

EVEN IF YOUR VOICE SHAKES

Sermon by Rabbi Mari Chernow

I picked up a book a few years ago called L-I-A-R –the Lexicon of Intentionally Ambiguous Recommendations¹. It is a collection of statements to use when you simply cannot be both honest and positive about a departing employee. The author suggests leaving this description up to the reader’s interpretation: “You’ll be very fortunate to get this person to work for you.” Or, put your words into writing so that no one knows whether you mean, “You’ll find VERY few people like her” or “you’ll find...very few people LIKE her. Leave out a comma, and say, “He won’t do *anything* which will lower your regard for him,” when what you mean is, “He won’t DO anything. Which will lower your regard for him.”

¹ By Robert J. Thornton

I love words. My life's work is dealing in words.

Interpreting traditional words. Modernizing ancient words.

Turning words into offerings, gifts that we hope, will float up to the heavens and be received in some holy place. And words through which we meet each other. On my couch or yours.

Words that bridge the abyss between our internal experiences.

Words that tell stories, soothe, challenge, excite, enrich, embrace.

We speak an average of 16,000 words per day.² That's a lot of words. And in a tradition that teaches that, "Death and life are in the hands of the tongue,"³ that's a lot of power.

What is a moment in your life about which you would say, "I will never forget those words"? I asked some rabbinic colleagues that question. They shared pivotal words such as,

² <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11762186>

³ Proverbs 18:21

“You are now a rabbi in Israel.” And words I can’t even say without attaching a Godforbid: “Your child is very, very sick.” There were painful words from critical parents, as in “You’d be so pretty if only....” Or “You bore me.” Some shared wise and lasting advice, from parents, grandparents and mentors: “The view is *always* better when you take the high road.” And “Don’t solve a short-term problem with a long-term solution.” There were influential words from teachers, such as, “Why don’t you just mouth the words?” and “You are smarter than you think you are.” And there were words with a bit of a comedic twist as in the story of one colleague who was attending a lay-led minyan in another town. Someone turned to her and, suggesting something about long-windedness, said, “I’m sooo glad we don’t have rabbis here. What do you do for a living?”

Kol Nidre, the definitive liturgical moment of this day, is itself about words. It is a release from words we will speak but

will not mean. It is an acknowledgement that we will promises and express aspirations, only to discover that we cannot, or will not, fulfill them. Kol Nidre is an admission that words are fluid. What we say in one moment sometimes turns out not to be true in the next. And so, we find a way to forgive ourselves.

Which is not to say that the Jewish tradition backs off in the slightest when it comes to taking words seriously. There are volumes written on lashon hara, the harmful effects of gossip and slander. There is an entire category of legal injury based on harm caused by words alone. Words are the building blocks of relationships. In the context of those relationship, our words have great significance. Just like a stamp, when you need one, is worth much more than the monetary value of the stamp, words can mean much more than what the words mean. [for those who don't know or remember we used to put postage stamps on the corner of envelopes] We cannot do the work of this season,

repairing relationships, without concentrated attention on the impact of our words.

Studies have shown that when a person demeans us, we are more likely to actively avoid that person and we are more likely, in turn, to speak rudely to others. The simple presence of words that evoke disdain such as “bother” “obnoxious” and “annoying” in a word scramble game decreases our attention, our recall, our creativity and our cognitive processing – all of that from just the sight of those words. All the more so when we are the target of hostility. All of this is to say that hurtful words do not just injure our feelings. They also change our brains. They change us.⁴

But on this Yom Kippur I am thinking as much about the words that do not get spoken as those that do. I will tell you something about me personally. I am more likely to regret

⁴ Christine Porath, *Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace* Grand Central Publishing, 2016.

moments of reticence, things I didn't say, than things that I did. So many words that get formed up here, make it all the way to here and then I just can't get them out.

It's safer that way. Less conflict. Fewer people reacting to my words or judging them. But I'm pretty sure that holding back means I'm missing out on some meaningful interactions, on some building blocks of relationships.

Finding one's voice is a spiritual challenge. Consider the greatest orator in the Torah, Moses. Ironically, among his first words are, *Lo ish dvarim anochi*. "I am not a man of words." It is one of the ways he resists God's charge to him from the burning bush. Go out there and speak to Pharaoh, says God. Go change everything for your people... and for all of humanity. Moses demurs, "I have heavy lips, and a heavy tongue." "Please," he says, "choose someone else."

God's responds, "Your brother Aaron speaks easily...and he is coming to meet you right now." But God does *not* take the next obvious step and give Aaron the job. Aaron is the better speaker. God just told us that. But this is Moses' mission. So it's going to have to be Moses' words.

Much has been written about Moses' struggle to speak. Many believe that he has a speech impediment. Perhaps he stutters, a reading supported by intricacies in the Hebrew text. Wendy Zierler has written a brilliant chapter comparing Moses' early life to the story of King George the sixth as portrayed in the 2010 movie *The King's Speech*. Both Moses and the King resist the role they are destined to play. And yet, with great struggle, both find their words, and lead with striking eloquence. King George, through his live radio addresses that comforted the nation throughout World War Two. And Moses, who speaks the entire book of Deuteronomy to the people at the end of his life.

In Hebrew, Deuteronomy is called *Dvarim*. Words. You'll recall that Moses once said he was not a man of *dvarim*.

Literature professor Marc Shell sees an even deeper dimension regarding speech in the story of Moses and the burning bush. Moses asks God, who shall I say sent me? In other words, what is your name? God answers with the words *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. I will be what I will be. It is a mysterious and beautiful answer. God is not static. God is about becoming. God *is the process* of becoming. *And*, according to Shell, God's answer is also a stutter. If you look at variant texts, you see evidence that God seems to catch on syllables and words when answering the most fundamental of questions, who are you?

Is it possible that God's name is ineffable, unpronounceable, even to God? That holiness is simply impossible to contain in language? And is it possible that what God teaches here is that we have to keep searching for the

words, even when they don't come? That words will always be woefully inadequate. They are finite and contained when our experiences are endless and unbounded. Words will never capture all that we have to express, but they're best we've got.

Words are as close as we can come to common ground. They are where we meet God and where we meet each other. And so we keep searching until the right words come. There is no other way to invest in the very people who make our lives worth living. Honest words might cost us something, in vulnerability. There are times to protect ourselves, times when the risk is too great. But these holidays stretch us to say more, not less. More that is real, raw, authentic, and revealing.

As Courtney E. Martin writes, "The relationships I admire most are not steady or nice; they are genuine, imperfect, held together by unconditional love and emotional courage and a belief in the possibility of endless renewal. The people I admire

most are those wise enough not to fight about everything, but to fight about and for the *right* things, those who don't idealize harmony, but trust in the necessary beauty of rupture and repair... I aim to pretend I am made of heartier stock until I actually feel it in my backbone.”

The necessary beauty of rupture and repair. How do we build ourselves out of heartier stock? Practice. Getting it wrong until we get it right. Having a conversation and then revisiting so that we can refine our words. And pin down precisely what we want to say. And what we don't. We can apologize for the words we didn't mean the first time around. Or did mean but don't any more.

The book *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, is about a small café in Tokyo. Guests can time travel from there but there are rules. They can only visit people who have been to the café before. They have to sit in one particular seat, which is occupied

by a ghost most of the time. So, they have to slip in at exactly the right moment. When they time-travel, they only have a short while. They only have until the coffee gets cold. And there is one final catch. Nothing they say in the past will change the present. So, for example, the young woman in the first story who goes back in time can declare her undying devotion to her lover. But she cannot change the fact that he has moved across the sea. The book is entirely about conversations. That will achieve nothing other than the conversations themselves. It begs the question - If you could go back in time, with no expectation of changing any outcome, who would you meet? And what would you say? What conversation do you need to have? We don't have a back alley café with a magical seat guarded by a ghost. But we do have Yom Kippur. It gives us time to find the words that we wish we had said. And maybe the words that we will decide *tonight* that we are going to say. For no other reason than

for the sake of the conversation. Yom Kippur hurls us forward into the necessary beauty of rupture and repair.

I'd like to make one more point. And that is that the poignancy of words in interpersonal relationships is only magnified when we take it to the level of words in action. That's why we're going to the south. That's why we have decided we have something to say about Israel. That is where the impact of our words can ripple out far beyond our own lives.

Maggie Kuhn was 65 years old in 1970 when she was forced to retire. That prompted her to found a movement known as the Gray Panthers, and to lead a cultural revolution to redefine aging. She saw our society's casting off of older adults and worked hard to return to them honor, dignity, and control over their lives. She took on banks, the media, medical and governmental systems on behalf of the elderly. It is believed she coined the phrase "family of choice" in reference to the

cooperative home that she shared with younger adults. She gave the following advice to activists, “Leave safety behind. Put your body on the line. Stand before the people you fear, and speak your mind – even if your voice shakes. When you least expect it, someone may actually listen to what you have to say. Well-aimed slingshots can topple giants”

The Jewish people. We love a good slingshot when it comes to taking on a giant. We have 16,000 chances every single day. 16,000 opportunities not to fight about everything but to fight about, and for, the right things. 16,000 times when we can choose unconditional love and emotional courage and the possibility of endless renewal. Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes.

