

Rosh Hashanah 5780 – Words Matter

Rabbi Michael Safra

It was the kind of tragic story that should have made a difference. September 1997, the Allentown district of Derby, England. Suicide by bullying. Thirteen-year-old Kelly Yeomans was the victim of relentless harassment. Teachers didn't want to hear of it, and neither did the police. Eventually, it became too much for her to bear. The bullies didn't pull the trigger; but neither were they blameless. Their teasing and taunting had a dehumanizing effect. They saw Kelly not as a child of God, but as an *other*, an object of scorn. Their words suggested that maybe the world would be better without Kelly. Eventually, Kelly came to believe them.

The Bible teaches that death and life are in the hands of the tongue, *mavet v'hayyim b'yad ha-lashon*. To this, the Rabbis added, "*kol hamalbin pnei haveiro ba-rabim k'ilu shofekh damim*, The one who embarrasses another person in public is considered as having committed murder." Words matter.

It is difficult to fully grasp the pain that words can inflict. "Sticks and stones may break my bones," says a popular meme, "but words can cause permanent psychological damage." A girl in Portland Oregon wrote a letter to People Magazine in response to Kelly's story. "As a teenager, I too was tortured by my fellow students," she said.

I was ... overweight ... and ... abused constantly. ... Teachers witnessed this over and over again and did nothing. ... I thought of suicide but luckily I never did it ... I wish all teenagers who tease others could have it happen to them so they could feel the pain and humiliation they inflict. I am signing this letter with the name they chose to torture me with for six years. How would you like to be known by an entire school as:

Big Bertha, Portland Oregon

That was 1997. Cruel nicknames were not invented during the last presidential election. Bullying long preceded Facebook or Twitter. And it is time we took the lesson to heart. Words matter – for individuals as well as the society we are tasked with building and improving.

This was a tough year in the annals of hatred. Our community was shocked by horrific shootings at Tree of Life in Pittsburgh and Chabad in Poway. We witnessed a massacre during Friday prayer at a mosque in Christchurch New Zealand; and a bombing on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka. We mourned 22 victims at Walmart in El Paso. We don't know what makes killers kill. People are complicated, and not everyone who hears base innuendo on television or reads it on social media becomes a murderer. But we must be concerned that the hate rhetoric is getting louder. We cannot pretend it doesn't matter or doesn't concern us. The world needs us to work to ease the tensions, stop the vilification, change the words we use to describe the "others" in our midst.

When the shooter in Pittsburgh writes, “HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people;” when the villain in Poway complains that Jews are engaging in a “meticulously planned genocide of the European race;” when the attacker in Christchurch decries a “Great Replacement” and the perpetrator in El Paso laments a “Hispanic invasion,” I hear the dehumanizing descriptions of “swarms of refugees” invading our country. I remember how my people was once compared to “parasites” or “cancer,” how we were labeled the ultimate Other.

Just a few weeks after the attack in Poway, the New York Times international edition published a cartoon depicting Benjamin Netanyahu’s face with the body of a dog leading a blind Donald Trump on a leash adorned with a Jewish star. We have a problem Words. Pictures. Dehumanization. The efforts to delegitimize matter.

We are living in a hyper-charged environment, and we have to do something to lower the temperature. We Jews are often victims, and I don’t want to blame victims. But I do want to summon our better angels as leaders, as God’s partners, as dreamers of a better tomorrow. We can do better than suggest that political opponents be “locked up” or “sent back.” We can imagine a world where some values are more important than winning.

It’s not just politicians. A few weeks ago I attended a dinner and got involved in a conversation with a group of rabbis, most of whom I had just met. We were talking about politics and Israel, and someone volunteered that he had lost a number of friends because of his vote in the last presidential election. And I said to myself: Is this what it’s come to? “Us versus them,” “you’re either with us or you’re against us” now applies to the people with whom I sit in Shabbat services or play tennis or share a drink while watching a game? Reasonable people are bound to disagree on a whole host of issues, and we have not just a right but a responsibility to advocate for our positions. But we have to think carefully about the words we use.

In the synagogue as well, our strength is our diversity. Jews don’t all look the same. Jews have different sexual orientation and gender identities. There are rich Jews and poor Jews and mentally stable and unstable Jews, and Jews of different cognitive and physical abilities. Not all the members of our community are even Jewish. There are words people used to use to describe those who look different or act different or profess different beliefs, which are no longer acceptable – even in a joke, even in private. If we are going to change the world, we have to be as careful in private conversation as we are on the *bima*.

This morning’s Haftarah recounted the story of Hannah and the birth of Samuel. Traditional commentary focuses on Hannah’s faith, her fervent prayer, her selflessness in dedicating her only son to God’s service. But how did she get to that point? When the story opens, we are told that Hannah is different. She doesn’t have a child like Penina does. And she suffers from depression. She doesn’t eat; she cries incessantly; she separates herself from others.

Hannah needs help, but she doesn’t get it. Instead, she is taunted. The text says that her rival, Penina, would try to make her miserable. “Hey Hannah,” Rashi supplies the words. “Why are you so sad today? Did you spend too much energy purchasing overalls or tunics for your children?” Her husband

lacked empathy as well. "Why are you angry and you not eating?" he would ask. "Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?" The high priest saw Hannah in her wretchedness and called her a drunk. "How long will you make a spectacle of yourself? Sober up!" he told her.

There was no attempt to understand her misery; it seemed easier to belittle it. You get the sense in Hannah's prayer at the end, just how much she had been hurt. "Talk no more with lofty pride," she says. "Let no arrogance cross your lips." She prays that the haughty should be brought low and the needy should be raised up, that the ones who have caused such hurt could come to understand the pain they inflicted with words.

Stop me if you've heard this before. Morris and Esther went to the state fair every year, and every year Morris would say that he wanted to ride in the helicopter. And Esther thought it was too expensive: "You know Morris," she would say, "Fifty dollars is fifty dollars." One year, they were arguing about it, and the helicopter pilot overheard. "I'll make you a deal," he told the couple. "I'll take the both of you for a ride. If you can stay quiet for the entire ride and not say a word I won't charge you! But if you say one word, it's fifty dollars." Morris and Esther agreed.

They went up, and the pilot did all kinds of fancy maneuvers, but not a word was heard. He did daredevil tricks, and still not a word. When they landed, the pilot asked Morris, "How on earth did you manage to stay quiet through all those maneuvers. I really thought I could get you to scream." "Well," Morris replied, "to tell you the truth, I almost said something when Esther fell out, but you know -- fifty dollars is fifty dollars."

I read an article recently by James Poniewozik, chief television critic of the New York Times, that pinned some of the coarsening of our language on reality television. Reality TV, as I think we know, is not real. It encourages participants to "be real," but, as Poniewozik explains, that is not the same thing.

To be real is to be the most entertaining, provocative form of yourself. It is to say what you want, without caring whether your words are kind or responsible – or true – but only whether you want to say them.

There's a certain aggressiveness on TV, which spills out. Life becomes a competition. Politics becomes a game. Who is in the lead? How can he "close the gap"? What do you have to do to gain an advantage? And there is competition between "us" and "them". In this debased environment, immigrants are "criminals" or "vermin," Jews are "dogs," Muslims are "terrorists," people with whom we disagree are "stupid" or "weak." Anyone who gets in my way must be stopped. "All is fair in love and war." "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing."

It seems like life has become sport, except – Vince Lombardi notwithstanding – even sports don't work like that. Sports don't tolerate hatred for the opponent. After the quarterback kneels to run

out the clock, the linemen stand up and hug each other. Thirty seconds ago, they were brutal enemies, but that was during the game. Life is not a game.

Hockey champions revel in hoisting the Stanley Cup high above their heads, but first they line up and shake hands with their opponents. Winners don't call their opponents "losers." Today's professional athletes recognize that they may even be on the other team next year.

You may have seen a few weeks ago at the US Open, when Naomi Osaka of Japan defeated 15-year-old American Coco Gauff. Osaka had a private conversation with Coco and then invited her to join the on-court interview. Coco Gauff told the crowd: "[Naomi] did amazing, and I'm going to learn a lot from this match." Not just from Osaka's grit; but also her grace.

Serena Williams had a tough match when she lost in the finals in last year's final to the same Naomi Osaka. She was frustrated during the match and was penalized for lashing out at the chair umpire. When SerSheena lost, thousands jeered. Serena could have basked in their support; she had felt cheated. But she spoke up instead: "I know you guys were here rooting, and I was rooting too. But let's make this the best moment it can be. ... Congratulations, Naomi. No more booing."

In sports, games end with a handshake or hug because athletes understand that empathy is not "weak." Love is more powerful than even the most intense competition on the field.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin tells a story of a man who lingered after the funeral service for his wife. Eventually, the rabbi approached the grieving husband and told him it was time to go; and the man waved him away. When the rabbi came up to him again, the man said, "You don't understand. I loved my wife." The rabbi tried to show empathy – "I know you did." "But you don't understand," the man repeated. "I loved my wife! I loved my wife! – and once, I almost told her."

It isn't just the words we do use that carry so much weight. What about the words we fail to use? *Death and life* are in the hands of the tongue.

In the Torah, love is a commandment. We are commanded to love God. We are commanded to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We are commanded to love the stranger. And to love kindness. "God has told you ... what is good," says the prophet Micah, "and what the Lord requests of you; only to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

God can mean a lot of things, but for me it comes down to humility. God is the awareness that I am not the center of the universe. There are others – and there is one Other – more powerful than me. To love kindness is to appreciate the godliness in others. To do justice is to recognize my responsibility to do God's work, to love God's children, to follow God's commandments.

Perhaps more than ever, we have to use words that reflect that commitment to love. We have to express appreciation, gratitude, wonder. Let's think about that the next time we have to call the cable company, or the next time the waiter brings out a salad with onions and croutons even though we were quite clear that those items should be left off. Or the next time we have to call the synagogue because a seating assignment got mixed up, or a teacher dismissed a little late, or it was too hot or too cold, or your bill was not accurate, or you did not like the sermon. We deserve to have things right. Nobody

should get the runaround. But do we want the person on the other end of the phone to feel like an unskilled or underpaid or otherwise belittled servant, or do we want him or her to feel like a partner in creating community, expanding Jewish life, and educating our children.

The synagogue is interesting because we are customers, but we are also stakeholders and owners. Think of all the volunteers and contributors. And the work that was put in for just today – to number chairs, bring in the books, assign seats and honors, arrange youth services and babysitting and family opportunities, review security, and do so many other little things. Do the words we use – even when angry – reflect our appreciation for all of that?

In 1964, the journalist Eric Sevareid interviewed Harry Truman about his experiences in the presidency. Truman became president upon the death of Franklin Roosevelt; he defeated Germany and Japan (and Dewey), and implemented the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe; he was the first world leader to recognize the state of Israel. But in this interview, he reflected on something different. “What you don’t understand,” the 33rd president said, “is the power of a President to hurt.” Sevareid reflected:

An American President has the power to build, to set fateful events in motion, to destroy an enemy civilization, to win or lose a vast personal following. But the power of a President to hurt the feelings of another human being - this, I think, had scarcely occurred to me. ...

“Death and life are in the hand of the tongue.”

The Psalmist decries the evildoers “who whet their tongues like swords, who aim their arrows – cruel words – to shoot from hiding at the blameless...”. He calls for divine retribution: “May God shoot the arrow, that they be struck down suddenly.”

Today I want to suggest that God cannot uproot evil speech alone. God needs us to imagine a world where words are used to express love, where words are used to affirm life, where words are used to appreciate blessings. In 5780, let us work to create that world. It isn’t enough to decry poor use of words by others. We must do our part to achieve a modified version of Isaiah’s prophecy: that our verbal swords shall be beaten into plowshares and our verbal spears into pruning hooks.

Elohai, My God, netzor leshoni me-ra, guard my tongue from evil, that my words may praise You, my actions may reflect Your will, my thoughts may focus on the blessings of life and love. Shanah Tovah.