

Words, Words Words
Rabbi David S. Widzer
Temple Beth El of Northern Valley
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A few months ago, I succumbed to peer pressure. Or, at least, family pressure. I'm not proud to admit it, but, at long last, I downloaded a game onto my phone called "Words With Friends." Maybe you've seen it. Maybe you've played it. I'm not sure why I resisted for so long – I have a pretty good vocabulary, I like playing games, I like connecting with friends. Maybe I was worried it would be one more thing to consume my time. But everyone else in my family already had it installed on their devices, so I gave in and downloaded the game.

It did not take me long to realize that I hated it. Not just because I lost just about every game I ever played. And not just because, when I was a kid, I never really liked Scrabble, the board game on which "Words With Friends" is based. No, my visceral dislike of the game had to do with how I felt it treated words themselves. The goal of the game is to get rid of tiles, representing letters, by placing them on the board to spell words. If you have a Q or Z or X in your hand, this can be quite challenging. Except that "Words With Friends" recognizes as words things that would NEVER be accepted in a Scrabble board game or in a standard dictionary. The letters "e" "t," for example, when placed together, spell "et," which is not a real word, but is acceptable in Words With Friends as a past form of "to eat," as in, "I et the bar-b-q chicken and it was good!" "Words With Friends" also accepted some proper names and some foreign words, but not others. And some words, I swear it just made up. I have too much respect for the power of words, for their significance and importance, to treat them this way. So I deleted the game completely.

Now I confess, my protestations on behalf of words being mistreated by this game may be a little highbrow and heavy handed. Who am I to defend the dignity of words? But I know that, in today's world especially, too often we use words carelessly or thoughtlessly. Too often they are used imprecisely. Too often we fail to recognize the impact they can have. A well-chosen word, a well-crafted sentence, a well-drafted paragraph, can make all the difference in how we communicate. Each word in a Robert Frost poem carries meaning. Each line in a Shakespearian play conveys a message. How often do we struggle to find the right word to put in an email, a school paper, or a business report? How long do you stand in the greeting card aisle, reading every option, till you find the best one?

Words make a difference. And on this Kol Nidrei Night of All Vows, this holy day when we say aloud the sins we've committed, when page after page of our prayerbook contains the contrition of our hearts and the confession of our souls, we recognize that we are accountable for the words we say. Words have great power. We should make sure that we are using them wisely and that we are using them well.

Some of the power of words comes from their ability to convey shared ideals in ways that are meaningful and impactful. Statements of belief not only engender understanding, they prompt feelings and evoke emotional connections. Used well, words can elicit shared sentiments in ways that deepen ties between people. Some words and

phrases are instantly recognizable as signifying values and ideals, building bonds of connection between those who share them. I'll start a sentence and you finish it for me, and let's see what shared sentiment it expresses.

"We hold these truths to be self evident that (all men are created equal)."

This is from the ... (Declaration of Independence).

And it conveys the idea of ... (equality).

"The only thing we have to fear is ... (fear itself)."

This is from ... (President Franklin D. Roosevelt's First Inaugural Address).

And it conveys the idea of ... (resiliency, determination, hope).

"Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu ... Adonai Echad"

This is from ... (the Shema [Deuteronomy 6])

And it conveys the idea of ... (monotheism).

"I have a dream that my four little 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)."

This is from ... (Dr. King's speech at the March on Washington).

And it conveys the idea of ... (equality).

The words we choose, the words we use, can communicate what we believe and the values that we hold dear. Words are important because they convey our ideas and our ideals in ways that deepen connections between people.

Words can also be used to shape our reality. Words can create or destroy. It is with words, after all, that the entire universe comes into existence. "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."¹ And so, too, with sea and sky, plants and trees, and birds and fish and us. God uses words to make things appear. Our morning liturgy praises God in connection with this power by exclaiming: "*Baruch she'amar v'hayah ha'olam*, "Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came into being." I learned from Rabbi Larry Kushner that, in Aramaic, God's power to create using words is described as "*ibRA k'dibRA*," meaning, "I have created as I have spoken." Rabbi Kushner points out that this may also be the source of the phrase, "Abra kaDabra," as the magician makes items appear. But we can also use words to create a new status for someone or something. "And the Oscar for Best Picture goes to ..." declares a film the best of the year (assuming the correct envelope is read). And when I get to say, "I now pronounce you married," my words confirm a new state of being for the happy couple.

Our words can create feelings, too. I try each day to greet my children with, "Good morning! I'm happy to see you!" (I'll tell you that I don't always succeed, but I do try.) I want to create a positive moment at the beginning of the day to get us all started in a good way. Boosting self-esteem is why good educators choose their words carefully, in order to encourage students to do their best work. Getting a little note on a spelling test from Mrs. Palmer, my fourth-grade teacher, that said, "Good Job," would put me in a good mood the rest of the day. A well-timed word of support from a coach draws out the best in athletes. There are executive courses on what to say to motivate your business team. A compliment creates a glow of satisfaction on a job well done.

The opposite is true, too. Words can destroy, sometimes physically. "Bombs away," and a city is demolished. "Attack that hill," and soldiers' lives are sacrificed. "The State sentences you to death," conveys the ultimate punishment.

But it's not just physical destruction. Consider the story of Justine Sacco, a former PR executive. Shortly before boarding an 11-hour flight from London to Cape Town, South Africa, Sacco sent a tweet with a stupid and insensitive joke about Africa, race, and AIDS. It was offensive to those living with the disease, to people of color, and pretty much to an entire continent. While she was incommunicado in the air, her tweet spread across Twitter and turned into a firestorm, as tens of thousands of people decried her insensitivity. By the time she landed, she was internationally famous (or infamous) and fired from her job.² The words she wrote, and words of the thousands of Twitter users, destroyed her reputation and her livelihood.

And, just as words can create positive emotions and feelings, they can destroy them, too. A put-down or insult, whether on the playground, in the locker room, or in the corporate office, can destroy self-esteem. A word of disapproval can deflate your whole day. And do you know anyone in life who has not experienced words of rejection? Colleges you aren't accepted to, job offers that go to someone else, high school crushes that aren't reciprocated: sometimes words shape our reality by destruction.

Sometimes the power of words is evident in their mis-shaping of our reality by concealment, obfuscation, or misdirection. Sometimes the purpose of this is relatively innocent. I'll give you a few examples. Can you guess what these jobs are normally called?³

Waste management and disposal technician – garbage collector
 Intoxicating beverage dissemination officer – bartender
 Knowledge navigator – teacher
 Director of first impressions – receptionist

Sometimes, however, the use of words to conceal has a more deceptive purpose. Politicians are loath to discuss raising taxes, but would more easily consider a "revenue enhancement provision." Economists will forecast "negative growth," but don't want to predict a recession. The military will regret "collateral damage," without admitting that it may have caused civilian deaths. Even simple verbs can fall prey to this mode of verbal deception, as President Bill Clinton demonstrated with a fine-edged defense of his alleged perjury that hinged on what the meaning of the word "is" is. We live at a time where there's even a popular term for the misuse of words: "Fake News." And even here, the words convey a double meaning. On the one hand, "Fake News" refers to things that aren't true, but are being presented as such, particularly when they are being repeated over and over again in an attempt to masquerade as truth. And on the other hand, the term "Fake News" is being bandied about to discredit things that are true but are inconvenient or do not fit with a preferred set narrative. Whether creating or destroying or concealing, words have power in how they shape our reality.

As our primary mode of communication, words can also have a dramatic impact on interpersonal relationships. In particular, words can hurt others. The old adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," just isn't true. Our Scripture knows better. *Mavet v'chayim b'yad-lashon*, "Life and death are in the power of the tongue," says Proverbs.⁴ The prophet Jeremiah compares the tongue to a sharpened arrow, while the Psalmist imagines the words themselves, let loose from the mouth, to be arrows.⁵ In explaining the text, the Talmud reasons that, while the sword

kills only up close, one can kill with an arrow from far away. So, too, words can have a harmful impact, even from a distance.⁶

Living in the Internet Age, we know this to be true. Our teens will tell you how easy it is to send and receive anonymous messages. Cyber-bullying is real and it is happening all around us. And while it is easy to say things anonymously online that you would never say in person, or with attribution, it is also astounding to me to read the “comments” section of articles and blog posts where people willingly sign their names to hurtful and hateful statements. Internet trolls intentionally rile up people with derogatory messages. Never has it been so easy to use our words to demean or belittle other people.

I wish we had a role model in a positive sense that I could point to as an example of how best to use our words. Unfortunately, I think we have the opposite. I disagree with President Trump on many issues of public policy, based on how I see Jewish values coming to bear on the great issues of our age. But it is not about politics to say that I am absolutely aghast at the President’s use of words that hurt. He picks on people. He calls them names. He demeans other citizens and their ideas. He uses language in public that a few years ago would have been considered cursing. And when he uses code words to “dog-whistle” to those who share the noxious beliefs in white supremacy and anti-Semitism, I don’t know whether to be more worried that he DOESN’T know how his words are being received, or more worried that he DOES. When he talks to a nearly all-white crowd in Alabama about mostly African American football players and decries “when people like yourselves turn on television and you see those people take the knee,”⁷ he is using words to divide, demean, and hurt people. If I don’t find using words these ways acceptable from my children, how much less are they acceptable from our President?

The opposite of words that hurt are words that heal. They play a different role in our relationships, as our Scripture knows. Proverbs teaches, “Thoughtless speech is like the stabs of a sword, but the speech of the wise brings healing.”⁸ These are the words of comfort we share quietly at graveside or in the hospital room, the balm for skinned knees or disappointed egos, the salve for souls who need repair. Words that heal are also what we are called upon to offer one another at this sacred time of year, as we seek reconciliation and repentance. We can always use another practice – repeat after me:

I (I) am (am) sorry (sorry).

I (I) forgive (forgive) you (you).

I’ll tell you a story of words of healing, one that feels incredibly powerful and emotional for me. My colleague, Rabbi Jacqueline Mates-Muchin, of Temple Sinai in Oakland, California, finished Erev Rosh HaShannah services this year and went home to bed. She was woken at 4:45 in the morning with a call from the security company that anti-Semitic vandals had defaced a 10-foot section of the wall outside the Temple, writing “F*** You Jewish Nazis.” Rabbi Mates-Muchin had a brilliant response. An early morning email alerted the congregation to what had happened, and by the time of the 8:30am service, the hateful words had been covered over by a giant section of white butcher paper. An easel with markers nearby invited people to “Cover words of hate with words of hope.” And soon the paper was filled with sentiments like “Love overcomes all.” “No hate.” “Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.” “Standing in

Solidarity.” “The only thing stronger than hate is love.” And “I forgive you.”⁹ Words of healing over words of hate.

Why does all this talk tonight about words matter? I’ll share one final story about words. In a town not far away, at a time not long ago, a person spread a rumor about another. He later felt regret, and went to the rabbi to ask how to make amends. “Go to the store and buy a bag of seeds,” said the rabbi, “then go to a big open field and scatter the seeds into the wind. Do so and report back to me in a week.”

The man did as he was told, and came back the next week to find out what to do next. “Now,” said the rabbi, “go back to the field and pick up all the seeds.”

“But,” the man protested, “those seeds have scattered far and wide! I’ll never find them all. Many have even already taken root!”

“Exactly,” explained the rabbi. “Now you understand. Our words can scatter far and wide and cannot be recalled. Once released, they may take hold and never be uprooted. So we must always be cautious with our words.”¹⁰

Words are important. Tonight of all nights, as we carefully consider our words, our prayers, our vows, our promises for the new year, we should recognize their power. Words can convey our ideals and our ideas in ways that deepen connections between people. Words can shape our reality. Words can create or destroy or conceal, hurt or heal. We should make sure that we are using them wisely and that we are using them well.

On this holiest of days, as we choose our words of repentance, of forgiveness, of supplication, of reconciliation, we pray that they may always be acceptable to You, O God. And let us say, Amen.

¹ Genesis 1:3

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/22/pr-exec-fired-racist-tweet-aids-africa-apology>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/how-one-stupid-tweet-ruined-justine-saccos-life.html>

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/16/living/feat-public-shaming-ronson/index.html>

³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/7552252/The-top-ten-most-ridiculous-job-titles.html>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/5120938/Job-titles-get-jargon-makeover-to-boost-appeal.html>

https://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/documents/10179/73292/Fancy-pants_job_titles.pdf

⁴ Prov 18:21.

⁵ Jer 9:7; Psalm 64:4.

⁶ Arachin 15b. An interesting discussion about Judaism and the power of words can be found at <http://www.aish.com/jl/i/s/84939897.html>. Many of this article’s ideas were helpful in shaping this sermon.

⁷ <https://www.yahoo.com/news/read-president-trump-apos-nfl-155540794.html>.

<http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/23/politics/donald-trump-alabama-speech/index.html>

Emphasis mine.

⁸ Proverbs 12:8, compiled from multiple different translations.

⁹ <http://www.record-bee.com/article/NQ/20170925/NEWS/170929911>
<http://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/Rosh-Hashanah-Anti-Semitic-Graffiti-Oakland-Jewish-Temple-446526093.html>
<https://www.jweekly.com/2017/09/21/anti-semitic-graffiti-defaces-oakland-temple-sinai-rosh-hashanah/>

¹⁰ Though I have altered the ending a little, this version of the well-known story can be found at <http://www.aish.com/jl/i/s/84939897.html>.