

Sermon for Kol Nidre 5779

May The Words of Our Mouths...

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I want to tell you the story of one of the lesser known characters in the bible, a man named Naval. Naval was a wealthy man; he owned 3000 sheep and 1000 goats. David, who later became king in Israel, and his men protected Naval's possessions in the wilderness. They made sure that none of Naval's animals were lost. Sometime later, David sent messengers to Naval to ask a favor. The messengers asked for whatever food Naval could spare to feed David's men, in appreciation for their help to Naval's shepherds.

Naval responded coarsely: "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many slaves nowadays who run away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and my water and the meat that I slaughtered for my own shearers and give them to men who come from I don't know where?"

That's quite a "Thank you!"

One of Naval's servants told Naval's wife, Abigail, what happened. He told her how grateful he was that David's men had been very friendly to him and Naval's other servants.

He described how David's men had protected them so that none of their flocks were lost. The servant worried that harm might befall his master, Naval, because David was likely to be angered by Naval's refusal of help. He lamented that Naval was "such a nasty fellow that no one can speak to him."

The bible portrays Abigail as a wise and beautiful woman. She grasped the problem and quickly assembled a bountiful supply of all sorts of food and took the food to David's men - but she didn't tell her husband. He was enjoying a banquet, and was seriously drunk! David was appeased and grateful, and he assured Abigail of his protection. When Naval regained his sobriety, Abigail told him what happened - and he became like a stone, perhaps from the shock of realizing what almost happened to him, because of his ingratitude and his coarse mouth. He died 10 days later.

This name "Naval" is a symbolic name - and the bible plays on that symbolism. When Abigail meets David, she appeals to him not to pay attention Naval; she describes her husband in an uncomplimentary way. She used a phrase which has become a familiar expression in Hebrew. She said: - כְּשֵׁמוֹ כֵן הוּא - (K'shmo, ken hu) - his name fits him. How so?

You can translate *Naval* as: "Vile, Mean, Base, Boor, Scoundrel, Villain."

Nothing nice! כְּשֵׁמוֹ כֵן הוּא (K'shmo, ken hu) - Abigail was right - his name did indeed fit him!

Naval's boorish, ungrateful words inform a term which I feel lies behind our confessionals today on Yom Kippur. That expression is נבול פה (*Nivul Peh*) - disgusting, disgraceful, contemptuous language coming out of people's mouths. In the long confessional, which we repeat at each of the five services of Yom Kippur, we ask forgiveness for the sins of idle chatter (בטוי שפתים *Bittui s'fatayim*), for the way we talk (פה דבור *Dibbur peh*), for empty confessions (פה ודוי *Vidui peh*), for degrading parents and teachers (זלזול הורים ומורים *Zilzul Horim uMorim*), for desecrating God's name (חילול השם *Hillul HaShem*), for stupid talk (פה טפשות *Tifshut peh*), for speaking ill of others (לשון הרע *Lashon ha-ra*), and for cheapening our everyday conversation (שיח שפתותינו *Si'ah siftoteinu*).

You may wonder why our liturgy has such an obsession with words, and how we use them. It's not just because of Naval, the biblical ingrate. It's because language is a uniquely human manner of communication. Yes, I know whales communicate. And I can assure you that our poodle, Ziggy, communicates with Anne and me, by his barks, stance and intonation!

But human language is incredibly expressive; it is an art form that, in its precision, distinguishes human beings from all other creatures. How we use language can elevate us and those to whom we speak - and about whom we

speak. נבול פה (*Nivul Peh*) - disgraceful language can degrade and defile us; it can cheapen our lives. It makes us coarse as people.

The 16th Century Rabbi Yehudah Loeb of Prague, known as the Maharal, who created the mythical Golem of Prague, was passionate in his denunciation of slander. In his book *Netivot Olam*, he compared the sin of נבול פה (*Nivul Peh*) - disgraceful language - to lewdness and unchastity; in other words: immorality of the highest order. He campaigned against lies because of how destructive such talk is to people's lives and their reputations.

Let's remember how precious words are in our tradition. Go back to Genesis: God creates the world by the mere - but extraordinary - use of words! And lest we think that we can just spout off anything we want and it has no substance, like blowing smoke - the Hebrew word for "word" is דבר (*Davar*). דבר (*Davar*) is also the word for "thing". The message conveyed to us by the Hebrew lexicon is that words have substance; words embody reality. We cannot use words cheaply, and act as though they have no consequences. They have tremendous impact. That's why we began tonight with the כל נדרי (*Kol Nidrei*) prayer. The essential lesson of כל נדרי (*Kol Nidrei*) is that words have substance, words express commitment - or lack of commitment.

In the book of Proverbs we read: מָוֶת וְחַיִּים בְּיַד לָשׁוֹן (Mavet vaHayim b'Yad Lashon) "Death and Life are in the power of the tongue." Words can heal, and words can kill. Words can bind us together as a society - and words can divide and cripple us. Words can lift us up, and words can insult, and bully, even drive people to suicide, as we have seen tragically.

How we use our words - in our homes, in our offices, on social media, on Twitter and television, in our advertisements, in the movies, and yes, in our political campaigns and in the halls of government - sets a tone, and it's our choice. The tone we set often prompts others to respond in kind to the tone we set.

How do we want to lead? With kind or cutting, degrading, humiliating words? With honesty, or with deliberate, regular falsification? Our words of prayer guide us in the right direction.

The most essential prayer in our liturgy is the Amidah. If we are traditionally observant, we say it three times daily, all year long; four times on Shabbat and holidays, and five times on Yom Kippur. It's striking - and I think very significant - that the *Amidah* always begins with a short introductory prayer, quoting Psalm 51:17 -

אֲדֹנָי--' שִׁפְתַי תִּפְתָּח וּפִי יַגִּיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ.

(*Adonai, s'fatai tiftah, uFi yagid t'hilatekha*)

“Adonai - open my lips, so that my mouth may speak Your praise.”

And when we finish the Amidah, we close with another short prayer:

אֱלֹהֵי--', נִצּוֹר לְשׁוֹנֵי מַרְעָה, וּשְׁפַתִּי מִדַּבֵּר מִרְמָה

(*Elohai, n'tzor l'shoni mei-ra, uS'fatai midaber mirmah*)

God, keep my tongue from evil, my lips from lies.

Our words of prayer guide us away from vile, degrading speech. Since the days of the bible - remember the story of Naval - Jewish tradition has taught us the dangers of speaking contemptuously, crudely and inconsiderately about other people. Judaism teaches us how negative, crass, deceitful and denigrating words injure both the speaker of those words as well as the person to whom those words are directed. נְבוּל פֶּה (*Nivul peh*)- Nasty speech - and lies diminish our human quality.

Now that we have recited Kol Nidre and tonight's cycle of confessionals, let's take the preciousness and seriousness of words to our hearts. Let us be advocates for clean speech - לשון נקי (*Lashon naki*); let's use kind words, words that build up, embrace, encourage and create peace.

That's our challenge for this New Year, and for the many years yet to come.
May we always be attuned to the words of our prayers, so they may to guide
us along the path to kindness, harmony and peace.

Amen.