

Earlier this evening, Rabbi Kramer led us in saying the blessing and wrapping ourselves in our *tallitot*, our prayer shawls. This experience is unique to Kol Nidre. During the rest of the year, unless you are the service leader, the tallit is donned only in the day time when there is natural light, because the goal of wearing a tallit is to see the *tzit tzit*, the fringes on the garment, and be reminded of the *mitzvot*, the commandments, our sacred obligations to each other, ourselves, and the Ground of All Being.

So, *mah nish tanah, ha lila hazeh?* What makes this night different from all other nights that we should wear our tallitot? One tradition, dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century suggests that we wear our tallitot to invoke God's attributes of mercy which were chanted earlier in the service – *Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum V'chanun*.... Another interpretation sees the tallit as a reminder of death and the transient nature of physical existence, as the dead are often buried in a tallit. Others say that since the traditional tallit is mostly white, we wear them as a sign of purity; we become like angels, dressed in white light.

In other words, we don't know why we wear our tallitot this evening! So since there is not one clear meaning, I would like to suggest another possibility. I believe we wear them for the same reason they are worn during the day the rest of the year: to remind us, on this holiest night of the year, of our sacred obligations, our Jewish values, and the fundamental, ethical basis of our lives.

Another unique thing about Yom Kippur is its focus on "sin." "*Al chet shekhatana l'fanecha*," "we have sinned before you." We say this over and over again during Yom Kippur. This catalogue of sins is actually an expression, all be it in a negative way, of the core values of Jewish life.

Tonight, I want to look at one set of “sins” that are omnipresent in the liturgy for Yom Kippur-- those we commit with our words. I’m going to speak about those values by using the Makhzor, the Holy Day prayer book, and the impending election – God help us !– as our guide.

*“Al chet shechatanu lifanecha/ the ways we have sinned deliberately and by mistake; and harm we have caused through the words of our mouth”*

*“Al chet chechatanu lifanecha/ the ways we have sinned by hardening our hearts; and harm we have caused through careless speech.”*

*“Al chet chechatanu lifanecha/the ways we have wronged you through lies and deceit, and harm we have caused through gossip and rumor”*

And there are more! “Many of the wrongful and harmful acts in the litanies of confession (the Al Chets)”, writes the editors of our new Machzor in a footnote, “refer to unethical speech... The problem of human speech is introduced at the beginning of the service... and underscored by Kol Nidrei, as we acknowledge the vows and the promises to God we have failed to keep.” The list is long, and it is not just an “outpouring of remorse and guilt,” but also a “teachable moment” when we can be reminded of the power of our words both to help and to hurt others. (pg 90)

The Jewish conversation about the power of words begins with the first lines of the Torah: “... *V’yomer Elohim v’y’hi or v’y’ hi or/*Then God said, “Let there be light and there was light.” God doesn’t physically make

the world, God speaks it into being! For better or for worse, from a Jewish perspective, words are powerful enough to create worlds, and, by extension, destroy them.

If you are a Sci-fi enthusiast you may remember Carl Sagan's book, *Contact*, or perhaps its film adaptation. In the book, government researchers using radio telescopes scan the heavens for signals of life from another planet and they hit the jackpot: the Vega people, light years away, transmit back a message they received from us some 50 years ago which they don't really understand. You'll never guess what it was--it was Hitler's welcome to the 1936 Olympic Games, the first television broadcast with even moderate power.

You see, such signals go on forever, at least according to Carl Sagan. The better the receivers are, the farther the signals can travel and still be picked up. All of it--every dumb commercial, Reality T.V., Talk Radio--all of it exists out there forever; the good, the bad, the ugly, it's all there. (L. Kushner, *shmirat lashon*, KN 5757).

It's humbling to think about, and a mirror of the Jewish view of speech and why we should take such care with our words. (L. Kushner, *shmirat lashon*, KN 5757).

No wonder Judaism has so much to say about *shmirat lashon*, "guarding our tongues" or "Mindful Speech." In fact, there is a sea of Jewish teachings on this issue. Let's not drown in them tonight, but I do want to cover some basics.

Most of these guidelines flow from one verse in the Torah, Leviticus 19:16, which reads, “*lo taylaykh r’khal b’amekha*/You shall not go up and down as a tale bearer among your people....” According to Jewish Law, *anyone* who tells tales about another person, who goes around from one person to another saying things like, “So-and so said this” or “Such and such I have heard about so-and-so,” is guilty of *richilut*, gossip, tale-bearing. (*Dayot* 7:1)

But there is still a graver sin than *richilut*, or gossip, warns the *Maimoides*, the great medieval rabbi and philosopher, which falls under the same prohibition: it is called the evil tongue, *lashon hara*. This means saying anything bad about anyone, even if what you say is *true!* (*Dayot* 7:2). Are you starting to feel the connection to this year’s election yet?

*Lashon hara* includes insults, ridicule, jest, denigrating another’s craftsmanship or merchandise, commenting on someone’s physical attributes, mental status, financial situation, medical history--anything that might cause another person harm, embarrassment or displeasure. They are all *lashon hara*, the evil tongue.

And there is an even deeper concept called - *Avak lashon hara* – “the dust of evil tongue.” This form of speech could be the most insidious, the most destructive because it is so easily disguised.

Maimonides explains that the “dust of evil speech” surfaces when we say things like, “Who would have ever thought that of all people, George Gittleman would become a rabbi!” or “Let’s not talk about so-and-so since I’d rather not tell you what I know....” Even praise can be seen as *avak*

*lashon hara* because it can result in a negative response or questions about motive or what is not said.

Of course, we are obligated to speak out about another person to prevent harm, and Jewish tradition does allow for exceptions. We would be failing each other if we did not warn others of things like a vendor who offers shoddy craftsmanship, an unscrupulous business person or poor professional services.

But here the information must be specific and contextual. For instance, I can tell you about the quality of work of an attorney or a contractor or a caterer, but I can't tell you what I might also know about their family or their history. The key here is to think carefully before we give or receive the information, to consider closely how is it connected to our own use and needs. Why the information is sought or needed and what are our intentions in sharing it?

I don't know how you are feeling right now, but after studying the Jewish law on mindful speech, I am both humbled and perplexed. Can one function outside of a silent retreat, without breaking these rules? Is this possible? I also feel the need to confess, "*khatani l'fanekha*, I have sinned before you," because I am certain I was not as careful as I should have been with my speech in the past year.

The renowned 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish rabbi, the Chafetz Hayyim, who wrote the definitive book on Shmirat Lashon/mindful speech tells this story. A rabbi, utterly committed to sh'mirat lashon, goes silent for 18 years. Finally, his vow of silence is over--and the first words out of his mouth are about another person! Oy!

This story is a reminder of how hard it is to be careful with our speech; that *sh'mirat lashon*, mindful speech represents ideals to strive for and not something to beat ourselves up with at least not too much. The question to ask yourself is how much ill will do you want to carry around about other people? Remember, we are where our minds are and if our minds are caught up in negative talk, so are we.

No wonder why we are so distressed by this election. There is too little, if any, concern for *sh'mirat lashon*, for being careful about what is said. Naming calling, bullying, lying have somehow become the norm, at least for some. It's frightening and for good reason; the ability to engage in civil discourse is essential to democracy and the rule of law.

The Talmud, the source of most of Jewish life is full of argument and controversy. In it, we read one rabbi's argument, then one from another rabbi's perspective; precedents are cited, arguments recorded and though there is usually a final decision, the dissenting opinion is always recorded. Why? To allow for a later court to rule in a different way, and to show respect for the dissenting voice.

In fact, we are taught that in the great debates between Hillel and Shammai, the two dominate rabbinic voices of the earliest layer of the Talmud, Hillel usually wins because, "He would teach Shammai's opinion first and speak with kindness and generosity."

What the Talmud is describing is civil discourse, reasoned debate, not name calling or bullying. Even though, we in the Jewish community may not always behave in a civil, reasoned and respectful way towards

each other, decency in discourse and disagreement is a basic value of Jewish life and a healthy America.

Judaism also understands that words can be deadly weapons in many ways. For example our tradition teaches that to embarrass or shame someone in public is tantamount to murder: character assassination.

“Character assassination” is bad enough, even worse is language that incites violence. In regards to the presidential campaign I am referring the derogatory words said about Muslims, immigrants, refugees and woman as well as the not too subtle suggestions that violence would be a good response to a candidate’s position on an issue.

It’s shocking that this kind of hateful, careless speech has been so prevalent in this election cycle, and it reminds me in the most frightening way of the rhetoric in Israel before Rabin’s assassination. Yitzkhak Rabin was the Prime Minister of Israel in the early 1990s, during the height of the Peace Process that led to the Oslo Accords. Because of his pursuit of a Two State Solution, the religious(?) right in Israel demonized Rabin in the press and from the pulpit, calling him a “*rodef*,” which is a technical term in the Talmud for someone who is threatening you to the degree that you can kill him in self-defense. It was shocking, but in hindsight, not surprising that such a hateful environment lead to the assassination of one of Israel’s greatest leaders as well as death of the peace process he so courageously pursued.

We know that hate speech can lead to violence and there is already evidence that that is exactly what is happening in our country now.

Attacks against Muslim American's have risen to levels not seen since the days just after 9/11. It is unfair to suggest that all the violence is due to the rhetoric of the campaign, yet scholars like Brian Levin, the Director of the Study of Hate and Extremism (at Cal State San Bernardino), are reporting that spikes in hate crimes against Muslim Americans are directly linked to political vitriol and derogatory remarks made on the campaign trail. Is this consistent with our values, as both Jews and Americans?

Besides the verbal and physical attacks against Muslims in our country, the presidential campaign has been filled with a regular bashing of immigrants. My grandfather on both sides of my family came through Ellis Island--how about yours? We are a nation of immigrants and the overwhelming majority of Jews in this country immigrated here not too long ago. No wonder there is a rare consensus in support of immigrant rights in the Jewish community today. But our support of immigrants is not just a reflection of our recent history; rather, it is a corner stone of Judaism dating back to the very beginning. The Torah commands concern, care and respect for the *ger*, the stranger, the resident alien, no less than 36 times.

“The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am YHVH your God.” Leviticus 19:34

"You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt...You shall not oppress a stranger, for



you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” Exodus 22

Why is the Torah so concerned about “the stranger”? In general, the Torah, and Jewish values as a whole, are concerned about the most vulnerable in society. The Torah is especially concerned about immigrants because they can too easily fall outside the protection of the law and thus fall prey to exploitation, oppression and abuse. In fact, that was the norm for the peoples amongst whom our ancient Israelite ancestors lived and that is one of the things that makes the Torah such a remarkable document for its time: it shows deep concern for people outside the normal boundary of kin, clan and tribe, something rare even today.

We can disagree about what needs to be done about immigration in our country, but there is no real argument about the need to practice *Sh'mirat Lashon*, careful speech, when talking about anyone, especially such a vulnerable population. Words do count, and the way we use words can shape our actions, and the actions of those who lead us and those we serve.

We can and we must speak out against discriminatory, derogatory and hateful speech. We can and we must expect more from our politicians and elected officials; if they are not able to pursue a civil discourse about the issues that confront our society, they are not fit to hold office. And, in as much as we have political power, it is incumbent upon us to use it to push for positive change. As tempting as it is to disengage, more than ever we need to be engaged, to make sure our voice and the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard.

Let's end where we began with the Tallit. Whether you wear one or not, you shoulder the values it symbolizes, you embody for better or for worse the behavior it encompasses. According to Jewish Tradition the knots and fringes that make up a tallit represent the 613 commandments. I'm not sure about the math, or what the number 613 really means to us, but I am sure about one thing; what we say and how we say it matters. It matters in our private lives – with our family and our friends – and it matters in our public lives – at work, in synagogue, around town - as well. We may have little control of how our politicians use their words but we have the possibility of being in complete control of how we use our words. Let's be the change we want to see in the New Year and, starting right now.