

ROSH HASHANA
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Next week we will stand on the eve of the holiest day of the year and commence the service with a most puzzling prayer. Yom Kippur Eve is not simply known as the eve of the holiest day of the year, it is also known as Kol Nidre Eve. This is, of course, because of the Kol Nidre prayer which is the first prayer we recite as we begin a day of fasting, contrition and self-reflection. But it is, in fact, not a prayer whatsoever. It is an ancient Aramaic formula discussing the nullification of vows that have been made in haste by human beings who take words for granted and don't always follow through on their promises.

While reciting its words it seems so easy to change our bad habits, to stop doing the things that we wish we didn't. Yet, year after year, we find ourselves struggling with the same religious and spiritual feelings. We know that when we begin Yom Kippur that we will make promises to stop our bad behavior, but we also know from experience that we will at best improve only slightly during the year to come.

It is indeed somewhat startling that we begin this period of fasting and asking for forgiveness with this rendition concerning the words that we utter. Most Jews who come to the synagogue are not familiar with the words of the Kol Nidre or with its concepts. Yet, it has become so engrained in our tradition that Orthodox rabbis in the Middle Ages and Reform rabbis in the Modern Age who have attempted to remove the passage from our order of services have not been successful. It continues to open the service of the holiest day of the Jewish year.

However we understand it, one thing is clear. The Kol Nidre formula reminds us that the words that we utter have to be taken seriously, that the phrases that emanate from our mouths place an obligatory nature upon us to follow through on the talk and to ensure that our words and our deeds complement one another.

Let's face it, words are cheap. Just think of the number of words that we utter and hear, write and read during the course of just one day, in casual conversation, in official school or business pronouncements, in the print media and the electronic media and today by computer e-mail as well. With the advent of information technology, words are sent out on a constant basis to friends and acquaintances alike, to business associates and colleagues and to nameless individuals with whom we may not even have a personal relationship. Nielson Mobile, a consumer research company, tracked 50,000 individual customer accounts in the second quarter of this year. They found that Americans each sent or received 357 text messages and 204 phone calls a month.

Once those words are distributed they are very difficult to retract. There are times when we may have wished, too late, to have pushed the delete button or to have stopped ourselves before we uttered a word or a phrase which may have been taken the wrong way. There may have been times for all of us when we may have written some words which were seen by another but not meant for his or her eyes. Words can hurt and words can heal.

In his book by that title “Words Can Hurt, Words Can Heal,” Rabbi Joseph Telushkin quotes an ancient Midrash which compares the tongue to an arrow: “Why not another weapon, a sword, for example?” one rabbi asks. “Because,” he is told, “if a man unsheathes his sword to kill his friend and his friend pleads with him and begs for mercy, the man may be mollified and return the sword to its scabbard. But an arrow, once it is shot, cannot be returned, no matter how much one wants to.”

Words can be used to inflict devastating and irrevocable suffering. Telushkin reminds us that Jewish teachings go so far as to compare cruel words to murder. On the other hand, words have the ability to heal and inspire, to give someone hope and to offer compassion, kindness and sentiments of concern and care.

Words have enormous power. They can inspire and they can destroy. There is an insightful Midrash on the opening phrase of the fifth book of the Torah “Devarim,” “These are the words.” The word “Devarim” can also be read “Devorim,” bees. Words can console us, words can cajole us. Words can also sting like bees at our flesh.

With a plethora of opportunities to use words in our daily life we are, very often, all of us, too cavalier with their use. We need to be careful what we say and how we say it. We should be in control of the words we write and type, those we share by telephone and those in person. And, like the Kol Nidre formula reminds us, should we make a promise in religious terms, should we take a vow, we need to follow through on our declaration and not take a dismissive attitude towards the words we have uttered.

In the Torah reading we read two weeks ago we are told:

“You must fulfill what has crossed your lips and perform what you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord Your G-d, having made the promise with your own mouth.”

Thinking of a person of integrity we say that: “his word is his bond.” In other words, he can be trusted to follow through on what he has said, to be honest in his dealings and to be a person above reproach. The same must be true, according to the Torah, in our words to G-d. Should we offer words of a religious nature we need to follow through with the appropriate actions. The text wants to remind us that we need to be sensitive to the words that we utter and how we say them for they tell a great deal about the kind of person we really are.

In a comment on this verse, the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Alter, the Gerer Rebbe states: “The words of a human being can make an impact and an impression upon others. In watching his words and in watching his deeds the impression upon others can be even greater.” When someone follows through with the words that they have uttered, when their word is their bond, when they can be trusted both in civil society and in religious society to mean what they say and say what they mean, then we know we are talking of a person of good character. We want to be with that person because we value their friendship. When the opposite is true, we want to stay away from that individual for they can’t be trusted and they may bring ruin upon themselves and sometimes upon

others, as well.

The story is told of one of the inventors of the transistor at Bell Telephone Laboratories who was driving on his way to a conference during which he was to be honored. He stopped for lunch at a fast food restaurant and saw a family seated together. Mother, father, son and daughter were all listening to their transistor, headphones on their ears, each was in his or her own world. He left the restaurant wondering if humanity might not have been better off without the invention.

In truth, technology is neither negative nor positive it is what we choose to do with it. Think, for example of our computers, cell phones and blackberries. Are we better off with them or without them? Do they make us better people, create better families, bring us close to others or do they allow us to live in our own worlds, cutting ourselves off from others? With all the words they produce, is the world a better place because of them?

One of the results of all the words produced is that no one listens anymore. It reminds us of the story of the psychiatrist who was asked by his friend, "Tell me," he said, "How can you listen, hour after hour, day after day, to people pouring out their distresses and troubles?" The psychiatrist is supposed to have replied: "Who listens?" Sometimes that seems to be the case in our world, "Who listens?"

A few weeks ago we all heard many words. Millions of Americans tuned in to their television sets or watched on their computers the Democratic and Republican Conventions. Thousands of words were uttered by candidates and their supporters. It was fascinating for all of us to listen carefully to the speeches that were crafted, the political analysis by the pundits and the comments by those who attended the conventions. Many more millions of words found themselves in the print media, on computer networks, on radio talk shows and in casual conversations over the course of those two weeks.

The speeches of all four major candidates for office in November were crafted by wonderful wordsmiths; they were delivered by candidates who are asking for our vote and our support. Those words are the backbone of the campaigns which are reaching out to citizens across this great land asking for our vote on November 4. We have to analyze all those words, investigate the policies behind them and judge whether the specific candidate and his/her party will follow through on the many promises that we are hearing.

Yes, it is difficult sometimes to wade through the show business atmosphere that surrounded both conventions. They were made for television extravaganzas. Each candidate was speaking before a favorable audience and it seemed that everything was programmed, including the signs and the standing ovations, the balloons and fireworks. Yet, every voter needs to wade through those outward appearances and examine the words of the candidates. What policies are they enunciating and are they the right ones for our country and our world? Can we expect the candidate to follow through on the promises or will they be simply empty words that fill a page on paper or a teleprompter on a podium and never come to fruition? This is a difficult task, but it is one, I believe,

that is incumbent upon us if we are to make intelligent choices on election day.

Unlike almost every other culture in ancient or modern times, Judaism is a religion of sound, not sight, of hearing rather than seeing. Hence, one of the key words of the Book of Deuteronomy is “Shema,” “hear” or “listen.” We need only think of the affirmation of faith:

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our G-d, the Lord is One.”

In one form or another, the verb “Shema” appears no less than 92 times in the course of the book.

Stephen Spielberg was once asked a question: “I’ve heard that you put great emphasis on being able to listen. Why?” Spielberg responded: “When I was a little boy, I learned a very important Hebrew prayer called the Shema. Besides its religious message, it says to me: don’t just listen to everybody else’s voices, loud voices that want you to listen to them. You must also listen to a voice that comes from inside yourself... as soft as a whisper, and even softer. Find time to hear it.”

Listening is a skill, it is a learned skill. It doesn’t happen automatically for most people. Words themselves don’t communicate, it is the meaning and the understanding of words that makes communication work. Listen carefully to your inner voice and to other voices as well.

G-d lives in words, is revealed in words and holds us to account for our words. The Torah reminds us that if one makes a promise, one is bound to fulfill it. While this may be in the realm of religious law, it is clearly in the realm of secular society as well. The Mishna tells us that if one does not keep one’s word they will be punished like the generation of the dispersion which occurred after the Tower of Babel episode. We are held to account for the words we utter, the promises we make, not only before G-d, but before another human being as well. So it behooves us to listen very carefully over the next few weeks, to evaluate the words and promises, to investigate the policies and the programs and to make an intelligent choice based not on style or flourish, but on real substance and expected follow through.

It is interesting to note that the major Mitzvah of Rosh Hashana is not the blowing of the Shofar, it is hearing its sounds. As Maimonides states: “It is a positive Scriptural commandment that requires one to hear the blast of the Shofar on Rosh Hashana.” While the Ba’al Tokeah, the Shofar blower, must have the proper intentionality to fulfill the Mitzvah, even he or she recites the Berakha

“To hear the sound of the Shofar.”

This practice reminds us that one of the hardest things for many of us is to listen. The Berakha implores us: Concentrate on the sounds, hear their stark tones and let them move you to do Teshuva, repentance. Hear its cry and be inspired. Listen, concentrate and then follow through. It should all be one continuous action. As the Gerer Rebbe taught:

“Listening to the Shofar is by no means intended to be a passive Mitzvah. It requires an active effort to concentrate on the sound, on its significance and its impact upon our lives.”

In the Talmudic tractate of Pesachim the text states: “The Holy One, blessed be He, hates

a person who says one thing with his mouth and another in his heart.” This is the real challenge of being good people. We are told that the Ark in the Tabernacle was overlaid with gold within and without. Our rabbis ask: “I can understand that the gold was to be placed on the outside so that all could see, but why on the inside as well?” They answer that this teaches us an important human lesson

“A person should be trustworthy both inside and out.” In other words, what you see should be what you should get. It means that we want to know that the individual is not merely a person of rhetorical flourish but follows through with their deeds. We want to know that they are honest and that their word is their bond. These are the people we want as friends, these are the people we want as leaders of our nation and these are the people who stand for ideals which are good and true in our society.

The Midrash reminds us that the letters that form the Hebrew word “Emet” - “truth” in Hebrew are spaced far apart in the Hebrew alphabet, and the letters that form “Sheker” - “deceit,” in Hebrew closely follow each other. This suggests that it is difficult to act in truth and in trust, while deception is as close as one’s ear. The Torah reminds us that we must be careful with our words in religious vows and in civil society. Kol Nidre recited on the holiest evening of the entire Jewish year instructs us that the words we utter must be truthful and we must follow through on them. The Shema and the sounding of the Shofar teach us to listen very carefully to the sounds around us.

In this political season let us listen carefully and judge the words of all the candidates and hold them to their promises. In our individual lives, let our word be our bond, let us offer words that heal rather than hurt, and let us be judged as individuals who stand up for what is right, speak the truth and follow through on our promises with conviction and commitment.