

## Yom Kippur Day 5782 - R. Ruthie Gelfarb

Over RH I shared that we Jews inherit a Treasure Chest, A treasure chest that we pass down from generation to generation. This treasure chest is filled with the wisdom of our Torah and with its mitzvot, sacred responsibilities. We Jews also inherit another treasure chest: the oral Torah/the Torah *shel b'a'peh*. It is filled with stories, legal interpretations, and wisdom from our forebearers.

Often, we hear teachings that do not make sense to our younger selves. Then one day, life leads us to understand. Aah, now I get it! It makes sense. There is wisdom there.”

- Guests are like fish, after the third day they start to stink! Got it!
- Throw an extra serving in the pot, you never know whom you might bump into.
- Life and Death are in the Power of the Tongue

Our traditional High Holiday Prayerbook, the Machazor, has 44 statements that make up the Al Cheyt, **twelve** deal with sins rooted in speech. 25% have to do with speech.

During Yom Kippur, we acknowledge before the Eternal the wrong we have done through our speech: subtle deceits & outright lies; sharing of gossip & rumors, through harsh internal criticisms as well as hurtful, thoughtless blurted out to others, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally.

The words we speak have immense power: Power to uplift and heal AND power to inflict pain and cause harm. Death and Life are in the power of the tongue. ***Mahvet v'chayyim b'yad lashon.***

The brilliant Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who many surmise lived with manic depression, encouraged his followers to only use “*diverei chizuk*” words of encouragement with each other in order build one another up.

Reb Nachman recognized that people were vulnerable to such intense self-criticism and that they might easily lose faith in their ability to better themselves. It is essential we encourage each other as well as ourselves by use positive self-talk to keep a healthy perspective as well as to have the energy and faith to do the work of teshuvah.

Moreover, encouraging words can help us to accomplish that which we may have thought impossible.

Allow me to share a story. Unlike most of you, I am not a long distance, endurance athlete. I don't run marathons or bike up and over the Rocky Mountain passes. However, I did attempt a sprint triathlon some years ago. I swam, biked and ran. Well one I got to the running portion, I started to falter. This 3.5 miles for me was very, very hard. Well just when i thought I couldn't do it any longer, I saw a crowd. And they were cheering “Your got this! Keep it going! Great job!” And you know what? Their words helped me to “Get It!” With enthusiasm and you, I finished this sprint triathlon.

Those words of encouragement enabled me to accomplish what seemed impossible to me.

What words of encouragement, *divrei hizuk*, have received in your life?.

In 5782, Where and with whom in your life do you have opportunity to use **divrei hizuk**/words of encouragement?

Just as skillful, thoughtful speech can create and build people up, impulsive and unskillful speech can bring people down. Unskillful speech can damage marriages, families, friendships, congregations and communities.

There was a community long ago in which some of the members gossiped quite a bit about other folks. The rabbi asked to meet with him. The rabbi took out a great big goose-down pillow and cut it open. She shook the pillow and the feathers went all over, far and wide. She then turned to the man and said, "Please collect all the feathers." "Rabbi, he replied, "that is not possible. They have gone far and wide." "That is exactly the point," she gently said. "Once words are shared they go far and wide and can not be taken back."

Perhaps this is why, Rabbi Moshe Isserles, author of the authoritative Code of Jewish Law, the *Shulchan Aruch*, exempts victims of *la'shon hara* from the general obligation to forgive wrongdoing EVEN when the perpetrator sincerely apologizes. Once slander is out there in the world, its effects are hard to truly calculate or minimize as a person's reputation may be sullied. *La'Shon Harah/gossip* has a life of its own.

There is a teaching that I want to share with you that I have often found hard to understand. It is from the great medieval Rabbi Maimonides. It is written in Mishnah Torah in a section called Laws of Character Development.

He writes, "*Lashon Ha'rah* kills three people: the subject of the harmful speech, the Speaker and the listener. The listener, Maimonides continues, suffers more than the speaker."

What a confusing teaching!!!. The listener suffers more than the speaker. Why would he say that???

Perhaps the listener is harmed more because she now has to integrate this new painful information about someone she knows. I know from experience that when I hear something negative or titillating about someone, it is almost impossible to not associate that information with that person forever, EVEN IF THAT INFORMATION IS NOT TRUE. The Way I think about this person is impacted forever. **If the listener does not protest or stop the speaker from saying words of la'shon hara, Jewish tradition teaches, the listener is now implicated in the wrongdoing.**

Friends, how has hearing lashon hara (gossip) impacted you???

Have you ever tried to halt gossip during a conversation? If not, why not?

Our culture and society encourages malicious, hurtful gossip. Sometimes it feels like the more salacious, the better.

In the US today, we are experiencing the troubling effects of the spread of false information, particularly on the internet. Vaccinations not working. That information is actually leading to people dying as postings are forwarded from one person to another. Voting machines being broken into and ballots altered. That information has led people to stop having faith in an election system that was the envy of the world. Teenagers post and repost hurtful images and words about classmates on facebook accounts. Real suffering has led teens to take their own lives. We are all suffering from a pandemic -- *lashon ha'rah* / spread of gossip.

Judaism discourages the spreading of gossip- whether it is false or true. Yes, even if it is true! For example, I am discouraged from sharing that the Xes made a large donation to a particular university so that their child would be accepted. True- Yes! Shared with others- No!

All this not gossiping is very, very hard. Speaking skillfully is very, very hard. What are we to do. I invite us to turn to our Oral Torah, with its sage advice and wisdom.

**You shall build a fence around the Torah.** I never liked this rabbinic advice as it seemed to be encouraging me to enact stringencies which were even harder than some of the mitzvot I was doing.

Now, I think it is brilliant advice. I only wish I followed it more often.

I have personally seen the effects of “Not Building a fence around the Torah” I had a congregant many years ago, who was a member of AA. He told me that if he walked by a bar he felt drawn into it and would have a drink which led to 2 and 3 and 4 and 5. So, he learned to walk around the block to avoid the bar and not be tempted. He built a fence around himself.



We can build fences around our speech!

When we feel emotionally triggered (vulnerable, dishonored, angry, or hurt), I invite us to repeat the phrase to ourselves: Life & death are in the Power of the Tongue. Or Before the Tongue, there are two gates: the teeth and the lips.

We all receive seemingly hostile, infuriating, thoughtless email. Perhaps wait 24 hours before responding. It is amazing what a good nights rest and some time can do to our thinking and speech. Rather than adding fuel to the fire, our responses can be skillful.

Let us heed the words of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Leffin, “Before you open Your mouth, be silent and reflect-- WHAT benefit will my speech bring to me or others? ” What benefit will my speech bring to me or others?”

These are all fences around the Torah. Fences around our Speech. They give us pause and opportunity to be more skillful.

## Conclusion

3 times a day and 4 times during YK, we recite the TEFILAH, the Amidah.

Cantor Audrey beautifully begins by singing , “*Adonai Sifati Tiftach o phi yagid tehillatecha.*” My God open up my lips that my mouth may declare your praises.

We acknowledge and we are reminded, we need support and help when it comes to using our mouths for good. We are requesting God to help us.

Lean on God a bit. God has strong shoulders.

We most often conclude the Tefilah with

*Elohai, n'sor l'honei mey-rah - loh sifatahi me-daber meer-mah.*

My god Keep my tongue from doing harm, and my lips from lies and deceit.

Before those who wrong me with words, may silence be my practice. Before all human beings let humility be my stance.

Rabbi Mar, the son of Ravina, wrote those words some 1800 years ago, during the 4th century. Little has changed under the sun. People have not changed very much. Perhaps that is why the treasure chest of Judaism, with its written and oral torah, resonates so powerfully and wisely in our lives today as it did thousands and thousands of years ago.

We Just need to open up our treasure chest and use it pearls!

Let's do so in 5782! I look forward to hearing how it works for you!