

ראש השנה א' תשע"ט
ROSH HASHANAH I 5779
SEPTEMBER 10, 2018
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In a column entitled *What Not To Say*, Educator Erica Brown writes:

‘When you’re ready, I have a great guy for you.’ I ask you, does any recently bereaved wife need to hear this when sitting shiva? No. The runners up in the Jewish foot-in-mouth prize for shiva awkwardness are those who say that the recently deceased is happier now or that the suffering is finally over. For those in the low chairs, the suffering has just begun....

And please hold back when visiting a sick person. “You look terrible” is not an expression of empathy. “You look great” also doesn’t work well, as a friend in the hospital once told me. “I hope this is not what great looks like.” Speaking of death, restrain the impulse to ask if the illness is fatal. [Nor should you say, “my uncle, ה"ע, had the same disease.”]

Some people believe that the ultimate statement of compassion is, “I know exactly what you’re going through.” Wrong. This sounds like you are competing in the Jewish suffering Olympics. There is no competition when it comes to sorrow. We each fail and fall and face crisis uniquely. It’s best not to snatch someone else’s pain but leave it whole and untouched by your personal experience....

[Erica Brown adds:] I’ve been thinking about why special events often bring out the worst in people because by the end of this month, my two oldest children will be married. When my first got married this past June — a fact that I shared with relative strangers if we engaged in conversation — I had several people ask me: “Do you like him?” I looked puzzled. You couldn’t have just asked me if I like my

son-in-law. I love him, but if I didn't would I tell you, a person I met only 10 minutes ago? Maybe I'm just weird, but I try not to share challenging family dynamics with people I hardly know.

And then there was the acquaintance from shul who heard my son got engaged and came over to wish me well. "How are you going to pay for two weddings?" he asked in passing. I was so stunned that after I put my eyeballs back in my head, I weakly replied, "That's a great question" and walked away. When I shared this at home, my husband felt it would be better to just state the truth, "No problem. My husband works for the federal government, and I'm in Jewish education." My daughter was sharper: "We're doing that by keeping the numbers low. You're not invited."

“וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת-עֶמְיתוֹ” – You shall not oppress one another” says Leviticus 25:17, “but fear the Lord.” The Talmudic sages unpacked this verse as the biblical prohibition of oppressing someone with words: reminding another of a personal change that may bring them pain, attributing reasons for someone else's suffering or using language that carries emotional barbs for another. Attaching the prohibition to fear God suggests that no one but God knows the intention you have when you use words to hurt. Only you can know if it's intentional or a stupid slip. Just remember that a Divine Presence hovers over. There are consequences, even when we think no one will know. We always answer to someone.

New situations can bring out strange responses as everyone adjusts to new realities. For those who struggle with language, the impulse to say something, anything, can come out as an unfiltered sleight or odd incursion into the deepest areas of another's personal life.

So here's what people in crisis and happiness want to hear from you: heart-warming stories or any of these expressions. I am here for you. I am sorry. I am so

happy for you. I am thinking of you. I care about you. I share your joy. I can't imagine what you are going through. I love you.

Silence also works really well.¹

Erica Brown's wise words remind us that often, we're not as good as we should be in comforting, in consoling, even in congratulating. Politicians' empty phrases such as "I feel your pain," or "you are in our thoughts and prayers," while not as overtly offensive as Erica Brown's examples, also miss the mark in penetrating the human soul and making that potentially critical difference in strengthening one in need of strength.

Saying the wrong thing is not only a modern-day phenomenon. Today's Haftarah reading took us back to hurtful speech long ago, in telling the story of Hannah, who endured childlessness in a society and in an age when a woman's worth was measured solely in her ability to bear children, who endured the taunts of Peninah, her husband's other wife, who had successfully borne several children. Hannah's husband Elkanah, likely well-meaning in trying to console his deeply distraught wife, fails miserably in his attempt and adds to her hurt. "Hannah," he asks, "לָמָּה לָמָּה יָרַע לְבַבְךָ? - Why are you crying and why aren't you eating? תִּבְכִּי וְלָמָּה לֹא תֹאכְלִי - Why are you so sad? הֲלוֹא אָנֹכִי טוֹב לְךָ מִעֲשָׂרָה בָּנִים - Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?" (I Sam. 1.8)

Elkanah here follows the bad example set centuries earlier by our patriarch Jacob, who snapped at his wife Rachel when she was distraught over her inability to conceive, and said to her: "הֲתַחַת אֱלֹהִים אָנֹכִי - Can I take the place of God, who has denied you the fruit of the womb?" (Gen. 30:2)

¹ Erica Brown, The Jewish Week, Nov. 3, 2015

Even though we sympathize, to an extent, with our Biblical husbands struggling to cope with their perennially unhappy wives, frustrated no doubt by their inability to console, we know that anger and impatience only make things worse and intensify their wives' suffering. Elkanah and Jacob attempt to argue their wives out of their grief, but not only do their arguments fall flat, they impose an added layer of guilt on Hannah's and Rachel's pain as well, in suggesting that they, Hannah and Rachel, are overlooking their husbands' dedication and devotion, and God's role in their destiny.

To make matters worse, our Haftarah reading describes what Hannah experiences on one of her visits, when Eli the Priest, watching Hannah's unusual behavior in prayer, assumed her to be drunk. "Now Hannah was praying only in her heart; רַק שִׁפְתֶיהָ נָעוּת – only her lips moved, וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשְׁמָע – but her voice could not be heard. Eli said to her: 'עַד־מַתִּי תִשְׁתַּכְרִין – How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself?'" (I Sam. 1:13-14)" Hannah corrected Eli's unkind and unfortunate misunderstanding, telling him (1:15): "I am a very unhappy woman וְאֶשְׁפֹּךְ אֶת־נַפְשִׁי – and am pouring out my heart to the Lord." Eli quickly changed his tune, blessed Hannah, and prayed that God would grant her wish. And, true enough, within a year, Hannah did give birth to Shmuel, to the future Prophet Samuel.

We may find some comfort in that our sages derived appropriate prayer conduct from Hannah's actions in our reading. The words came from her heart, only her lips moved, her voice was not heard – actions misunderstood by Eli, but understood by our sages, who recognized that Hannah was on to something – that the ideal way to *daven*, to pray, is to articulate the words in a very soft voice. God does not need us to shout, He hears our silent prayer, and that our prayer must be heartfelt, reflective of *kavannah*, of feeling, of emotion, of intent.

But we are still struck by the rampant insensitivity shown a woman in distress in our reading today. The fact that later history will secure Hannah's heroic status in the pantheon of our spiritual forebears does little to soften the pain of a woman whose tears, year in and year out, are responded to, not with the sensitivity and humanity that she desperately needed, but rather, with scorn and anger.

These days it often seems as if we are drowning in oceans of angry, hostile words. From world leaders and media personalities with global platforms, who stir up hatred and anger through deliberately divisive and often dishonest language; to the anonymous smartphone, tablet or computer user, who, while hidden behind his or her device, hurls abuse on total strangers – those who wield words as weapons of destruction, add to the turmoil of the current age, which exhausts and discourages us day in and day out.

Our sages offer us an interesting twist on how we can use our communication skills to better our world, in developing the concept of ברכה. *Berakhah*, usually translated as blessing, means a lot more than that. *Berakhot* in essence are an acknowledgment of life circumstances. In our daily prayers, we offer *berakhot* that recognize our status in life as free people, as Jews bound by mitzvot and tradition. Through *berakhot* we acknowledge milestones, joyous occasions, Shabbat, festivals, fruits, nature, day becoming night, night becoming day, creation, and of course, sadness and pain as well.

In that light, the Mishnah teaches us: “חיב אדם לברך על הרעה כשם שהוא מברך על הטובה” – One is obligated to offer blessing on the bad just as he does on the good.” So we offer a *berakhah* when learning of a death, and when we ourselves, suffer loss. And although not in the classical *berekhah* formulation of ברוך אתה... our tradition provides us with words of comfort to offer the bereaved when otherwise, appropriate language may be hard to come by. המקום ינחם, we say to the mourner, “May the

Almighty console you, as He has done for previous generations as well who have mourned....”

It is no accident that next week, on Yom Kippur, when we enumerate sins we have likely committed, sins of speech outnumber all other transgressions. It is too easy to use words, to use speech, in order to hurt, in order to divide, in order to build up ourselves at the expense of those we would simultaneously tear down. The ברכה, the blessing, the sensitive acknowledgement of reality, of life situations, good and bad, helps steer us to a better day when words, when language, when human behavior, can be a source of comfort and healing.

Earlier this summer, we were saddened by the death of Charles Krauthammer, Pulitzer Prize-winning syndicated columnist, TV personality, public intellectual, staunch advocate for the State of Israel, and among many other pursuits, the founder and chairman of Pro Musica Hebraica, an organization devoted to the recovery and preservation of classical Jewish music.

Charles Krauthammer, an eminent psychiatrist before he became a columnist and commentator, in one of his most moving columns, remembered his late Harvard Medical School professor, Hermann Lisco.

Toward the end of my freshman year [he writes], I was paralyzed in a serious accident. Hermann came to see me in intensive care. He asked what he could do for me. I told him that, to keep disaster from turning into ruin, I had decided to stay in school and with my class.

If Hermann had doubts – I would not have blamed him: No one with my injury had ever gone through medical school – [If Hermann had doubts] he never showed it. He told me he would do everything possible to make it happen.

He did. Within a few days, a hematology professor, fresh from lecturing to my classmates on campus, showed up at my bedside and proceeded to give me the lecture, while projecting his slides on the ceiling above me. (I was flat on my back in traction, but I'm sure Hermann had instructed everybody to carry on as if such teaching techniques were entirely normal).

He then went to work behind the scenes... getting me transferred... to a Harvard teaching hospital so that I could catch up at night with my class' second-year studies and rejoin it in the third year; persuading (ordering?) skeptical attending physicians to allow their patients to be cared for by the student in the wheelchair....

Hermann did all this quietly, without fanfare.... Those who were touched by this man, so wise and gracious and goodly, mourn him. I mourn a man who saved my life.²

Sometimes life circumstances offer us the opportunity to use our words to lift the spirits of one who otherwise would have had every reason to give up on life. Whether those words be directed to the sufferer, going beyond platitudes into earnest probing of what we can do to really help, or whether those words become advocacy on behalf of the person or family we want to help, we understand what Proverbs (18:21) meant in saying that מִוֶּת וְחַיִּים בְּיַד לְשׁוֹן – Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

A family seated here today suffered a terrible loss earlier this summer, losing their husband, father and grandfather to a sudden, devastating illness. Experiencing this tragedy out of town, in an unfamiliar hospital setting, the family had every reason to despair, to fear, literally to fall to pieces – but an incredibly compassionate hospital staff, doctors and nurses who understood their fear and their isolation, found the

² Charles Krauthammer, *Hermann Lisco, Man for All Seasons*, in *Things That Matter*, 2013, pp. 34-36

right words and the right tone to mitigate their loneliness, and to reassure them that somehow, notwithstanding the dire diagnosis, they would be okay, they would get through these difficult days. And the constant calls and texts from friends far and wide also made a huge difference – too often we stay out of touch in tough situations, fearing we would not know what to say – when the answer really is simple. No therapy, no philosophizing, no theologizing, no second-guessing of medical staff, rather simple words of comfort, of concern, of specific offers of assistance – nothing more, nothing less.

One more story. Over the summer I read Dave Itzkoff's excellent biography of actor and comedian Robin Williams, a complex story of an immensely talented man tormented by inner struggles and issues throughout his tragically shortened life. In the context of his challenged life, he managed to perform some wonderful acts of kindness, one of which Itzkoff excerpts from the late actor Christopher Reeve's memoir *Just Me*. Christopher Reeve, who, like Charles Krauthammer, had suffered a devastating injury, leaving him fully confined to a wheel-chair, recalls:

At an especially bleak moment [following my accident], the [hospital] door flew open and in hurried a squat fellow with a blue scrub hat and a yellow surgical gown and glasses, speaking in a Russian accent. He announced that he was my proctologist, and that he had to examine me immediately. My first reaction was that either I was on too many drugs or I was in fact brain damaged. But it was Robin Williams. He and his wife Marsha had materialized from who knows where. And for the first time since the accident, I laughed. My old friend had helped me know that somehow I was going to be okay.³

³ Dave Itzkoff, *Robin*, 2018, p. 298, citing Christopher Reeve, *Still Me*, 1996, pp 27, 33.

“היום הרת העולם,” we recite in our Rosh Hashanah liturgy, “today the world was born.” And in our morning service, every day of the year, we include the words: “ברוך שאמר והיה העולם – Praise be the One who spoke and the world came into being.” Yes, words have power. Behind words lie the power to create worlds, and we know, sadly, to wreak massive devastation. Sometimes words spoken from the heart, our sages remind us, נכנסים אל הלב, can penetrate even the most distressed or broken heart.

On this awesome day in this holy season, our liturgy and our tradition do a good job of reminding us of our seeming powerlessness in the cosmic unfolding of the universe. Most of us realistically have little impact on the trajectory of the world, on the major global issues that challenge even the greatest of minds.

So let's start small. Let's commit, this Rosh Hashanah, to use the limited power we possess, to do our part to rid this world of even a scintilla of tension, of anguish, of bad feeling. Let's start with words, insuring that the way we speak to each other, the way we communicate on line, in public, in private, brings smiles, not scowls, joy, not anxiety, comfort and not grief, love and not hate, to even the limited audience who hear what we say, who read what we write, who feel what we convey. In doing so, we will bring us closer to achieving that reflected in this day's greeting, that of *Shanah Tovah*, that of a year in which goodness prevails.