

YOM KIPPUR SERMON 5784 Columbia Jewish Congregation

I know a lot of rabbis title their sermons. I usually don't, but maybe I could title this one, "The Magic Sermon." Are you ready?? Say after me the magic incantation, "Abra Kedabra!!" [Cong. Repeats] Good! Now, I'm guessing most of you don't know the origin of that phrase, **or** that it's Hebrew. That's right – what we really just said is *Evra K'dabra* which means, "I will create as I speak". What could be more appropriate for this time of year, coming after the birthday of the world on Rosh Hashanah?

You see, we, as Jews, should never say "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me!" We should never say that because we learn in the very first chapter of our Hebrew Bible the incredible importance of words. God **speaks words**, "*Vayomer Adonay*", as we read in Genesis, and an entire **world** comes into being. We also learn that the root *daber*, is also the noun, *davar*, which means a thing. Words matter because words **ARE** matter, and can create realities as well as things.

But words can be equally destructive. Let's try a little experiment. I want everyone to close their eyes for just a minute, and answer my questions simply by raising your hands. Keep your eyes closed **and** your hands up until I tell you otherwise. If you ever remember having been yelled at by parents, or teachers, or other adults you trusted in a way that made you feel bad about yourself, raise your hand and keep it up. If you have ever been insulted or teased, or embarrassed or shamed by something a friend or fellow student, or colleague or coworker said, raise your hand and keep it up. Now open your eyes with your hands still up and look around the room...

If the **ONLY** message we get this Yom Kippur is that we need to be more careful with our words, then it will have been a successful Day of Atonement. Later in this service, during the *Viddui*, the confessional prayers, we'll be reciting the *Al Chet* prayer in English. I want you to notice how **MANY** of **those** sins are sins we commit with our **words**. We all know about *loshon hora* or *lashon hara*, but many of us don't know the real Jewish meaning of the term. You may have heard some people say, "It's not *lashon hara* because it's true!" Sorry, but that's wrong! That's a **different** sin called **lying**, from the commandment, "*mid'var sheker tirchak* – keep yourself far from a false thing." And now we are challenged by a societal norm that people are referring to as POST-TRUTH...

Lashon hara is **always** true, but it is **hurtful** to the other person. If you're really interested in these Jewish laws about speech, I highly recommend the book, "Words that Hurt, Words that Heal" by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. It's good anytime, but especially around this time of year. When he was going around the country on tours to promoting his book, Rabbi Telushkin would challenge the audience to try to go just **24 hours** without speaking *lashon hara*, without saying one hurtful thing about someone. Perhaps this drash will inspire you to take that challenge.

We need to focus on speaking about **ideas**, and **feelings**, NOT about people. One of the things I learned from that book is that there's another sin we commit with our speech and we likely aren't even **aware** that it's sinful. It's called *ona'at devarim*. An example of **this** sin is, if I know that Person A really dislikes Person B, but I go to person A and PRAISE Person B to them, that's *ona'at devarim* because my **praise** of someone they **dislike** may likely be increasing their **hatred** of that person.

Of course, we are all human, and we make mistakes, many of which are done with our words. And so Yom Kippur gives us an opportunity to go to those we've said bad things about to seek their forgiveness. There's a famous Chasidic story about a little shtetl that had a revered rabbi, but a new man had moved into town and was trying to size the rabbi up. In doing so, he raised many questions about the rabbi, which led to him saying some critical things about the rabbi to just about anyone who would listen. But as he got to know the rabbi better, he realized how wrong he had been, and that some of the things he'd told others weren't even true. In heartfelt repentance, he knocked on the rabbi's door. When the rabbi answered, he began to sincerely apologize for what he had done and beg for forgiveness. The man then asked if there was anything he could do to make up for his sins. The rabbi, who'd been listening intently, thought for a minute, then nodded and said, "Just one thing. Take your feather pillow up on the hill just outside of town, cut it open, and shake out the feathers, and then come back to me." The man said, "really? That's all? OK...". He thought maybe it was some kind of sacrifice or ritual, so he did as the rabbi asked and went back and knocked on his door again. When the rabbi answered, he said, "I did just as you asked." The rabbi thanked him and then said, "Just one more thing... Now go and **gather up** all the feathers and bring them to me." The man protested, "but rabbi, the wind has blown the feathers all over the place! There's no way I can ever gather them all back!!" The rabbi said, "so it is with our words. I forgive you, but in the future, be more careful with your words!"

Telushkin also pointed out in his book that, just as the fence who sells stolen goods is as guilty as the thief, so is the person who LISTENS to gossip just as guilty as the one who says it. So what are we to do when we **hear** gossip or lashon hara? First, **don't** repeat it; then, try to change the topic. If those don't work, then we look at the positive commandment called *hoche'ach toche'ach*, you shall surely reprove your neighbor who is sinning. But as that commandment continues, it adds "but you shall incur no sin in doing so". This is to teach us we should **only** correct others if we can do so in a **sensitive** way that doesn't make us guilty of being **demeaning** to them. So in this case, rather than **blame** the other person or make them feel **bad**, we should say something like, "it makes **me** uncomfortable to hear these kinds of things about others. What else can we talk about?"

Evra kedavra – we create as we speak. Our wonderful Howard County Library System was a leader in getting us to speak more kindly with one another through their initiative that began in 2006 called **Choose Civility**. It spread to the entire State of Maryland, and even

beyond, and we can still see bumper stickers and magnets around town reminding us to choose to be civil. In an era when foul language and swear words have become popular in everyday usage, I can't help but wonder, even though I believe in free speech, if the lack of civility in how so many people speak to one another is partly due to the inflammatory words that slip off of many tongues, and add to the polarization in our country.

We create as we speak. Let us dedicate 5784 to being a year that we focus on words we use and how we speak to one another. If we can tap the spark of Godliness that is in each of us, when we choose the words that we say out loud, with our families and our neighbors, and even those we disagree with, perhaps we can create a friendlier and more loving world. I'll close with something called the Rebbe's Proverb, that I learned from my friend and teacher Danny Siegel, who translated it from the Yiddish. "If you always assume the person sitting next to you is the Messiah, waiting for some simple human kindness – then you will come to **weigh** your **words** and watch your hands. And if he so chooses NOT to reveal himself in your time, it will not matter. G'mar tov – may you have a good finish to this holiest of days.