

Power of Words: Words that Hurt, Words that Heal

Three individuals took a boat onto a lake one afternoon. Far from shore, two began to look around, commenting on the beautiful scenery. A noise caused them to suddenly stop talking. Turning to look at their companion, they realize that he has a sharp tool in his hand and drilling into a piece of wood on the bottom of the boat. “What are you doing?” they cried. “What’s wrong?” he responded, “This is my part of the boat. Why does it concern you?”

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about the importance of good chemistry and giving the benefit of the doubt to others, because we are all in the same boat. A boat where the words that cross our lips and type with our fingers hold the power to poke holes in the hull.

How we use our words as a Temple community matters. We try to restrain ourselves from making statements that are hurtful to others. And I know, in today’s polarized world this feels even more challenging

– being respectful of others whether we agree or disagree. While we have talked about civil discourse, and the way that we talk TO others, this year, we need to address how we talk ABOUT others.

Friends, too many conversations circulate that speak negatively of people in our community.

Members come to me to share their pain from being in the “rumor mill” – feeling uncomfortable, rightfully so, at being the subject of conversations when they are not present. Some have shown me forwarded emails, where the sender neglected to remove hurtful comments from the chain. At other times, private conversations turned public, with notes sent using the BCC line. Adding to the anguish, friends tell them the stories making the rounds, and their hearts fill with a mixture of sorrow and embarrassment.

Social media amplifies the impact – offering echo chambers where gossip multiplies like rabbits or even tribbles. Images and statements made in one forum are copied, or turned into screenshots, and shared

across multiple platforms, often out of context, with new captions or comments.

We act as if our words have no impact – yet all along we are poking holes in our boat. The time has come for us on this Day of Atonement to acknowledge that our words can hurt – often with more lasting effect than any sticks or stones. At the same time, we have the capacity to change our culture to one in which we employ more words that heal.

The Chofetz Chaim, a famous rabbi, and his colleague once stopped to eat at an inn. When they finished the meal, the innkeeper asked, “So, how did you like my food?” “Very good,” said the Chofetz Chaim. “It was excellent.” “Oh, it was quite good,” said the second rabbi, “but it could have used more salt.”

As the woman left, the Chofetz Chaim turned white. “I can’t believe it!” he exclaimed. “Why did you speak lashon hara!”

Seeing the Chofetz Chaim's reaction, his companion was confused. "What did I say that was so wrong?" he stammered. "I said that the food was good – only it needed some salt!"

"You simply don't realize the power of words!" cried the Chofetz Chaim. "Follow me to the kitchen." As they opened the door to the kitchen, they saw that the owner was berating the cook for not using enough salt and insulting her honored guests. The cook stood wiping tears from her eyes and shouting back at the innkeeper about the quality of her cooking. Their voices reached a crescendo as the owner threatened to fire the cook.

The second rabbi objected and ran to stand between them, "Please, stop! Forgive me for causing harm – the soup was good and my tastes are unusual. Please do not fire her on my account." Hearing the rabbi's heartfelt apologies, the innkeeper calmed down and agreed to keep the woman on her staff.

While we understand the devastating impact of rumormongering and telling blatant lies about others, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal*, explains that other forms of gossip are not as obvious, “As a rule,” Telushkin writes, “most people seem to think that there is nothing morally wrong in spreading negative information about others, as long as the information is true. [However,] Jewish law takes a very different view (forbidding *Lashon Hara*)... Unlike slander, which is universally condemned as immoral because it is false, *lashon ha-ra* is by definition true. It is the dissemination of *accurate* information that will lower the status of the person to whom it refers; I translate it as ‘negative truths.’”

Think about that phrase, “negative truths” and the concept that Telushkin is explaining. The veracity of information cannot and should not be used as an argument to justify sharing that information with other people. He later notes that the only exception is when someone’s life or well-being are at stake. This teaching explains why the Chofetz

Chayim was so concerned by the comment made by his companion. There was no need to add the part about salt. Those final words only served to diminish the reputation of the innkeeper and her restaurant.

According to Talmud, when one performs lashon ha-ra, three people are irreparably wounded – the speaker, the subject, AND the listener. The rabbis understand that the perspectives of all three have been altered by the negative truth being shared. Furthermore, once shared, it becomes nearly impossible for the tale or its roots to be fully removed – leaving a lasting impact on the relationships of all three individuals involved.

Imagine how those traditional three individuals impacted by *lashon ha-ra* grows exponentially today. Once transmitted only through face-to-face interactions, *lashon hara* now occurs at lightning speed and with much larger audiences – thanks to technology that allows us to speak to one another across great distances, and rapidly share the written word.

Understanding the long-term damage possible with lashon hara, we would be wise to heed the guideline offered by Swiss theologian Jonathan K. Lavater, “Never tell evil of a man if you do not know it for a certainty, and if you know it for a certainty, then ask yourself, ‘Why should I tell it?’”

Realistically, we may never end all conversation about other people. Rabbi Telushkin observes that, “Human behavior is fascinating, and generally anything that intrigues us we desire to share with others.”

If that is indeed the case, we have an even greater obligation to employ words that heal and repair. We read from the beginning of Torah, “God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light.” Words carry the power to bring hope and inspire the spirits of others. Go back for a moment to that story of the Chafetz Chayim. Imagine if the rabbi had complimented the soup! Imagine how events would have transpired if

he had said, “Please thank the cook for the best soup I’ve had all week!” Such is the power of our words to build or destroy.

In our community, the time is now to change our culture. To shift from using words that hurt and embrace words that repair and heal. We can engage in direct communication, create partnership with others, and cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

The teaching against lashon ha-ra does not prohibit one from offering constructive criticism. Indeed, as I talked about on Rosh Hashanah, there is a time and place where it is necessary to offer valuable feedback. How can someone learn and grow if they are unaware of how their actions impact others?

Moses Maimonides, the famous 12th century Rabbi and philosopher we know as Rambam, offers guidelines for giving criticism. He teaches that feedback must always be direct and in private – so as not to embarrass the recipient. The last thing one wants to do is to

cause someone else's cheeks to redden, inflicting so much embarrassment that you have harmed that person.

Within our Temple Family, speak directly to others. If you have a concern about something that someone has said or done, engage with that person. Your comments may be helpful, and, you may also learn something about the person or situation that you were not previously aware of. As one adage goes, "One cannot make your candle brighter by trying to blow out someone else's." The more we talk TO people, instead of ABOUT them, seeking to nurture their flames, rather than snuff them out, then the brighter our congregation will glow.

While we need to offer feedback, the term feedback includes both positive, as well as negative responses. Using our words to praise others, we cultivate a more positive atmosphere.

Author Jack Canfield tells the story of a 7th grade teacher who used the power of words to repair social rifts in her class. Concerned by cliques and bullying between students, the teacher asked everyone to

take out a piece of paper and write down one nice thing about each of their classmates. That night, she sat down and compiled a list for each student which started with the words, “Thank you for being...” and then continued with the list of positive attributes identified by the student’s peers – a friend, a nice person, smart, etc.

The next day, the teacher handed out the lists and asked the students to read them aloud. While some elicited a few giggles, most seemed surprised to learn that their peers appreciated their talents, skills, and personalities. From that point forward, the teacher noticed a more positive atmosphere in the class. Students who previously snubbed one another, now sat together and talked. Those who previously felt isolated, now interacted with the whole group. Instead of finding each other’s faults, the students started celebrating one another’s gifts.

Sharing encouraging words, and acknowledging the contributions of others, creates an environment in which we look for the positive.

Looking for the good in others, our words have the power to strengthen our One Family. Invest time this year to thank the staff and members of our Temple Family and compliment their efforts. Stop to compliment Victor Lucas, Pedro Cruz, or Rick Holzbeke as they work on our facility, or thank Randi Butterworth, Jeanette Fischer, Ana Maria Tamargo, Maxine Gould or Julie Fischer in the office for assistance they provide. Write a note to a member or call when something that they say or do touches your life in a positive way. Try to compliment one another and look for the good.

In addition to speaking directly with others and acknowledging their blessings, our words have the power to create partnerships that strengthen our world when we ask, "What can I do?" I will never forget the story of Stevie, whose funeral I officiated at years ago. Born with mental and physical disabilities, Stevie lived his life in a variety of institutions.

At his memorial service, a social worker shared that at her first meeting with Stevie, he finished the conversation by asking, “What can I do?” Not sure what answer to give, the social worker ignored Stevie’s question. Later that day, she observed Stevie and realized that Stevie asked everyone, staff and residents alike, “What can I do?” Most of them gave him an answer. Stevie helped one person tie his shoes, another to take out the trash, and a third he assisted up the stairs. Although each task was small, it was clear to the social worker that Stevie’s effort brightened the lives of those around him.

Those simple words, “What can I do?” change the way that we interact with other people. Offering to assist, we place ourselves in a position to be partners with those around us. Instead of complaining when things don’t meet our expectations, asking “What can I do?” serves as an invitation to help address the problem.

We are blessed, to be a community with a wide and diverse range of knowledge. In our congregation we have past and present industry

titans, leaders in their fields, and dozens, if not hundreds, of former synagogue presidents and board members.

Drawing from that immense wealth, we have the potential to reach great heights. When you see an opportunity, ask, “What can I do?” and share your talents with our Temple Family.

Al heit sh'hatanu l'fanecha for the sins which we have committed before you, O God, with our words, we ask forgiveness and mercy. For the times when we have slandered, gossiped, boasted, and sworn falsely we beg for your mercy, that we might, on this night, turn our swords into plowshares.

May our words, which can so easily wound those around us and poke holes in our community, become sources of blessing as we repair the rifts.

May we speak directly **to** others – engaging them in constructive dialogue, while refraining from talking **about** them.

Help us to embrace an attitude of gratitude, looking for opportunities to lift others up with praise.

Let our words unite us together as partners, by asking one another, “What can I do?”

Our words mean more than we may ever realize. Years after her experience with that 7th grade class, the teacher went to the funeral of one of the students who had died in military service. When the student’s parents saw the teacher, they approached with tears in their eyes. Reaching into her pocket, the mother pulled out a tattered and worn piece of paper which she gave to the teacher – “He had this with him in his pocket at all times,” she said. The teacher opened it up and saw the words of thanks and praise from his classmates that she had written so long ago. The mother continued, “Your list inspired him to always be the best person he could be.”

May all the words spoken by our mouths, typed by our fingers,
and embraced in our hearts, be a blessing to those who ride through
life in the boat with us.

Ken Yehi Ratzon