

We had just moved back into the building. All my many boxes had been gathered up from the various storage spots where they had been hidden away for the past year and were now sitting in the middle of the office area; a mountain range with peaks that reached halfway to the ceiling. (Clearly I hadn't heard Rabbi Fleekop's RH sermon yet)

One of the construction workers who was still on site, looked in on me standing there with all those boxes and asked: Anything valuable in there?

I think his concern was whether things needed to be locked up so they wouldn't be stolen, but it was an interesting question.

I know I am behind the times. The executive director of one organization on whose board I serve has no paper on or in his desk. The executive director of another organization on whose board I serve is already on her second Kindle. And me, with my boxes, literally hundreds of them.

What was in all those boxes? Books mostly, and files, notes on past events and ideas for the future. What I really had- was essentially, a collection of words. And whether that's of any value, that depends.

Judaism emerged out of the culture of Ancient Mesopotamia, and though we borrowed liberally from our neighbors, our creation story takes its own unique turn. Whereas in Babylonian myth, the great god Marduk creates the world by literally beating his enemy Tiamat and emerging victorious; the Jewish creation story portrays the world brought into being by words. "Vayomer Elohim, And God said."

To some extent in Jewish culture, words are all you really need. In the Bible, naming creates reality. Saying what something is distinguishes it and makes it recognizable; it creates its reality. And later through the centuries, Jews have made the manipulation of words a central feature of our lives, whether as students of Talmud, or comedians in the Borsht Belt.

When we think about the power of words, we often focus on the power of words to hurt. I doubt there is anyone here today who doesn't remember some hurtful words, perhaps a childhood taunt, (I know still remember) or some ill considered words from a parent, lover or close friend, whose sting was as painful as any slap or jab. We probably also remember words that we said, or, today equally likely, typed or texted, that we wish could have been recalled. How many of the sleepless nights in our lives have been caused by the words we used. How stupid we felt when we realized the pain and trouble we had caused, often without even considering what we were doing at the time.

For all these reasons, guarding our tongue, keeping careful track of our words, has been a major category of Jewish ethics throughout the centuries. Our tradition offers great advice on limiting gossip, and on thinking twice before repeating even that which is true. Jewish ethical teachers have recognized that snarky remarks are always going to be tempting because of the way they make us feel bonded with others, on

the inside of an exclusive social circle. In addition to fasts from food, our tradition has on occasion recommended a fast from words, as a way of learning to be more sensitive to the power that we exercise through our speech.

Life and death are in the power of the tongue, the Bible teaches, and the rabbis tell wonderful stories about body parts, arms and legs, thighs and shoulders, competing for supremacy, only to be shown up by the power of speech. The strongest muscles, literally and figuratively, are not the biceps or the quads, they are the muscles in the tongue. The wrong words can destroy months or even years of patient work, while the right words can rescue a sensitive situation and even save a life.

Social networking, has only added to the power of words, as we learned sadly from the experience of Megan Meier. This teenager committed suicide after a mother in her neighborhood pretending on FACEBOOK to be a boyfriend, Josh, dropped her suddenly and with particularly mean and callous words.

But our Torah portion this Rosh Hashanah morning isn't about lashon harah, about bad speech, it's about the positive power of words to shape reality.

Last winter I had an experience that reminded me of the power of words. I was called to the hospital to see someone who had experienced a medical crisis that was the result of an unacknowledged problem with alcohol. Because he was really seriously ill at this point, the underlying issue had to be recognized. He could put it off no longer; he couldn't hide in euphemisms and half truths. He had to talk with his family about what was going on. When I visited the next day, he described to me how relieved his children were to have had this conversation. Rather than being upset, they were grateful that something that they knew wasn't right, was being named and talked about directly.

I remember a job interview I had over 25 years ago with a congregation that had a serious problem but decided not to share that with the

rabbinic candidates. The whole weekend I was there, I felt extremely unsettled. I remember changing my flight so that I could leave early, I was that anxious to leave. I couldn't say what was bothering me, but later after learning the congregation's story, I am sure it was the disconnect between the conversations we were having and the reality that wasn't being spoken about.

Naming talents and positive qualities is equally important as facing up to problems. An elderly woman once reminisced with me about how important it was to her that her parents, before they died, had said some positive things about the way she was bringing up her children. Having them highlight in words the positive qualities that they appreciated was extremely important and that memory remained with her decades later. She or he, may know you love her, but hearing it said aloud, in words, conjuring up the specifics, means a great deal.

At Shir Hadash, in our work in community organizing, we have experienced how empowering it is for members of our congregation to

be able to tell their own story --whether publically at a community meeting, or to a single individual who was really listening.

I know I feel good when I can say what is actually going on and very uncomfortable when I am asked to keep from someone a truth that is important to their lives.

There is a Jewish children's story that I have told for years, without ever truly understanding it, about a Sultan who has a secret. It's such a human theme that it appears in the stories of many different cultures, morphing just a bit as it is passed around.

The Jewish version comes from Morroco. Once there was a sultan with horns on his head but he doesn't want anyone to know. He tries to hide these horns under his hair, but even so, eventually he needs a haircut. So for years, when the Sultan's hair gets really unruly he has a trim and then imprisons the barber so that his secret won't get out. Eventually all the barbers in the land are in jail except for one Jewish barber. This barber convinces the Sultan that his secret is safe, that he would never

tell, and besides, he doesn't know anyone of consequence. The Sultan lets the barber go but warns him that the minute anyone else finds out, it will be his death sentence. At first this isn't a problem, but eventually, this secret becomes more than the barber can bear. Bursting to tell someone, the barber runs out into the woods, and tells his secret to the river. The reeds growing in the river somehow capture the message, and when a shepherd comes and picks a reed to make it into a flute, the only song it will play is, the Sultan has horns.

Of course, this soon comes to the Sultan's attention and he brings the barber before him for execution. The barber then asks the Sultan, if the sun is still shining, and if the winds have continued to blow. As the Sultan agrees that they are, he also realizes that he is still standing, and that the revelation of his secret was not half as bad as trying to keep it to himself all those years. The barbers are released from prison and a new haircut style becomes popular, imitating the Sultan's horns.

In the early years of my rabbinate, the average age of someone coming out of the closet, seemed to be about 40. Of course by that time life was pretty complicated and people were often married with children. Now, it is not unusual for young people to come out in high school or even junior high. At one level this seems to us baby boomers to be premature. Many of these kids, like many of the heterosexual kids, don't have a sex life yet, only fantasies and aspirations. And yet, that truth about who they are needs to be said, or else there is a feeling, because of people's assumptions, of being inauthentic, of not being true to oneself.

Speaking the truth is powerful and it is a basic human need. The more we can do to make it safe for people, young teens and adults, to speak all the truths in their lives, the more we can allow everyone to grow and flourish.

But unfortunately speaking lies is powerful too, for the same reason – because words create reality.

That is the second thing I would like to speak about this morning.

Words can be used to help us understand each other, but they can also be powerful weapons in preventing understanding. Our democracy depends upon a level of civil discourse. It depends on people expressing their true concerns and it depends on others being willing to hear them.

Many political analysts have pointed out that the United States is becoming more polarized, with much less common discourse. One example of this is that today, rather than everyone getting the same news from Walter Cronkite or The Huntley--*Brinkley* Report, people seek information only from their own position. There are those who listen to NPR and those who watch FOX news, those who read these blogs and those who read only those. In the Jewish world this has become pretty pronounced as well, especially around Israel issues.

I have friends who send me emails from AIPAC and from STAND WITH US and friends who send me emails from JSTREET and PEACE NOW, but

there's no one sending me Daniel Pipes on Terrorism on Monday and GUSH SHALOM on Peace on Thursday. It's not like the Mishnah and Talmud, where the opinion of Beit Shammai is printed first, so that the followers of Beit Hillel, who actually won the debate, still have to read the other side.

Further it's worse than our not reading or listening to things outside of our comfort zone. There is also a sense for some, that the situation is so serious, that stretching the truth or repeating a lie is acceptable because winning or at least having the other side lose, is the most important thing.

In Great Britain, the party which is out of power is called, Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. To me this conveys two important things. First that we acknowledge that there is an important place for opposition, for those who have a different view point. Second, that though in opposition they remain loyal to the core values of the democratic society. Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition is not like the Nazi party in

Weimar Germany, which used the protections offered by democracy to undermine and destroy that democracy. To get a chance at bat, you have to first agree to the rules of the game.

Smear campaigns, repeating known lies so often that a quarter of the population can't tell whether or not they are true, using extreme language in criticizing your opponent, not allowing people to speak, all of this is demagoguery; it is not democracy.

Jews like to talk and to argue- its part of our culture of words, and though its noisy, I think it is basically healthy. In Brooklyn I never gave a sermon without someone coming up to me afterwards and arguing.

Since I tend to have pretty definite opinions about things, I would sometimes get upset that people disagreed with me, particularly about things that really mattered to me, like Israel. At one point an older rabbi helped me with an important observation. He said, "if they didn't care, they wouldn't argue". When I see things so differently from

someone else, I try to remind myself to seek out what it is we both care about , and view our disagreement in the light of those values.

At our Grand Re-Opening in August, as we put up the mezuzah, I read a bit of a prayer taken from the ceremony for putting a mezuzah on the door of a home. Translated from the Hebrew it read:

In this gate may there come no sorrow.

In this dwelling may there come no trouble.

Through this door may there come no panic,

In this place, may there be no conflict.

But as I read those words that evening, I was uncomfortable, because the truth is, there can be conflict, and there probably should be conflict, if we are speaking our truths to each other.

If you feel strongly about something you can and should speak your mind, but you have to be willing to engage, and not just dismiss your opponent. A family, a congregation, a democracy can thrive with heated dialogue, as long as long as words are being used in helpful ways to shed light and not as weapons just to destroy.

Vayomer Elohim, and God said. With our words we imitate God. With our speech, we create, we name, we bring new aspects of our world into being. With our words, we have the potential to heal and to build bridges of understanding. May our words be well chosen and true in this year ahead.