

Here at The Community Synagogue we ask every young person who becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah to say a prayer. We want them to reflect on the blessings in their lives and their hopes for the future. Most weeks the prayers are sentimental and idealistic - for peace, the freedom they enjoy, for health. Occasionally, the prayers are humorous - like asking for the Giants to win the Superbowl (as if a miracle like that could ever really happen!).

A few months ago, however, the response to one Bat Mitzvah prayer left me speechless (not an easy thing, mind you!). After seeking God's blessings for her family, the Bat Mitzvah concluded her prayer with the wish that President Bush be defeated in the upcoming election. The overly enthusiastic political expressions of a 13-year old paled with what happened next. The congregation burst into cheers and applause. I was aghast ... and embarrassed.

Don't get me wrong. It is good that people feel passionately about the political process - and with America at war it is important that we care about an election that could have decisive consequences for this country and the world. But is the time of worship a time for political banter? I believe it is absolutely not. Jewish tradition - which speaks of the need for justice in the public, as well as private sphere - demands that we speak out for what we believe. But the debate about ideas and values is a far cry from demonizing individuals - even those with whom we might strongly disagree.

The lack of civility that Shabbat a few months back is a reflection of the mood of our society - deeply divided over who will more likely lead us to a more secure and stable future. But what should also concern us is the decline of civil discourse that accompanies the debate. This election is, it seems, eliciting an overabundance of self-righteousness and, with that, a concomitant lack of respect for anyone of a different point of view. This behavior is to the shame of the Right and the Left, Democrats and Republicans.

A couple of months ago, Linda Ronstadt got up at the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas to do what she had done in several previous concerts. She dedicated her encore song "Desperado" to filmmaker Michael Moore and urged the audience to go see his movie "Fahrenheit 9/11." What ensued was nothing short of a melee. A few audience members tore down posters and threw drinks. The Aladdin's president, William Timmins, had Ms. Ronstadt ejected from the premises. Whether one agrees that an entertainer should bring politics into a show or not, to deny her the right to speak her mind is chilling.

Watching news shows about the election, reading op-ed pages or listening to radio talk shows, one cannot help but notice the shrillness of the rhetoric. The candidates - and those who speak for them - seem to understand that to gain any real political traction one has to aim low, attacking the other's character rather than speaking about one's ideas. Only in the past week or so are we beginning to see some change, for up until now the Bush and Kerry

campaigns have been so focused on what happened 30 years ago - on whose service during the Viet Nam War was more dishonorable - that we heard little about what ought to matter.

Like many of you, I have strong personal feelings about the upcoming election. I am concerned about America's security - and Israel's. But there is so much more at stake. In the past three years this nation has gone to war twice. Have the goals been realized? Are we winning ... or not? And is the cost - in human lives and a growing debt to this country - worth it? All agree that global warming is accelerating - and we have a melting Arctic and hurricanes to prove it. What plans do the candidates have to get Americans - the greatest energy hogs in the world - to become more environmentally conscious? How do we reduce our dependence on oil, which props up despotic regimes like the Saudis, whose opposition to Israel is what fuels Moslem terror? Should our country continue to act unilaterally, with little regard for other nations, or ought the United States work harder to build true multi-national coalitions? If all agree that the threat of Islamic fundamentalism is the great threat of our time - why is no one speaking about ways to support those Moslems willing to reform Islam? And how might we move from acrimonious debate to more bi-partisan support to challenge our true enemies, who care not a whit whether one is a Democrat or Republican, but seek the destruction of us all.

I do not blame the "media" for they give what we seek. It is up to us to consider: will we vote based on ideas, or innuendo; on intelligence, or insult?

Jewish traditions warn us about such uncivil discourse in the public arena, for what happens on the large stage has an affect in our individual lives, just as our personal behavior has a ripple affect on the community of which we are a part.

As counter to this the sage Hillel taught that the responsibility for change begins not on the grand stage, but within each of us. *Bimakom she-ain anashim, histadel l'hiyot ish* "In a place where there are no people, strive to be human." In other words, even if (or maybe especially if) others are not acting in a decent way (as human beings ought to act) we must strive to be even more human (or, as I prefer, "humane").<sup>1</sup>

The Psalmist wrote: *bakesh shalom v'rodfehu*, "seek peace and pursue it."<sup>2</sup> One *midrash* interpreted this as meaning "seek peace first in yourself, then in your home, and then pursue it elsewhere." In the contemporary context, before passing judgment on the intemperate words said by those President Bush or Senator Kerry, perhaps we would do well to look first at the uncivil way that we often speak.

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<sup>1</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:5

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 34:14

A look at the traditional litany of sins listed in the Yom Kippur confessional *Al Het* shows an inordinate number - in fact, nearly one-quarter - relate to wrongs we commit with our mouth. "Jews have about as many words for bad language," Rabbi Joshua Hammerman jokes, "as Eskimos do for snow." Yom Kippur reminds us of the power of words - to heal or destroy. "Life and death", the book of Proverbs teaches, "is in the power of the tongue."<sup>3</sup>

In his book, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, Rabbi Joe Telushkin writes, "We choose our clothes more carefully than we choose our words, though what we say about, and to others, can define them indelibly. That is why ethical speech - speaking fairly of others, honestly about ourselves, and carefully to everyone - is so important." The ability of the tongue to create or destroy is, said one commentator, alluded to in the Hebrew word for "tongue" itself - *lashon*. The first letter - *lamed* - points to heaven, the final letter - *nun* - pointing to the pit of destruction.

The spread of the Internet - email and "I.M." in particular - presents a modern twist to an ancient problem. How easy it is these days to spread our hurtful words without time to think before we push the "send" button, a dispatch of pain instantaneously sent and widely distributed.

While our traditions have much to say about positive ways of talking, this evening I want to focus on four ways our tongue can lead us astray - through outright lies, gossip, talebearing and innuendo.

### *Malicious Lies*

Lies can easily ruin lives and reputations. Thus, there can be no justification for spreading rumors about others (even in jest) which might harm them. What makes outright lying doubly bad is that it grows out of the basest of motives - revenge, anger and greed. It might be jealousy of a friend who has found a loving partner. In our misery we say something to destroy the relationship so we can have that friend back all to ourselves. Or we might wish to see a competitor fail in business, so we intimate illegal or immoral action. "It's only words," we rationalize, but in the process one's livelihood can be stolen, a life shattered.

All this does not mean that one should be completely forthright. There are times when the truth ought to be hidden - such as to save a life. To keep someone from feeling embarrassed, we might also "stretch the truth." The classic example is that at a wedding, we always say, "the bride is beautiful," reminding ourselves that the true beauty is that which radiates from the soul.

### *Gossip*

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<sup>3</sup> Proverbs18:21

Gossip, in Hebrew, is called *lashon hara*- "the evil tongue." Not as blatant as a bald-faced lie, it might involve taking a kernel of the truth and embellishing it. In fact, says one commentator, gossiping about something partly true is worse than an outright lie. Lies most people immediately disbelieve, but if what we hear has the ring of truth it allows us to imagine the worst. Gossip includes emphasizing negative characteristics. If we go about saying, "She's tight-fisted and never gives anything", if we look for the worst in others instead of the best, if we dismiss someone with the words, "He's an idiot", we are engaging in *lashon hara*. Wrong, too, are those who speak of the disgrace of another, even if what they say is accurate. If we speak gleefully of the sexual indiscretion of someone - it is *lashon hara*. Whispering wisps of truth about how we heard of someone's business suffering because of questionable dealings? That, too, is *lashon hara*.

Alluding to anything negative in others is no less wrong. When we say to someone, "did you know his father slept around" or "she may appear to be a committed Jew, but she grew up Baptist" - it is *lashon hara*. True, we are not saying anything that is inherently bad, but what we are doing is questioning the motives, integrity or background of the person, rather than letting their life and present behavior stand on its own.

Gossip is particularly hard to stop when one is in a group. Why? You think one of two things - either "everyone is saying it, so it must be OK" or "if I say, 'this is wrong', people will think I'm not being sociable." Wanting to fit in, then, we allow things we would never say privately to go by. Though it is hard, however, the proper response when we hear gossip is simple: "please stop!"

### *Talebearing*

The talebearer is someone who "goes from one person to another saying, 'so and so said this, and this I heard of another.'" Although it may be true, that person harms the world."<sup>4</sup> This is not someone who wishes to harm another (as the gossip does), but nevertheless, just in spreading stories does damage.

The talebearer is a person who has not learned the distinction between private and public conversation. If someone says something to you, is it fair to assume that it can be said to others? Judaism answers, "No, it is not." If someone speaks to you, it is private unless you ask permission to share what was said with a third party. Whatever is said between two should always be considered private. If you do need to share with a co-worker, friend or spouse, better to speak in the realm of ideas, avoiding the mention of names.

One of the most used lines has to be: "I'm just telling you what so and so told me." Yet,

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<sup>4</sup> Rambam, MT, *Hilkhot Da'ot* 7:2

this is the essence of talebearing. Yes, it is hard to verify everything we hear, but it is important. Before you go out and repeat something you sense could be hurtful, it is important to confirm the story. Go to the person being talked about. Tell them, "Are you aware others are talking about this?" Ask them, "Is this true?" "But, Rabbi," you're thinking, "how can I do that? how can go to a friend and say, 'I've heard something bad about you'? If I ask them, they will assume I think the worst about them." There is a risk, but true friendship involves honesty on both sides. Better a story spoken about openly than one passed about behind people's backs. Have we not all had situations which, because we spoke indiscriminately, we later cried, "but I never meant to do any harm." Talebearing hurts others ... and those who do it.

### *Innuendo and Jokes*

Sometimes there are things we say which are not, on the surface, wrong, but lead those we are speaking of to think the worst. Body language is a powerful way of conveying negative thoughts, without having to resort to words. If, while someone is talking, out of the side of your eye you catch me doing this (finger twirled on side of head), you know that what I am saying is, "this guy isn't working with all the cylinders going." A simple bobbing of head and eyes rolled to heaven means "blah, blah, blah. Will she never shut up!"

Sometimes bad things are simply implied in our words. For example, one who says "Well, I really can't say what happened" may well be fishing for someone to say, "C'mon, you can tell us." And even if nothing more is said, in the silence those listening get the impression that some impropriety has taken place. Or we might excuse our words, with something like "This is probably only gossip, but ..." or, "I don't know this is true, but what I heard is ..."

The Rambam referred to these things as "the dust that covers up slander."<sup>5</sup> I love that phrase, because it alludes to the way we try to hide behind the excuse that we really said nothing wrong.

Lest you think our words don't matter, consider the story of Oliver Sipple. Sipple was an American hero, an ex-Marine who saved the life of President Ford in 1975 by grabbing an assassin's gun in San Francisco just as she was about to shoot. When reporters came to interview him, he had only one request: that they not publish anything about him. This only led the reporters to dig into his history, and in profiling him they trumpeted the fact that he was active in gay causes. One reporter confronted Sipple's mother in Detroit and asked about her son's apparent homosexuality. She was visibly stunned; she had known nothing about it. Shortly thereafter, she stopped speaking to her son. When she died four years later, Sipple's

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<sup>5</sup> Rambam, MT, *Hilkhot Da'ot* 7:4

father informed his son that he would not be welcome at her funeral. Devastated by the rupture in his family, Sipple began to drink heavily. He became increasingly withdrawn. A few years later, he was found in his apartment, dead at age 47.

When I was growing up and was teased by others, I was taught a ditty which was meant to dry my tears: "Sticks and stones will break your bones, but words will never hurt you." I have come to the realization that this is not a very Jewish way of looking at life. Words do hurt, sometimes terribly so. A recent study concluded that those who were abused said much worse than the physical violence done against them was being verbally abused. Harmful words cut away our compassion, they can belittle and rip apart a sense of self-esteem, they can ruin the best of relationships, they can destroy livelihoods and they rip away the decency of a society. We fool ourselves if we think otherwise. The power of life and death *are* in the tongue, and so we should be more careful to guard what we say (or write) about others.

We may not be able to change the way Fox News, MSNBC or the candidate's handlers frame the Presidential debate, but around our holiday tables and the fountains at work we can change how we talk about the future of our nation. And we do it by more careful consideration of how we speak not just about the election, but everyone else.

Four quick, practical and final suggestions, since you may be asking yourself, "So if I can't gossip, what am I supposed to talk about?" First, think before you speak. Is it some kind of sin to actually wait before saying what suddenly pops into your head? As one commentator notes, maybe there is a reason the tongue has two "gates" in front of it - the teeth and the lips - a double reminder to take care before we speak. Second, try to discipline yourself to talk about ideas and not people. Third, remember what your mother told you: "if you can't say anything nice about someone, don't say it." And finally, when in doubt about whether to speak or not remember the sage advice of Rabbi Akiva: "silence is the rampart of wisdom."<sup>6</sup>

If you need help to accomplish this, or want to learn more, please take the sheet titled "Watching Our Words" that will be available as you leave the synagogue today or on our website.

"Life and death are in the power of the tongue." Let us guard our words, then, being careful not to hurt those we love and honest even with people we do not like. Let us use our speech to restore a power of life, self-worth and helping others see the sacred within them. Then (and only then) can we offer our prayer with integrity of spirit: "May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, Adonai, My Rock and My Redeemer."

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<sup>6</sup> Pirke Avot 3:17