

Moving between England and America, I sometimes forget which language it is that I am supposed to be speaking. I know that it sounds like we are speaking the same language, and most of you would claim to speak English, but in reality there are many, many differences; and I spend significant time translating in my head, to make sure I say the right words in the right country. With my young nephew it has been confusing with nappies or diapers, and dummies or pacifiers. But it gets trickier; am I filling the car with gas or petrol, getting that one wrong can have problematic consequences. And to still be allowed to visit England I have to remember that while it is soccer here, it is only ever called football back there.

But by far the most confusion always comes in restaurants. I have sat in a restaurant trying to understand that a scallion is a spring onion, a zucchini is a courgette and an eggplant is actually an aubergine. I've stood in a queue, sorry a line, asking for my food to take away, and had to be helped by the person behind me, who informed me that I actually wanted my food to go. And when I've asked for the bill at the end of the meal, they've looked back at me blankly, until Micol explained that I needed the check.

George Bernard Shaw is often attributed with saying that the English and Americans are two nations divided by a common language; and he was certainly right.

The power of language is a truly phenomenal thing. It can drive wedges between people or serve as a source of unity. Words of love, comfort and healing, can serve to bridge the gap between people like nothing else. But words of hate, bigotry and derision can cause lasting pain and conflict.

We should not be surprised that words are arguably the most powerful thing which exists in this world. After all as we read this morning, the very world in which we live was created by the word of God. Raw materials and ingredients are not specified; instead God's work of creation begins: *vayomer Elohim, yehi or, vayehi or* – 'And

God said: “Let there be light” and there was light’.¹ On each day of creation God speaks; decreeing with words that something should be created, and as a result of God’s words the spoken word becomes a reality. It begins with the light and ends with God saying: ‘Let us make humanity in our own image, after our likeness’,² resulting in our creation. The entire world, including humanity itself, came into being through the power of words.

And we who are made in God’s own image, are also endowed with that creative power through the words that we speak. In the modern world where we have been able to split the atom, to propel people into space and to cure diseases which were previously fatal; we often forget the power which our words possess. The force contained within our words is hard to quantify; but through our words we enjoy a creative power to build or destroy, to hurt or heal, to bless or curse.

In magic this linguistic power is still present. The most commonly used magical incantation used by magicians across the ages and around the world is abracadabra. It was so well known that JK Rowling even adapted it for her Harry Potter stories, so that it became *Avada Kedavra* – the killing curse. As JK Rowling knew, these words relate back to Aramaic and Hebrew.³ *Abracadabra*, which may on the surface just sound like hocus pocus, actually comes from the Hebrew *abareh kedaber*; *abareh* meaning I will create, and *kedaber* meaning as it is said. In this way the magical word *abracadabra* essentially means: ‘I will create as it is spoken’. It acknowledges the creative power which words inherently possess; it is a reminder that the entire world was *barah* created, *kedaber* as God spoke.

With all of the magic and mystery inherent in JK Rowling’s Harry Potter series, she left us in no doubt as to what is the most powerful thing in both their and our universe. Towards the end of the final book, and don’t worry I won’t spoil the ending, Albus Dumbledore, the wisest of all the magicians says: ‘Words are, in my not-so-humble

¹ Genesis 1:3

² Genesis 1:26

³ She made reference to the Aramaic origins of the word at the Edinburgh Book Festival in 2004.

opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic; capable of both inflicting injury, and remedying it.' And he was absolutely correct; there is something magical about the power that our words possess. Words can hurt and words can heal.

And yet, in playgrounds on both sides of the Atlantic, children can be heard to say: 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' This has to be one of the greatest lies ever told to our children. Bruises will eventually heal; the scrapes on the knee from when we were young are all but a distant memory today. How many of us can remember physical pain from when we were younger? I am guessing that many more of us can remember the pain caused by stinging words. We remember the insults we heard, the names we were called, and we remember, and sometimes still feel, the pain they caused us.

In a study conducted by psychologists, it was discovered that memories of painful emotional experiences linger far longer than those involving physical pain. The researcher from Purdue University attributed this to the development of the cerebral cortex of the brain, which allows humans to relive, re-experience and suffer from social pain.⁴

Words hurt me when I was young. I don't remember any of the physical fights I had, or the pain of any of my many falls, but I do remember the words of my music teacher in elementary school, who told me: 'You can't sing'. There were many ways that he could have told me that I couldn't be in the choir. And he might well have been right about the fact that I couldn't sing, but did he need to say it like that? Could he not have chosen his words more carefully? I enjoy singing, but only in the privacy of the car or the shower. When I have to teach or lead a song in public, my heart rate accelerates and I become that 8 year old boy again, who was told that he could not sing.

⁴ Article from BBC News website: August 29, 2008.

And while I carry this memory with me, I am well aware that my suffering was trivial when compared with the insensitive words, insults and threats which others have suffered. Earlier this month Jamey Rodemeyer, a 14 year old boy in Buffalo, committed suicide after suffering years of bullying as a result of his struggles with his sexuality. He was verbally tormented in person and on-line; and these hateful comments ultimately proved too much for him. After his death his parents said: 'To the kids who are bullying they have to realize that words are very powerful and what you think is just fun and games isn't to some people, and you are destroying a lot of lives'.⁵ Words can hurt and words can heal.

There are unfortunately many ways in which we can use our words negatively. As part of the Yom Kippur confession we declare as a community *dibarnu dofi* – our speech has been blemished; this declaration is not specific and instead it includes within it the various ways in which we can use our words negatively, amongst them: lying, cursing, insulting, slandering, and gossiping.

Amidst the Rosh Hashanah liturgy the Unetaneh Tokef prayer forces us to directly confront the power of this period in the Jewish year. Recognizing that by Yom Kippur our fate will be decided with our names and fate inscribed and sealed. It asks 'who shall live and who shall die', and then it asks how death will come.

With our words we have the power to destroy; demolishing a person's character, reputation and well-being. On this Rosh Hashanah as we consider the year which has passed we may ask:

How many people did we hurt with our words this year;
who by sarcasm and who by insults;
who by dismissing and who by one upping;
who by bullying and who by criticizing;
who by lying and who by gossip.

⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/20/jamey-rodemeyer-suicide-gay-bullying_n_972023.html

The philosopher Socrates suggested a three filter test for avoiding gossip, but it offers us important lessons when considering our speech more generally. He urged people to first consider whether what they were going to say is true. Then he queried whether the words were going to be positive and good. Finally he asked if there was a value to the listener in hearing the words. Before speaking, it is worth bearing in mind Socrates' important advice, but it is also worth taking a deep breath and just thinking about the consequences before saying something which might later be regretted.

There is a famous story told about Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel who instructed his servant Tabbai to go to the market and to buy him some good food. Tabbai returned later that day with tongue for his master. A little while later Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel called on his servant and instructed him to go to the market and buy some bad food. Tabbai returned later that day and again he brought tongue.

Rabbi Shimon said to him: 'I don't understand. When I sent you to buy me good food you came back with tongue, and when I sent you to buy me bad food you came back with tongue; how is this possible?'

His servant Tabbai replied: 'Good comes from it and bad comes from it. When the tongue is good there is nothing better, and when it is bad there is nothing worse.'⁶

Just as our words can be used to hurt, destroy and curse; they can also be used to heal, build and bless.

At this time of year we may be more conscious of Elton John's warning that: 'Sorry seems to be the hardest word'. But when we find the power to apologize to someone, using our words to express remorse and to ask for forgiveness, a new relationship can flourish and grow where once there had been anger and tension. When we say sorry we expose ourselves, admitting that we did not act to the best

⁶ Leviticus Rabbah 33:1

of our ability and that we failed in some way in the past; it is not always easy to do. But for the person we hurt, to hear our words of regret offers them a chance to begin to put away the pain that we had caused.

And words can be used positively in and of themselves. After being offered the position here as one of your Rabbis at The Community Synagogue, I was struck by several e-mails I received from members of the search committee, offering me congratulations, support and help with our move to Port Washington. The words were filled with warmth, kindness and care, which immediately helped make me feel wanted and welcomed by this community, before we had even left London. And since we have been here, the words of encouragement and welcome which we have received from so many of you have created a feeling of community, which has been so important to Micol and me over our first couple of months here.

Popular culture will often make fun of the significance of the declaration: 'I love you', and the pressure that accompanies it. But are there any words that a person would rather hear? Telling someone that you truly love them nourishes that person's soul and provides for their deepest emotional needs: their need to belong, to feel appreciated and to be wanted. We all need to hear these words, and we all need to therefore speak these words to those that we love: our spouses, children, family and friends. Everyone grows through hearing those three little words.

The most important prayer we recite, at least three times a day, every day, is the Amidah. It finishes with a silent meditation, said privately by us to God, which begins with a request: 'My God, keep my tongue from causing harm and my lips from telling lies, let me be silent if people curse me'. In that moment of quiet, with no words spoken aloud, we ask God to help us avoid causing harm with our words, even when provoked by the curses of another. And then at the meditation's end we pray: *Yihiyu leratzon imrey fi vehegyon libby lefanecha Adonai* - 'May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, O God'. This is the challenge the *Amidah* presents, at the conclusion of our service: Will the words

we speak be acceptable to God? How can we make sure that inside and outside of the synagogue we use the power of speech in ways which are worthy of God's ears? Can we become partners with God in the work of creating a better world through our words?

The entire world, with all of its beauty and majesty, was created by God through the power of words. And this power does not remain in Heaven; it was given to us, when God created us and gave us the gift of speech. With our words we can be God's partners, making this world a better place for all who live in it. Or with our words, we can tear down and destroy this beautiful world which God gave us. Socrates offered a three filter approach to speech, but the Amidah asks but one question: Is what you are about to say acceptable to God? If the answer is yes then say it, but if the answer is no perhaps those words are best left unsaid.

Returning to the model of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, as we look forward to the year that lies ahead, we can ask a different question:

How many people will we heal with our words;
who by empathizing and who by understanding;
who by comforting and who by defending;
who by consoling and who by reassuring;
who by apologizing and who by forgiving;
who by encouraging and who by loving.

May we recognize that our words are filled with power.

May we use our words for love, comfort and healing.

And may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our heart be acceptable to You.⁷

Amen.

⁷ This final prayer: "May we recognize..." was inspired by a sermon by Rabbi Carrie Vogel.