

The Power of Words

(Holding Koren Mahzor aloft) How many words are we going to say today? How many?

I did a little calculation before Yom Kippur. There are on average about 120 words on a page of the Koren mahzor, and we will recite, or daven, or sing, about 1200 pages in these 24 hours, 800 of them from the time we woke up this morning until we will blow the final shofar blast about 7 hours from now.

So just from this morning to tonight, just the words of the tefillah in Hebrew, number around 100,000. 100,000 carefully chosen, thoughtfully crafted, intentionally placed words.

Why all these words? Why daven all day today? Why does teshuvah, why does kaparah require so many words?

Shouldn't the day be about deeds? Aren't we trying to repair our actions? And don't actions speak louder than words?

I want to argue two things this morning, in about 2500 words:

First, I want to argue that Yom Kippur is all about words. That is, even though the Torah reading we read this morning describes sacrifices and incense and lots of wardrobe changes, the whole way Hazal developed Yom Kippur, even the way they described Temple times, centered around experiences of speech.

Second, I want to argue that words are just about the most important thing in the universe. They created the universe. Words are deeds, and words determine deeds. Words are deeds, and words determine deeds.

Then we will understand why we are steeped in words today, and why there may be nothing more important to try to do in the year ahead than to be thoughtful about our words – to truly be mindful of our speech.

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The heart of today is the Avodah service we will recite in Mussaf. There, we journey back in time through the words of the medieval poets to relive the sacrificial, cleansing and penitential service of the day. The High Priest is our protagonist, and we follow him as he performs the complex and detailed duties from immersing to confessing to slaughtering to sprinkling.

The service we read about in our mahzor, though, is markedly different than the one the Torah describes. As past Bayit member Professor Shraga Bar-On mentions, “By contrast to the silent high priest ceremony” described in the Torah, “according to the oral tradition in the Mishna, the ceremony becomes spoken. The sages added two more confessions in addition to the original biblical confession about the scapegoat, another prayer of the high priest in the outer courtyard, a public reading of the Torah, and calling out the Holy name 10 times.”

In other words, Hazal transform the Yom Kippur service from one that is almost entirely silent to one filled with speech. This is not an example of the idea that, ‘when we no longer have a Temple, we have no choice but to convert sacrifices to speech, to prayer’ – no, this is the Sages saying that *the emphasis of the day, even in Temple times, is not on the sacrifices, but rather on the words.*

Indeed, the emotional core of the day is when we all recite the Kohen Gadol’s three confessions aloud together, saying, וכך היה אומר, *so would the Kohen Gadol say.* And then we bow and prostrate ourselves, reenacting the moment when the Kohen Gadol would utter God’s Ineffable Name. which he did 10 times over the course of the day, by the way, I believe modeled on the 10 utterances that created the world that the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot describes. Because, now, using speech, invoking God, we are creating repaired world we want to see, in which we partner with God, every Yom Kippur.

בשהיו שומעים את השם הנכבד והנורא מפרש יוצא מפי כהן גדול – *When the people heard God’s awesome name coming forth from the lips of the Kohen Gadol.* It was hearing those sounds, that word, that we flung ourselves to the ground in reverent subservience to God.

And then something amazing happens.

ואף הוא היה מתכוין לגמור את השם כנגד המברכים ואומר להם, תטהרו. *He timed the conclusion of pronouncing God’s name with the people’s response of “Barukh Shem Kevod Malkhuto L’olam Vaed”, and then said to them “you shall be purified.”*

What’s going on here? The Kohen Gadol’s confession, each one, ends by quoting the pasuk we sing over and over again today about the power of this day: כי ביום הזה יכפר עליכם לטהר אתכם מכל חטאתיכם לפני ה' תטהרו. *For on this day God will atone upon you to purify you from all your sins, before God you shall be purified.*

And so when the Kohen Gadol got to the name of God in that verse, he uttered God’s true name. Everyone bowed and answered with the response ו"בשכמל. Then the Kohen Gadol had to finish the verse. He had one word left - תטהרו.

The mahzor could simply have said, and the Kohen Gadol finishes the verse, תטהרו. Or not said it - it’s obvious. But instead, a word becomes more than a word.

Imagine catching the Kohen Gadol's eye in that instant. He has just uttered God's name, the only time of the year it's ever done. We have all flung ourselves to the ground. Just as we feel when we do it here, we expose our vulnerabilities, our imperfections, to God in those intimate moments laying on the ground.

And the the Kohen Gadol doesn't just finish the verse. No. in his fervent focus and passion, he turns to all of us and speaks.

תטהרו!

It becomes a one word sermon. A speech. A promise. A charge.

Become pure today! You will become cleansed today! True teshuvah is possible!

All in that one word, uttered by the Kohen Gadol *after* God's name.

We've all had those moments. When a mentor or parent or friend turns to us and offers a wish, a challenge, a word of faith in us. It's so much more than a word. It can fill us with hope and power and confidence. In a word.

Instead of animal entrails and changes of clothing, everything – the whole focus of the YK service *in Temple times* – becomes about words. Words carry deep meaning.

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The Avodah section, of course, appears only in the Mussaf. But every one of the 5 services of the day has a Viduy section. What is viduy really?

Viduy, confession, is nothing other than the mitzvah of teshuvah. The Rambam, in the very first halakhah of the very first chapter of the Laws of Teshuvah, says that for every wrongdoing, when a person returns to God, they must confess their sins, and that that is the Biblical mitzvah of teshuvah. The more confessing – the more viduy, the better. And no punishment, or apology, or fixing the mistake, or atonement will be one bit effective עד שיתודה, until the wrongdoer verbalizes their confession.

And for what do we confess? Read the Al Hets carefully in Mussaf. A full quarter of the sins, more than 10 of the 44 that we detail, have to do with speech:

על חטא שחטאנו לפניך – For the sins we sinned before you, in:

ביטוי שפתיים – an utterance of the lips.

דבור פה – speech.

וידוי פה – insincere confession.

טפשות פה – foolish talk.

כחש וכזב – deceitful, false words.

לשון הרע – I don't even need to translate.

It's not all evil speech, or talebearing. Sometimes it's foolish speech, thoughtless speech. Opening our mouths without thinking. Saying the wrong thing even when we meant to say the right, in the complex and sensitive world we live in. One where even if you argue that political correctness as a form of censorship may have gone too far, nonetheless careful choices of words are still needed more than ever.

One where civil discourse and the capacity for respectful disagreement is disappearing by the day.

And one where words uttered without much thought can literally circle the globe in an instant, never be able to be taken back.

What do we learn from the fact that the mitzvah of teshuvah is actualized through the viduy, through speech, and that so many of the viduys are about acts of speech?

We learn that words are deeds. **Words are deeds.** Let us never delude ourselves into thinking words are insignificant, that they are smaller than physical behaviors. They are so often bigger.

And so I marvel again and again at that strange phrase we learn as children, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words – or names – will never hurt me." I say in front of you today that the deepest wounds, and most painful scars, I have, are not from sticks or stones. They are from words. So are the most hurtful things I have done to others. Words I have said – or not said.

And of course we also know the opposite is true. It has been words of encouragement and support, words of praise, words of intimate love, words of caring and commitment, that have been among my life's greatest gifts and most important memories. And so have been many of the proudest things I have done in my life: things I have said – or not said.

No wonder the Sefer Hahinukh, in describing the mitzvah of וידוי מעשר, of declaring our fulfillment of the laws of maaser, a mitzvah performed entirely by speech, describes the root of the mitzvah this way:

ספר החינוך מצוה תרז

משרשי המצוה, לפי שסגולת האדם וגודל שבחו הוא הדבור שהוא יתר בו על כל מיני הנבראים, שאילו מצד יתר התנועות גם שאר בעלי חיים יתנועעו כמוהו, ועל כן יש הרבה מבני אדם שיראין מלפסול דבורם שהוא ההוד הגדול שבהם יותר מלחטוא במעשה.

What makes us unique creatures? Every creature has a body. We all move, run, act. Only we have fully developed speech. No wonder there are so many people who are more afraid to offer unfit speech than to sin in physical deed.

Wow. There are many people who are more afraid to offer unfit speech than to sin in physical deed. That's the world I want to live in! That's the world this speech-focused Yom Kippur is pointing us towards.

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The Avodah is the heart of the day. There we discovered that speech is what created meaning and inspiration on Yom Kippur as far back as Temple times.

The Viduy is the constant refrain of the day. There we discovered that word is deed. Speech is real. Whether mitzvah or aveirah, it is our most basic and defining characteristic. It demands our greatest attention.

The bookends of the day, Kol Nidre and Neilah, are marked with the Selihot services. Here, we encounter the final critical message about speech.

The chorus of the Selihot services last night and tonight, as they have been since we launched these days on Reb Elli's wings right here 2 weeks ago, the chorus is God's 13 Attributes of Mercy.

The Talmud (RH 17b) depicts God's teaching Moshe those attributes after the sin of the Golden Calf.

ויעבור ה' על פניו ויקרא א"ר יוחנן אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומר מלמד שנתעטף הקב"ה בשליח צבור והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה אמר לו כל זמן שישראל חוטאין יעשו לפני בסדר הזה ואני מוחל להם

The verse states: "And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed" (Exodus 34:6). Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Were it not explicitly written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this. The verse teaches that the Blessed Holy One wrapped Godself in a prayer shawl like a prayer leader and showed Moses the structure of the order of the prayer. God said to him: Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me like this arrangement, and I will forgive them.

Our classic understanding of this Gemara is that if we really pray these 13 Attributes with kavvanah, we can somehow summon up God's behavior in these channels, and find Divine compassion upon our flawed selves.

R Moshe Alshikh (Num. 14:20), in the 16th century, quotes a work called the לבנת הספיר who asks, why does God say, after teaching Moshe this liturgy, "עשו לפני בסדר הזה", "act before Me like this arrangement"?

He answers, we have misunderstood this Gemara, this Divine promise all these years. The promise is not upon **saying** the attributes. We have to **do** them! We have to model **our behavior** upon God's merciful ways, and then we can hope to be forgiven.

So why do we spend so much time chanting these words like a mantra, over and over again? Let's get out of shul and go do it!

This cuts against everything I have been arguing until now. Words aren't as important as deeds, he is saying. Actions *do* speak louder than words.

And of course if we speak nicely but act wrongly, our words aren't worth much. What we do with our arms and legs, the kindness and change we bring in the world far beyond words, matters.

So why do we chant the 13 Attributes so many times today?

I think the answer is the last piece of this puzzle of the place of words on Yom Kippur and in our lives. Words don't just inspire. Words aren't just deeds, good and bad. Words also shape our being. They form us and our actions. *We are what we say. We become what we declare.*

We say these attributes over and over to embed them in ourselves. So that part of our DNA, part of our muscles, the chorus of our hearts, is the call to loving, compassionate life. Then we walk out to the remaining 364 days of the year ready to put that into action. **If we hadn't chanted it over and over again on this day, we wouldn't be able to live it the rest of the year.**

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Yom Kippur is about speech. We will utter 100,000 words today. That's *6-7 times the amount of words we say on a normal day*, according to social science research. We will pray a week's worth of talking, today!

100,000 carefully chosen, thoughtfully crafted, intentionally placed words.

We will relive the ultimate moments of speech – when the High Priest called out God's name 10 times, recreating the world in partnership with God, and when the High Priest turned to us and said, תטהרו – “be cleansed”! Because words inspire, uplift, and shape us.

We will perform the speech mitzvah of viduy and we will confess the many sins we do with speech. Because words are deeds.

And we will fervently sing out the 13 attributes of Mercy because we will only do them if we've said them. Because words create our world.

This 5778, let us inhabit this world. A world when we think about the power of our words to shape our lives and others.

When we try to reflect on every word we say, before we say it.

When we choose the words we say to ourselves and others with intentionality and care and love.

Then we will be creating a world of peace, and hope, and redemption. Shanah tovah.