

YK 5775

The Words in Our Voices

Rabbi Elaine Zecher

Recently, I heard a college president tell a group of anxious and excited parents who had just deposited their precious young adult children in their dormitories the following observation: students these days appear to be intellectually far more advanced than in the past but they are also –and he hesitated-- socially retarded. He cautiously clarified that his use of the term had nothing to do with slang nor was it meant as derogatory or insulting. Rather it was commentary to his and his faculty's experience. These parents, who moments before sighed in relief that their child had been admitted into this school, may have wondered why this particular college would allow these kind of other kids in, surely not their own! As if he could read minds, the President immediately assured them that this was a phenomenon that affected not only their kids but was also pervasive across the country and beyond. None of these college students escaped the diagnosis of incompetence to engage others on multiple social levels. The good news was that it wasn't only their children. The bad news was that this academic leader had just called their children average.

The president proceeded to express his concern regarding the overuse and reliance on social media as a major cause for social ineptitude. With eyes cast on screens, opportunities to engage others diminish.

As a parent in that room, I certainly concur that children, college students, and we have become a generation of "slouchers" with our eyes and shoulders directed downward toward our screens.

We see in these students what we, as adults, do as well. We constantly check our email. We leave the phone by the bed. We sit with others and engage in adult parallel play. Where young children may be in the same room actively involved in his or her own activity, adults pull out their electronic toy and create a safe space between the device, our single or double thumb method of responding (depending on your age and dexterity), and our faces. Though we may be communicating and interacting at rapid paces, emoji images are no replacement for our own verbal expressions of joy, sympathy, anger, or relief.

The problem is not just the direction of our attention toward all these devices. How we act and what we say when we look up from our screens matter significantly.

When our ancestor Jacob finally encountered his brother, Esau, after many years of escaping his wrath when he stole the blessing, he approached his brother now as an adult and said, "To see your face is to see the face of God." In our world today where the selfie prevails, to see, really see, the face of another is a sacred act.

Martin Buber, the renowned Jewish teacher, based his philosophy on the idea that "All real living is meeting." By meeting he did not mean committee meetings. Encountering another's face, another's very being, is the essence of life.

We need more face time and not the kind that comes only with the click of a button and a wifi connection.

We need more face time because it allows us to hear the voices that emerge with our words and see the facial expression. The words we choose, the language we convey speak of who we are and how we are with others. We need to practice, to be in

conversation face to face. To agree and to disagree teaches us more than asserting our own opinion. It teaches us to think about our words, to pay attention to their impact and to choose wisely.

The prophet Hosea of the 8th century BCE urged:

וְשׁוּבוּ אֵלַי, קָחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים יְהוָה

Take words with you and return to the Eternal. (14:2)

This summer brought a war of words especially concerning Israel. Every medium of the media overwhelmed us with opinions.

This was a summer of bad news in every corner of this round earth, and the fall isn't shaping up so nicely either: A plane of innocent passengers shot down in Ukraine; an Ebola virus attacking blameless African citizens; scenes in Ferguson, Missouri of death and unrest caused by racial prejudice and hate, the attempted dawn of a caliphate structured around egregious violence, pillaging, and no respect for life.

And then in the tiny country of Israel, the land bridge between Africa and Asia, the land Jews call home, the land Palestinians call home, too, the land many Arabs, Christians, and Muslims already call home; in that land, too, terrorists spent their money building tunnels, hiding behind children, and wreaking havoc on civilians instead of securing their people's safety and well being. They turned a war of attrition into an onslaught of devastation with the intention to destroy the people of Israel and drive them into the sea. What happened next must be recognized. While Israel employed the Iron Dome and prepared bomb shelters to protect all of her citizens, the media focused on partial truths and perverted facts. With all of the terrible situations around the globe, it felt like no country, no warring faction, no ragtag

bunch of militants could hold a candle to what too many professed as Israel's egregious behavior as if she were the sole cause of the violence. There is no question that the death of children anywhere is a profound loss but not computing the complexities involved when reporting was irresponsible. William Randolph Hearst's journalistic tactics in the late 1800's helped to cement the idea of "yellow journalism." He was known to have insisted: "you furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war."

The barrage of pictures from Gaza of human carnage furnished the public with one particular narrative. We know there are others. Chris Noe, our wonderful Vice President, reported this scene. Driving with his family to their summer vacation through a small southern town, they came upon a church with a sign that surprised him. With all the vitriolic expression against Israel, he saw the words, "We stand with Israel." What a difference those four words can make.

And yet, the war also uncovered the thin veneer concealing simmering Anti-Semitism of vast geographic proportions. The conflict allowed its suppressed presence to ferment and to explode. In Germany, in France, in South Africa, and many other places, civility and respect was replaced by hateful, prejudiced words and violence against Jews.

Even in Israel, the public expressed vastly different opinions and ideas about the direction of the war. Her citizens marched and gathered. They cried against loss of life. They worried for their children and those of the innocent Palestinians. They battled vocally over the appropriateness of war. While some marched for peace, others marched for a stronger military resolution. It felt like no opinion was left unsaid. There and here. The tension was palpable which is probably why the New York Times reported on the challenge that rabbis were having

speaking about Israel. I can acknowledge the tension but I don't fear it. Maybe it is because I feel secure in my love for Israel, not a blind love but one which supports her especially during a summer like this. And for me, too, Israel is personal. I watched from Boston as my brother and sister in law sent their youngest son into harm's way. I fervently prayed for his safety knowing he was stationed right in the middle of the fighting in Gaza. Through Skype I could see the anguish in my brother's eyes mirrored in my own. What I marvel at is that during all of this, that even in his own family, at their Shabbat table in Jerusalem, his other children expressed varied opinions about the conflict. Left, right, center. It is all there. As Tal Becker from the Hartman Institute has said "Criticism comes from belonging not from betrayal." We, from this community to every one across the globe where the Jewish community gathers have given voice to our views because we belong to this people. The phrase two Jews three opinions passionately applies. But it is about belonging not betraying our support and connection to Israel. And it happens through the words we choose to use. There, here, and everywhere.

Take words with you and return to the Eternal
 -וְשׁוּבוּ אֶל קַחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים יְהוָה

We know we must figure out how to be proactive in settling tension between those with whom we disagree, among those who feel passionate about their idea, who want to ensure a better world. We need to raise our expectations of ourselves, not lower them. The world as we know it is changing at a rapid pace and not just because of technology. Allegiances, borders, religious associations are no longer predictable. *Although we seek stability in the comfort of community, we, too, will have to rewire ourselves in a wired world and figure out how to involve one another to reconnect and to find strength in our*

relationships. The challenge continues to put conversation in real time with real people into practice.

Some of our inspiration and hope come out of this tragic summer. In July, many thought HAMAS had kidnapped an Israeli soldier. Though there are details yet to be uncovered, the Israeli Defense Forces pronounced him dead. As his family mourned, including his twin brother and siblings, their father asked for his son to be remembered in a very particular way. Standing on the dais, surrounded by his army unit including my nephew, this bereaved father said that his son, Hadar, had spoken to him before he left for Gaza about the importance of an idea expressed in Hebrew called *lashon nekiyah*- *lashon*-language; *nekiyah*-clean; together the words mean cleaning up one's language to express something more kind, something with more reverence for the other. In the depth of his mourning, this grieving father offered inspiration to the world about the way we regard one another and the pathway toward honoring his son's memory through the gift of speech.

In that tragic moment, what Hadar's father recalled in his eulogy was the way his son spoke about how to make the world better. In Hadar's mind, *lashon nekiyah* projects an expectation of decency, respect, and dignity. Let his death and all innocent blood shed not be in vain.

Lashon Nakiyah means we have a choice in how we form words. Words of encouragement, kindness, positive reinforcement could flow from our lips and yet how utterly easy is it to head in the direction of the negative. Even our prayer book recognizes the human proclivity to offer harmful words. Redactors of the oldest prayer books to the ones we use now don't leave what we will say in private prayer to chance: O God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from deceit."

The words that come from our lips are our choice. Our attitude is our choice. Are they *lashon hara*-gossipy, negative projectiles? Or can we find the good, the decent, the dignity to lift up? It certainly is not easy. Sometimes what is in our heads jumps to our lips. As Alice Roosevelt Longworth famously rejoined, "If you haven't got anything nice to say about anybody, come sit next to me."

Our thoughts belong to us. Joshua Loth Liebman, one of the great rabbis of his time and former senior rabbi of our own congregation said, "our minds are not a democracy. Not every thought gets a vote." And I would add not every thought should be said out loud either.

The power is not just in the words, however, the power is in each one of us to be someone who energizes another person to change because of what we say. As a teacher of mine has said, "In every instance how we speak to another person, how we relate to them, makes it more or less possible for them to attain their fullest potential or express their full being." (Rabbi Jonathan Slater on Kedushat Levi Hukkat, IJS)

If we are going to enjoin our college students and the rest of the world to put down our many devices, we must also be prepared for how we will look up and engage one another. A key to social competence means paying attention to the kind of words we use in encountering each other.

And we need to practice. When we speak with those closest to us: those we love and adore and those who make us crazy and who sometimes are the same people, how will we employ *lashon nekiyah*-kind and respectful language? How will we insure decency flows from our lips?

When we speak with colleagues, neighbors, and friends, will our language reflect the best effort to lift them up?

When we speak about our synagogue, this place, this home, how will we find the good, the meaningful, the blessings we experience by being part of this community?

And when Israel comes up or when we bring her into conversation, whether we agree or disagree, what will our words demonstrate and how will our words compel us to act for her welfare?

Our utterances are instruments of action as one philosopher has said. (How to Do Things with Words, JL Austin) They have the potential to energize people to change. Starting with ourselves and our families and moving to the next concentric circles of our lives, we create a ripple like a stone dropped into the water.

Just as the flutter of a butterfly's wing in one place in the world can affect the weather in another place from a scientific concept known as the butterfly effect, these words that emerge from our mouths can have lasting and positive effects far beyond our immediate reach.

On Yom Kippur, we read from Deuteronomy. The Israelites are perched over the land they will enter and inherit. Moses tells them:

“You stand this day before the Eternal.”

לְפָנַי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם בְּלִפְנֵי

It is the final admonition concerning the importance of the

covenant and collective responsibility. The Hebrew word for *before-Lifnei* also contains the word for face. They stand face to face on this precipice of their journey. It will be the way they will survive and thrive as they settle into the new land and new life. They will need to draw strength from one another, from the sacred encounter with each other through their words. Their survival depended on it. Ours does, too.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts bring us closer to each other, lifting us higher toward the divine and toward a world made stronger because of *lashon nakiyah*, words filled with respect, decency, and kindness.

Take words with you and return to the Eternal.

-וְשׁוּבוּ אֵלַי, קָחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים יְהוָה