

Laura Schwartz Harari
Kol Nidre 5766
B'nai Israel Amarillo, Texas

“Words That Hurt—Words That Heal”

Sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never hurt me”.

How many times in your life have you heard this phrase repeated? I know I have, many times—whether on the school playground, in a social context, or in a childhood novel. It was conventional wisdom, back then, to dismiss the effect that name-calling has on us. We were taught to believe that nasty rumors, insults and public shaming, were to be met with bravado. As long as we were not harmed physically, there would be no lasting impact from verbal assaults upon us, our good name or our reputation.

How wrong this has proven to be! I imagine that each of us can identify someone we know--perhaps even ourselves-- whose conduct today reflects the legacy of having negative words aimed at them. Think of the articulate young executive who writes brilliantly, but who is panic-stricken every time he has to speak in public, having been criticized by his high school speech teacher. Think of the attractive woman who, after years of her mother's critique of her weight, is convinced she cannot be worthy of anyone's love. We don't have to look far to see the impact that negative

words—said directly or spread as rumors or lies—can have. Words have the power to hurt us as surely as the sword.

In his book Chutzpah, Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz relates the following anecdote about gossip:

“ My mother is vacationing at a Jewish hotel in the Catskill Mountains, and is sitting around with a group of older women. One of them hears my mother’s name and, without realizing she is my mother, launches into a discussion of that other Dershowitz, the Harvard professor. ‘Such a wonderful boy he is, but why did he have to go off and marry that shiksa (non-Jewish woman)? All the smart and successful ones do it, Henry Kissinger, Ted Koppel...? Why?’

My mother, playing dumb, strings along the know-it all: ‘How do you know that Dershowitz married a shiksa?’ Mrs. Know-it-all knows: ‘My son’s cousin is his best friend. He was at the church where they had the wedding.’

My mother responds: ‘Well, I heard that he married a Jewish woman.’

‘So you heard wrong,’ Mrs. Know-it-all assures my mother. ‘That’s the story the family is putting out, can you blame them?’

At this point my mother can’t hold back. ‘Alan Dershowitz is my son. I was at the synagogue where he married Carolyn Cohen, whose father’s

name is Mordechai and whose mother speaks fluent Yiddish. So what do you say about that?’

‘Oh, I’m so glad it wasn’t true!’ Mrs. Know-it-all says in obvious relief, but quickly adding, ‘How about Henry Kissinger, is his wife Jewish too?’

What startles us about this story is that most of us have **been** Mrs. Know-it-all at one time or another. We have put down another, or called someone’s reputation into question, for the purpose of self-aggrandizement. While we realize that what we did was inconsiderate and hurtful to the other, we may not realize that unjust speech—whether said in someone’s presence, or as gossip about them—can harm its speaker as well!

In his book, Words That Hurt, Words That Heal, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin says the following: *“The Jewish tradition views words as tangible (in Hebrew, one of the terms for ‘words’ is ‘devarim’, which also means ‘things’), and extremely powerful. The Bible clearly acknowledges the potency of words, teaching that God created the world with words. As the third verse of Genesis records: ‘And God said, Let there be light, and there was light’.*

A tale tells of a man in a small Eastern European town who went through the community slandering the rabbi. One day, feeling suddenly remorseful, he begged the rabbi for forgiveness and offered to undergo any penance to make amends. The rabbi told him to take a feather pillow from his home, cut it open, scatter the feathers to the wind, then return to see him. The man did as he was told, then came to the rabbi and asked, 'Am I now forgiven?' 'Almost', came the response. 'You just have to do one more thing. Go and gather all the feathers'. 'But that's impossible', the man protested. 'The wind has already scattered them'. 'Precisely', the rabbi answered. 'And although you truly wish to correct the evil you have done, it is as impossible to repair the damage done by your words as it is to recover the feathers.'

That words are powerful may seem obvious, but the fact is that most of us, most of the time, use them lightly. 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.

If we keep the power of words in the foreground of our consciousness, we will handle them as carefully as we would a loaded gun.”

As powerful as is the capacity of words to hurt, so powerful is their capacity to heal and inspire. Rabbi Jack Reimer suggests that we resolve to make four phrases a regular part of our speech in the coming year. They are:

- Thank you
- I love you
- How are you?
- What do you need?

Learning to say thank you requires us to cultivate gratitude for what the other has done for us. We can express love in many ways. Its expression is most meaningful when we find the way most needed by the recipient of our expression. ‘How are you?’ and ‘what do you need’, place the emphasis on the “you”. Rather than presuming we know best, discerning what the needs are of others will allow us to meet their needs in the most impactful way.

To Rabbi Reimer’s list, Rabbi Telushkin adds the phrase, “I’m sorry”. This is, for us, perhaps the hardest acknowledgement of all. To say, ‘I’m sorry’ requires us to admit to having been wrong, even unkind. Yet, this is what we must find a way to do. The Sages of the Talmud have said that Yom Kippur forgives us for those sins we have committed toward God, but not those sins we have committed toward our fellow

human being, unless we first approach that person and asked for their forgiveness.

The concluding words to tomorrow morning's Torah reading underscore for us that "gates of repentance" are always open. God wishes for us to turn and return. "the commandments that Adonai has given you are not far away—they are not in the heavens,...they are not beyond the sea...rather these **words** are very close to you—in your **mouth** and in your heart that you may do them."

On this the eve of the holiest day of the year, my wish is that we may all learn to harness the healing power of words in our speech and in our dealings with each other.

Amen, keyn y'hi ratzon!

-