

Creating Worlds with Words
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Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, the prolific author, told a story some years ago about his own family. One day, his five-year-old daughter Naomi was in a weepy mood, and in a moment of frustration, his wife, Dvorah, yelled at their daughter, “I hate it when you keep crying over nothing! It hurts my ears. If you can’t stop crying, I will have to leave you at home!” The next morning at breakfast, Shira, Naomi’s then three-year-old sister, started crying. Naomi stuffed both index fingers in her ears, and screamed at her sister: “I hate it when you cry! It hurts my ears. If you have to cry, go into the other room.” Dvorah was dumbstruck. Naomi had exactly replicated her impatient tone, her chiding, even some of her words. Embarrassed, and eager to show Naomi a better response, she went over to the crying Shira, sat her on her lap, and said, “Mommy’s sorry she forgot to wait for you to add the blueberries to the pancakes. I never want to make you cry. I’m just going to sit by you until all baby Shira’s tears go away.”

Naomi carefully studied this exchange, and during the days and weeks that followed, Dvorah made a point of repeating such compassionate reassurance whenever she saw Naomi or any of their other children crying.

Some time later, their youngest child, two-year-old Benjamin, kicked Shira, prompting a fit of wailing. This time Naomi (the five-year-old) sat down beside her hurt sister and said comfortingly, “It’s okay, Shira. No more crying. I’m going to sit right here for the whole night and wait for you to stop.”

As Rabbi Telushkin retells the story in his book, Words That Hurt, Words That Heal, he comments that he and his wife learned as valuable a lesson as Naomi from the incident, one that had been expressed in the late 19th century by the Chofetz Chayim, Rabbi Israel Kagan, a great Eastern European rabbinic scholar. The Chofetz Chayim taught, “*When people are preparing a telegram, notice how carefully they consider each word before they put it down. That is how careful we must be when we speak.*”

(Telushkin, XX-XXI)

We could easily make the same point in our society using the example of e-mail and text message instead of the telegram—our words, whether written or spoken, have great transformative power and leave lasting impressions. This is certainly not a new concept in Judaism. Our tradition has regarded words as significant from the very outset, when the third verse of the Torah declares, “*Vayomer Elohim—Vayehi Or; Vayehi Or.*” And God said, “let there be light!”—and there was light. God is able to create our

entire world through words alone, a notion that shows God's power as well as illustrates the importance of words. In fact, one of our daily prayers that serves as a gateway to our morning when it headlines the *Pesukei D'Zimra*, verses of song, section of our service begins with this very sentiment.

Barukh Sheamar V'Hayah Ha-Olam. Praised is the
One Who Spoke and the world came into being.

When it comes to how WE use our words, we are held to a high God-like standard. This should not be surprising given that we start with the biblical premise that every human being was created in God's image, and therefore in many areas of behavior we are expected to do what God "does" or follow God's example. But how can we possibly create worlds with words? Well, on a literary level, Telushkin offers us one perfect example: *Certainly we've all had the experience of reading a novel and being so moved by the fate of one of its characters that we felt love, hate, or anger. Sometimes we cried, even though the individual whose fate so moved us never existed. All that happened was that a writer took a blank piece of paper, and through words alone created a human being so real that he or she was capable of evoking our deepest emotions (p.4).* Authors can literally CREATE WORLDS with their words, though their kind of creation may be imagined and need not be connected to something real. The reality is that

we can actually create with our words in this world, too, and the equally sobering reality is that those words are also just as capable of destruction.

To illustrate the impact of our words, let's actually work our way up, "*Mi-Genai La-Shevach*", from disgraceful to praiseworthy, and consider examples of speech. We'll start by addressing several different aspects of gossip, and then contrast that ugly kind of speech with more positive uses of words, including constructive criticism, saying we're sorry, praising, giving thanks, and even just extending a greeting.

When it comes to the broad and dangerous category of gossip, there are three types of speech that tend to be lumped together, and so I will devote some attention to each of these three types. The first, and least serious, is passing on information and comments about others that are true and not defamatory. The second type of speech is passing on negative, though true, stories, which are really the essence of the Hebrew term *lashon ha-ra*—the evil tongue—including a subcategory of *rechilus*, tattling. And the third type of speech is choosing to pass on lies and rumors, information that is both negative and false, what we know in Hebrew as *motzi shem ra*.

At first glance, it would appear strange that there could be anything problematic with gossip that involves passing on true and non defamatory, perhaps even praiseworthy, information about someone. But if we look a

little closer, we can quickly see a potential problem that emerges from the passing on of seemingly innocuous information like “did you see how much weight she lost—wow, she looks great!”. Simply, innocuous gossip rarely remains so. If two or more people start talking about a mutual acquaintance, what is the likelihood that they will devote the entire time to sharing stories about that person’s niceness or successes? People are in the habit of critically evaluating others, and it’s not a stretch to say that many, and perhaps most, of us find that more interesting than going around the room repeating in different ways how wonderful the person in question is. Moreover, even if we are careful with our words, praising a friend in the company of someone who strongly dislikes him is not all that likely to change the antagonist’s opinion but may get the antagonist started on voicing the reason or reasons for dislike, especially if you leave the crowd soon after sharing your praise of your friend. These points serve to remind us that we must be extremely careful even when engaging in ostensibly innocuous gossip.

The second type of gossip speech, *lashon ha-ra*, is not slander. It is the passing on of true information that will reflect negatively on the person to whom it refers. Jewish law prohibits us from passing on this kind of information unless the person to whom you are speaking needs the

information for some constructive reason, like if the person would be in clear and present danger without knowledge of these facts. Incidentally, *lashon ha-ra* even goes beyond the verbal into the category of *avak* (the dust of) *lashon ha-ra*—actions such as making a face, rolling one’s eyes, or offering sarcastic responses or innuendo when someone’s name is brought up all contribute to the damaging of reputations and are thus inappropriate. *Rechilut*, or telling others negative or hurtful comments people have made about them, is also problematic. We may think—aren’t we entitled to know if people who act a certain way in front of us are actually saying cruel things behind our back? But in this case, too, keep in mind that it’s not always that simple. When we report the hurtful comment, do we also share all of the complimentary remarks we’ve heard that same person make? How many of us would appreciate it if even our closest family and friends heard every comment we’ve ever made about them? As Telushkin relates, the 17th century French philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote, “I lay it down as a fact that if all men knew what others say of them, there would not be four friends in the world”. So if the statement is not extremely damaging, it is not considered appropriate in our tradition to pass it on. We need look no further than the book of Genesis, where we find that God omits Sarah’s sharp critique of Abraham’s old age when God addresses Abraham in the

aftermath, to learn that we are even permitted to be less than fully truthful when confronted with a question like, “what did so-and-so say about me?”

As for the third type of gossip speech, passing on lies and rumors, I'll share with you an anecdote that speaks volumes about the seriousness of the problem.

Betty, the church gossip, and self-appointed monitor of the church's morals, kept sticking her nose into other people's business. Several members did not approve of her extra curricular activities, but feared her enough to maintain their silence.

She made a mistake, however, when she accused George, a new member, of being an alcoholic after she saw his old pickup parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon. She emphatically told George (and several others) that everyone seeing it there would know what he was doing.

George, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and just turned and walked away. He didn't explain, defend, or deny. He said nothing.

Later that evening, George quietly parked his pickup in front of Betty's house... walked home... and left it there all night.

You gotta love George. ☺

Stories of passing on rumors, hearsay, or lies don't typically end with a laugh. Reputations and images can be irrevocably hurt or ruined, and for what? Because it sounds juicy? Because it makes us sound like we're well connected to the information pipeline? In those rare instance where we might feel the ethical need to report a rumor privately, if we're worried that

someone's safety or well-being might be in jeopardy, then we should report it accurately—as a rumor—and encourage the listener to do further due diligence to verify the facts of the situation. In general, then, when it comes to passing on any kind of negative information, **about a person or about an institution**, we ought to stop and ask ourselves three vital questions: Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it fair? Much damage can be done, and likely of the permanent sort, if we are not extremely careful in the words we share. It is largely for these sins of inappropriate speech that we confess our failings in the Al Het litanies that we will recite five times during this Yom Kippur holiday.

On the flip side, our words have great creative potential as well. Even beginning with what could easily be perceived as a negative interaction, namely the delivering of constructive criticism, there is an opportunity to make a positive impact on others. The Torah teaches us, “*Hokheakh Tochiakh et Amitekha*”—you must surely rebuke your friend—so in this instance, too, our tradition steps in early on to indicate the necessity of appropriately delivered constructive criticism. If we address the issue or perceived shortcoming privately, and thus avoid public embarrassment, and approach the situation with sensitivity and with kindness, we have the potential to help a person or institution learn and grow from an experience.

Here we can also consider three important guide questions before plowing ahead: “Does my offering this criticism give me pleasure or pain?” If it’s pleasure, then we probably shouldn’t speak out. “Does my criticism offer specific ways to change?” And, “Are my words nonthreatening and reassuring?” If the criticism is difficult for us to deliver, and yet delivered in a non-confrontational tone and with helpful advice, we can feel comfortable that even in a potentially awkward situation we are using our words wisely. In much the same way, when we realize that we have erred or hurt someone and want to apologize to him or her, if we approach that person with sincerity, with words truly coming from our heart, those words can go a long way. Saying “I’m sorry” is often difficult but they truly are two of the most important words that we are capable of speaking. We can’t control whether someone ultimately decides to grant us forgiveness for something we’ve done, but we can accept responsibility and put forth our own best effort at healing and reconciliation.

Our words also can do a world of good when we use them for praise and giving thanks. The *Barukh She’amar* prayer that I referred to earlier concludes with the blessing “*Melekh Mehullal Ba-Tishbakhot*”—praised is God who is magnified with songs or words of praise. Human beings are no less capable of being enthroned or uplifted by praise and expressions of

gratitude. Little gestures like “good job”, “nice work”, “you have a beautiful home”, “everything was delicious”, “we appreciate what you’ve done for us”, and even just “thank you”, may not seem like much, but hearing those kinds of appreciative statements creates and reinforces a clear sense of value and worth in our daily lives, whether we are hearing them from a friend, a family member, a colleague, a client, or even a stranger we just helped.

When our family begins Shabbat dinner, we have adapted the traditional recitation of “Eishet Hayil”, “A Woman of Valor”, from Proverbs 31 into a more young-family friendly ritual, asking our children to think of something nice that mommy or daddy did for them this week. After they each come up with an answer, we do a “1, 2, 3—yay, mommy!” or “yay, daddy!” Shabbat is a great time to focus on praise and gratitude for those we care most about, but we don’t want to lose sight of the chances we have every day to share that positive reinforcement with all those who cross our paths.

Finally, on the most basic level, a mere greeting of “hello”, “how are you”, “it’s nice to see you”, or just “good morning” can set the tone for, or even transform, a person’s day. I still remember one of the stories Rabbi Cahan, my rabbi growing up at Har Shalom, shared many years ago on Erev Rosh Hashanah at Churchill High School. In a nutshell, one particular rabbi living in Germany before World War II had been in the habit every day of

exchanging kind and pleasant greetings with his neighbor. “Good morning, Herr Muller!”, the rabbi would say, to which his neighbor would reply, “Good morning, Herr Rabbiner!” With the onset of the war and the Holocaust, the rabbi was first removed from his house and, in time, eventually deported to a concentration camp. When he arrived there and got off the train, he and all the other men were forced to walk in a line for selection. As he got closer to the front of the line, he suddenly had an urge to see the face attached to the voice telling people which way to go. When he reached the officer, he looked at him and greeted him as he had so many times before—“Good morning, Herr Muller!”—to which Herr Muller smiled and responded, “Good morning, Herr Rabbiner!”, before pointing him in the direction of life. The rabbi ultimately survived the Holocaust and lived to share this tale—a tale which came to be referred to as “*The Power of a Greeting*”. While mere greetings don’t typically have this life-saving power, there is little doubt that they do have the power to improve people’s quality of life on a regular basis. Simply being noticed and recognized as another human being created in God’s Divine image means more than we give it credit for. Doesn’t it feel good to see someone smile at you and say hello or Shabbat Shalom or Shana Tovah or whatever is the proper greeting to share at that moment? I’ll ask everyone here to try this over the rest of Yom

Kippur with the hope that it will carry over into Friday and beyond—try greeting anyone you pass by, even if you don't know them, even if it's just making eye contact and saying hello and “G'mar Tov”, or “have an easy fast”, or “Shana Tovah”. On recent Shabbat mornings we have revived the practice of having greeters welcome people in the lobby, but for this effort to be truly effective going forward each of us as individuals also needs to share in the responsibility and privilege of greeting.

When it comes right down to it, every day we have important decisions to make regarding what we do or don't say. Will we choose to ignore people who walk past us, humiliate people in public, and risk tearing down people's or institutions' reputations? Or will we try harder to lift people's spirits, guard their dignity and integrity, and create or build up their sense of self-worth? Will our words destroy people's worlds, or make theirs, and ours, better? Our tradition (*the Talmud?*) teaches that “death and life is in the power of the tongue”— can we find the way to control this great power of ours for the good?