



“THE POWER OF THE TONGUE”

Yom Kippur Day – 5769/2008

Rabbis spend a lot of time trying to find the “right” sentence to begin a sermon. The sentence has to point accurately to the material to follow, but it also has to engage people immediately so that they will keep listening.

On this day of confessionals, I must confess that I had a hard time writing the first sentence of today’s sermon. I wanted the sentence to capture the dire challenges that we face as Americans. But somehow, the right words eluded me. The dire reality that we face seems beyond simple description.

Major financial institutions have crumbled, while taxpayer dollars shore up others. Every day, people across the country lose their homes to foreclosure because they simply borrowed more than they could afford, victims of the predatory mortgage lending practices of the past years. Other Americans lacked the foresight to avoid getting sick – an astounding 1.85 million Americans declare bankruptcy each year because of unexpected medical bills.¹ The unemployment statistics confirm that increasing numbers of people have lost their jobs; still others fear losing their jobs in the coming weeks and months. And too many Americans approaching retirement watch helplessly as the value of their investments dwindles.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue; well over four thousand American soldiers have lost their lives and many thousand more have been profoundly injured. Osama bin Laden remains at large; Al Qaeda continues its vile preparations for terror. Pakistan threatens to destabilize, and Iran appears to be moving forward with obtaining nuclear weapons. Longstanding allies of the United States have questioned the judgment of our current administration. And the mistreatment of prisoners at Gitmo, and at Abu Ghraib, has eroded our standing as a moral leader in the world.

Eight years ago, our nation had a budget surplus. Now we face the largest deficit in the history of our country. Yet despite massive increases in federal spending, we have neglected to care for vital infrastructure: bridges collapse, and roads deteriorate. Public schools remain shamefully under-funded. Three years after Hurricane Katrina, the poorest victims have yet to receive the help they need to

¹ Source: AARP

rebuild their homes. And despite the stark evidence of climate change, we have invested very little in alternative, green sources of energy.

So you can see ... I had a hard time capturing the magnitude of these challenges in a single opening sentence.

As Jews, and as Americans, we commit ourselves to the desire to provide a better future for our children, our grandchildren, and the generations to come. How will we meet these challenges we face? Now, more than ever, we need reasoned discourse from our political leaders. Now, more than ever, we need our leaders to inspire us to make the sacrifices we must make in order to meet the challenges that we face.

Yet as those of us who are following the presidential election closely can attest, too often the level of discourse in a political campaign does nothing to advance the cause of democracy. Too often, words are not used to elevate our understanding of the issues we face. Instead, they are used as weapons. Words are used to distort the truth. Words are used to incite anger. Words are used to flame our fears. You might think I am exaggerating the use of words as weapons in political campaigns. But many years ago, when I myself worked in political campaigns, we actually called the mailings used in negative campaigning "hit pieces." We used words to "hit" – to inflict harm -- on the opposition.

This abuse of words makes me angry. And this abuse of words makes me sad. Because Judaism cares about how we speak and what we say.

We are reminded of the value Judaism places on our words as we come together on this holy day. Many of the sins we confess on Yom Kippur are sins of speech. On Yom Kippur, we say "*Al het shehatanu lefaneha...for the wrong we have done before you....*" We recite a list of these wrongs. Of the 44 sins listed in the traditional "Al Het," eleven of them are related to speech. They include the sin of harsh speech, insincere confession, false protests, slander, innuendo, gossip, and false promises. In the eyes of Jewish tradition, what we say shapes who we are.

Since the very beginning of this campaign for the White House, we have had to sift through the words and evaluate the political speech of the candidates and their supporters. How else will we each be able to make our decision on November 4th? So this morning, I will offer you a taste of what Judaism teaches about how we should use our words. I hope that it will help you evaluate what you have heard and what you will hear as the campaign continues.

But I also hope that it will help you think about how you speak, and how you evaluate the speech of others in your personal lives. I will have failed if you leave the sanctuary this morning thinking that this sermon is only about our

political leaders, and not about what each of us say and what each of us hear every single day.

One of the hardest sins of speech to avoid is gossip. If we are honest with ourselves, we know how easily we gossip about others without giving it a second thought. And one of the problems with following the campaigns is that we don't hear enough cogent and coherent discussions of the issues. Instead, much of what we hear can be labeled as gossip.

The medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides taught that gossip can fall into three categories.

The first is *rekhilut* – innocuous but unnecessary information. In this, we must ask ourselves: Do we need to know the number of cars or houses each candidate owns? Do we need to know what a candidate does on his vacation, or the retail value how much the outfit his spouse wears might cost? Do we need to know whether a candidate can field dress a moose? Does this information help us address the serious issues we face as a nation? No. This is *rekhilut*, and we should dismiss it out of hand.

The second category of gossip that Maimonides identifies is *Leshon HaRa* – negative but true information about another person. Now, our tradition does NOT teach that we must never say any negative truths about each other. There are some instances when we are obligated to speak up. Here's a classic example. Let's say that your colleague, Sam, approaches you with the news that he is considering undertaking a major business deal with Mr. Ploni, and he asks you what you think. You've done business with Mt. Ploni in the past, and you know that he is dishonest in his dealings. You are obligated to let Sam know this, so that Sam can make the best possible decision.

In the case I just outlined, this true, negative information is relevant. Negative information about a person becomes *Leshon HaRa* – sinful – when the information is NOT relevant to the issues at hand. So when you hear negative information about a candidate, ask yourself: does this information help me make a responsible decision about how best to address a particular issue? If it does not, then the information is irrelevant and you should reject it.

It becomes tricky, of course, to determine whether the negative information you hear is true information. We know that political campaigns often take statements and voting records out of context. For example, one candidate might be accused of "voting against" something, but if you look at the entire voting record, it tells a different story. In these cases, it is best to evaluate the information based on the Yiddish proverb *halb emes iz oich a ligg*: a half-truth is still a lie.

The subject of lies brings us to the third category of gossip: *Motzi Shem Ra* -- negative information that is untrue. This is particularly heinous, and particularly hurtful. This election year a group that is NOT associated with Senator McCain's campaign spread the smear that Senator Obama is a madrasa-educated Muslim. The intent of this smear was to alarm Americans, and especially the Jewish community. Despite having been quickly exposed as an utter falsehood, over a year after the initial smear, 13% of American voters still believe this lie. And an additional 16% say they aren't sure about Senator Obama's religion because they've "heard different things about it."² This means that nearly one-third of American voters "know" that Senator Obama is a Muslim, or they believe that he might be.

Our tradition tells a story about the staying power of this kind of gossip. A man goes to his rabbi and apologizes for spreading false rumors about the rabbi's conduct. "I'm so sorry...what can I do to make it up to you?" the man asks. The rabbi tells him to take one of his feather pillows to the center of the town, cut it open, and let the feathers fly away on the wind. The man does as the rabbi told him to do, and he returns to the rabbi. "Now, go and collect all of those feathers," the rabbi instructs him. "That's impossible!" says the man. The rabbi shakes his head and says, "So it is with your words. You will never be able to collect them back again."

One final word about gossip and political campaigns: why do you think campaigns abuse speech to the extent that they do? They do it because it works. Negative speech influences voters. We are much more likely to retain negative information about a person than positive information. However, even though we humans may be "wired" this way, that does not mean we are powerless to resist it. On Yom Kippur we are reminded that we have the power to resist our darkest impulses and turn to the good. We do not have to be swayed by the gossip that we hear – gossip about our political leaders, or gossip about anybody else.

In a story of creation from the Torah, God forms Adam from the earth and then blows into his nostrils, making him "*le-nefesh hayya*" – often translated as "a living being." But in an ancient Aramaic translation of this story, Onkelos suggests that at the moment of creation, Adam doesn't merely become "a living being" – Adam becomes "a being that speaks." In this sense, our ability to speak is a divine gift. Words can inspire us. Words can uplift us. Words can give us hope. And now, more than ever, we need this hope.

In the coming year, may we always use our words for good. And may we demand the same from those who will lead us. Because at this critical moment

² Source: Nicholas D. Kristof, New York Times, September 21, 2008, "The Push to Otherize Obama."

in our country's history, the words of the Biblical proverb³ ring true: *Mavet v'hayyim b'yad lashon*: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

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³ Proverbs 18: 21