But this isn’t anything new. Many of you know the music or have seen the show *Hamilton*. I loved it. I think it’s one of the best musicals of all time. And I have always admired Alexander Hamilton in history. But his pen was absolutely poisonous. Look at the letters Alexander Hamilton sent to John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Aaron Burr. They are filled with verbal poison, and, eventually, that poison pen led to his own death. His insults led directly to the duel in which he was killed.

Friends, we need to change as a society. We need to change the way we speak to each other. We need to stop insulting one another. We need to stop using our words as weapons. We need to stop shedding blood with our words. Yes, our words. Yours and mine. And here. I’m reminded of the words of the great Musar Rabbi Israel Salanter, who said:

Don’t think that I am innocent of all the offenses I am enumerating. I too have committed some of them. All that I am doing, therefore, is speaking aloud to myself, and if anything you might overhear applies to you also, well and good.

Yes, words can hurt. But they can also heal. People can live off a good compliment for weeks at a time. We learned about Sarah’s words with Hagar that led to banishment. But, to avoid insulting her husband Avraham, Sarah’s words following her laughter when she finds out she is pregnant are changed from “he is

so old” to “I am so old.” In the Talmud, Tractate Taanit 22a, 22a, Rabbi Berocha asks Elijah if there is anyone in the market that has a place in the world-to-come. Elijah tells Rabbi Berocha that two men who walk by have a definite share in the world-to-come. Rabbi asks them “What is your occupation?” They reply. “We are comedians. When we see people who are depressed, we cheer them up; also when we see two people quarreling, we strive hard to make peace between them.”

The more contemporary Rabbi Jack Riemer suggests that what we really need to do as a society is consistently and constantly use the following four phrases: “Thank you, I love you, how are you, what do you need?” Let me repeat that. “Thank you. I love you. How are you?” This year, let us pledge to spend less time insulting people, to control our anger, to stop using our words as weapons, to be more careful about the words we choose, smile more, talk less, and when you do talk pay compliments, give positive feedback, speak words of kindness, compassion, comfort and love.

And one more thing. Always assume that the microphone is on.