On The Power of Words and How We Use Them

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What are the magic words?

_Abra Kadabra_ of course.

The magician shows you his empty hands, he rolls up his sleeves, all in an attempt to convince you that nothing – no physical influence – could affect the outcome of his trick. Only his magic words.

It turns out that these very special, very famous, magic words likely have roots in Hebrew, or Aramaic.

Author Estelle Frankel suggests that the original was something like “_ibra k’dibra_ - "I create through my speech”"

I believe that behind all the window dressing of a magic show – the lights and smoke and music – stands a common truth about our human existence that should _astound_ us, but it too often goes unnoticed.

_We can create through speech._

Too often, we underestimate this great potential that rests within each of us.

The power of words is paramount in Judaism. And how we use our words – from chanting Torah to everyday speech - is a core concern of Jewish practice.

In some ways, it’s much easier to pay attention to rituals like Kashrut – focusing on the food we put INTO our mouths - instead of focusing on our speech, and the words that come OUT of our mouths.

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1 Frankel, Estelle: _Sacred Therapy: Jewish Spiritual Teachings on Inner Emotional Healing and Inner Wholeness_.

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We call ourselves the People of the Book, which means we are also a People of Words. And paying closer attention to how we and others use them, can make a huge impact on us and on our world.

I believe that words can create reality because I am a student of history. Our past, and certainly our Jewish past, teaches us time and time again about the immense impact of the words that we speak and write.

In the summer of 1995, Benjamin Netanyahu addressed a crowd of people who were protesting the 2nd Oslo Peace Accords - An agreement between Israel and the Palestinian People. Netanyahu stood before the crowd, calling Yasser Arafat a war criminal, but the crowd of Israeli protesters had a different focus. They were infuriated with then Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin. They screamed “Rabin Boged!” “Rabin is a Traitor!” The protestors chanted, “BaDam Va’Esh, et Rabin Negaresh” - “With blood and fire we will drive out Rabin.” And they screamed with all their might - “Mavet LaRabin” – “Death to Rabin.”

You don’t need a textbook to learn about this. We have a front row seat to these chilling words thanks to the internet. Just type in the words “incitement against Rabin” into Youtube and you can sit and watch for yourself, complete with English subtitles, as these destructive words left these people’s mouths. One could argue that these were just words. You might say that it was all a bunch of hot air. But Jewish tradition teaches that words have power. That words can affect reality. And that the poisonous words shouted that night, in some way, altered the course of Israeli history. A few months later, on November 4th, 1995, an Israeli Jewish religious fanatic, Yigal Amir, assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

This is surely an extreme example of the power of words. But we are living through an extreme transformation of how we as a society use our words. L’Shon Harah – The term used by our Talmudic sages to categorize evil speech, is now commonplace in our public discourse. We find it on our computer screens, but also in our daily conversations, in our meetings at work, in our homes. There are literally newspaper columns dedicated to gossip. The limits of what we as a society deem to be acceptable speech are being redefined. It is changing so much that many of the things that we say and hear– comments that easily qualify

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2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhSZy_jfNRg&t=179s
as L’shon Harah – Evil Speech – go unnoticed. Or worse – we notice it, but do nothing about it.

During these High Holy Days, many of us sit in the pews thinking about how we can deepen our relationship with Judaism this year. It’s hard to get to services regularly and it’s a challenge to study Torah. Sometimes the demands of our schedules get in the way of Shabbat dinner. Sometimes we’re just too tired. But no matter where we are, no matter how full our schedules are, we have an opportunity to live out our Jewish values and deepen our relationship to Jewish practice every time we open our mouths.

If we want to deepen our Jewish identity this year, we can begin by paying extra attention to all of our conversations, all of our texts, all of our tweets, all of our interactions. We can engage more with Judaism by watching our tongues.

It says in the Talmud, “Whoever saves a life, saves the world entire.” And we have the power to save lives every day by simply being mindful of our words. To many of us, this may sound silly. How can my words save a life? But our Jewish wisdom tells us that we truly possess this power through our words. Our tradition often frames our speech as a matter life or death.

The 19th century Rabbi and teacher, Rabbi Israel Salanter offers us the following teaching.

“If you were to say of your rabbi, that he does not have a good voice, and of your cantor that he is not a scholar- you are a gossip. But if you were to say of your rabbi that he is no scholar and of a cantor that he has no voice – you are a murderer.”

In his book, A Guide to Jewish Practice, Rabbi David Teutsch writes, “Judaism has traditionally regarded [Halbanat Panim – Shaming or causing embarrassment] as a serious offense. The blood brought to the cheeks by embarrassment is said to remind the embarrasser that causing embarrassment is tantamount to shedding blood. (Talmud Baba Metsia 58b)

Certainly emotional injuries are as real as physical ones.”

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3 Jerusalem Talmud Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:9
4 Teutsch, Guide to Jewish practice, page 125 on the bottom of the page.
5 Teutsch, ibid, 142
Words have power. Words can affect us, even physically. Anyone who has ever been embarrassed, or yelled at, or catcalled, knows that words have the actual power to elicit a physical reaction within us.

And if words have the power to make our stomachs churn with anxiety - if words can make us cry, it must mean means that within our words exists the potential for good. The potential for blessing. As Rebbi Nachman of Breslov once said, “If you believe breaking is possible, believe fixing is possible.”

This evening, we begin the celebration of the birthday of the world. And in our liturgy, we remember this moment by saying:

“Baruch She’Amar v’Haya Ha’olam” “Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came to be.”

Do I believe in the historicity of the story that these words from our morning liturgy reference? That God spoke and, Abra Kadabra, the world came into existence?

No. I don't believe that literally.

But I do believe in a central truth of that story. I believe that our words have the power to create our reality and that they have the power to help fix our reality.

Stanford researcher and Professor Carol Dweck is famous for introducing a concept that she calls “Growth Mindset.” She suggests that our word choice when praising our children is essential. When a child accomplishes something, many of us are tempted to say something like, “You did it! You’re so smart!” But through these seemingly harmless words, we are framing that child’s reality. Through praising the successful result and connecting it to the child’s intellect
- “you did it, therefore you’re smart,” -
We are also implying the opposite
- “if you don’t do it, you’re stupid.”

Dr. Dweck suggests that we praise the effort instead. “You tried and tried. You pushed through the difficulty. Good for you. And look at what came of it – you did it!” In this example, we highlight the value of effort rather than the moment of success. Dweck shows us how the words we use can create and shape our understanding of reality. We are constantly shaping
our brains and we are shaping the lens through which we see the world even in the most casual comments.

When we consider just how powerful words can be, and we view things through the lens of speech, it can make *everything* much more important and more relevant – even the liturgy in our prayer books.

Consider the Ashamnu prayer. In the prayer where we admit our sins, We say *Gazalnu* - we have robbed. I assume not many of us have robbed a bank in this past year. But how many of us have stolen time from another in conversation? *Chamasnu* - we have been violent. Hopefully very few, have been physically violent this year. But how many of us have used our words in a brutal fashion?

When we gossip, when we speak poorly of others, when we use unkind language, we are using such a powerful tool for such petty purposes.

It’s like trying to cut a sandwich with a chain saw.

Go use such a powerful tool for something more constructive.

Don’t underestimate the power of words. Don’t doubt our power to shape our world through speech. This doesn’t mean that we can’t have confrontation. It doesn’t mean that we can’t have difficult conversations. But especially in those difficult moments of conflict, we must be careful with our words. We must recognize that our words have the power to hurt and the power to heal - - the power to destroy, and the power to build.

Let us not forget, as one of my college professors, Dr. James Bloom, used to remind my English class, it was through the power of words that this great nation came to be. The United States of America was literally *written* into existence.

Next time we’re inclined to talk about someone behind their back, or the next time we want to yell at someone, we should remember how *constructive* words can be and ask ourselves, “Is *this* how I want to use this power?”

In this same vein, the next time you feel the urge to say “I love you” or in the theme of these High Holy Days, the next time you feel the urge to say “I’m sorry”, don’t talk yourself out of it. Those words *matter*.

With the simple words “I’m sorry” you could ease someone’s burdens. With the simple words “I love you” you could save a life.
“I have a dream, [said the great Martin Luther King Jr.]... that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” –

Yitzhak Rabin told us, “You don’t make peace with friends. You make peace with unsavory enemies.”

“In the future... [Malala Yousafzai predicts]... women, rather than men, will be the ones to change the world.”

One common link between all of these words is that they have long outlived the moment when a bullet pierced the bodies of the people who said them.

None of these dreams are fully actualized yet, but all of these words continue to reverberate throughout our world and in our consciousness – beseeching us, inspiring us, to act – to affect change in a world that desperately needs it.

If we want to live out our values, if we want build a world of love, if we want to build a better world for our children. Let's watch our tongues. All of it begins– and according to our sacred stories, all of this universe began - with words.

Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came to be. Blessed are we, created in the Divine image, who have the ability to bring about blessing and goodness through speech.

Shanah Tovah