

RENOUNCING HATRED AND FALSEHOOD
Rosh Hashanah First Day
September 21, 2017 ☆ 1 Tishri 5778
Rabbi Dennis C. Sasso

We live in a complicated world, a messy, dangerous world. North Korea and Iran pose nuclear threats; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved; Russia meddles in Syria, endangering the region; poverty and oppressive regimes destabilize the world.

America, whose values have helped to point the way to better tomorrows, is ill at ease. The “melting pot” has become a boiling pot. The hope, *e pluribus unum* – “out of the many, one” is dissolving into polarizing ethnic politics of privilege vs disenfranchisement. We have become less the **United** States of America and more the **Untied** States of America.

What can bind our wounds and bond us together? I would suggest: a thoughtful and intentional return to the basic values enshrined in the sacred sources of our American heritage. If we are going to restore “faith in” America, we must look to the “Faith of America,” the ideals that have shaped and inspired our democracy. We must revisit the values our founders deemed to be “self-evident”, occasionally neglected, but to which we always returned, to shape a tradition committed to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” It seems as if we, sometimes, have forgotten some basic truths, including the foundational belief that “all men (“people”) are created equal.” We must reaffirm President George Washington’s commitment to a government that “...gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”

Two and a half centuries after the founding of the Republic and seven decades after the Holocaust, we heard angry men in Charlottesville marching and shouting “Blood and Soil,” echoing the Nazi slogan *Blut and Boden* – claiming that the land belongs to the racially pure. We listened to the unrelenting bigotry of the white supremacists depicting black people as inferior beings and Jews as “foreign interlopers who need to be expunged.” One white nationalist leader said he was disappointed in Donald Trump for “giving his daughter to a Jew.” The marchers chanted, “Jews will not replace us,” echoing paranoid fear of Jews as the ultimate enemy.

And yet, in the aftermath of Charlottesville, we find inspiration in the generous and humane response to the tragedies in Houston, Florida, Mexico and the Caribbean. In the presence of natural disasters of unparalleled magnitude, citizens have responded with magnanimity. The majority of Americans are inclined to benevolence and kindness – the best antidote to hubris and hatred.

We must embrace the hope of President Abraham Lincoln who at a divisive, difficult time challenged the nation to move forward “With malice toward none, with charity for all....”

How can we meet this challenge? Perhaps we can begin by looking at how we communicate. America is experiencing a breakdown of language, not merely of good grammar and style, but of substance and principle.

The *Ashamnu* confessional which we recite during Yom Kippur, alerts us to the dangers of language: “We abuse, we betray, ... we embitter, we falsify, we gossip, we hate, we insult, we jeer ..., we lie, we mock ..., we are unkind, we are violent..., we are xenophobic....” Written many centuries ago, this prayer remains an apt confessional for our times.

I believe that the health of our nation will not be restored until we take seriously the power of language, so perverted by the airwaves, social media, TV, tweets, and slogans. Words are no longer weighed carefully, considered for their consequences. They are not used to start conversation, but to ignite argument. Leaders around the world indulge in provocative actions and aggressive sound bites, rather than pursue serious diplomacy.

The dogmatic stances of the extreme right and the extreme left, the racists, the neo-nazis, the homophobes, the Islamophobes, the antisemities, are projected as battle slogans. We used to X out dirty language; now we write it in bold. What once was spoken only behind closed doors, is now blasted all over the internet. What was once deemed unspeakable, is now taken for granted, celebrated.

I am concerned about our children. I am concerned that the constant exposure to hostile and derogatory language, to hateful speech and vitriol will dull their moral radars and their sensitivity to the pain and dignity of others. Recently we gathered the parents of our religious school to converse about the pressing concern of how to talk to our children, our teens, during these times. What wisdom can we garner from our American and Jewish traditions to make sense of the senseless and to counter the negative rhetoric.

We often quote but fail to internalize the core teaching of our religious tradition, the Golden Rule: “What is hateful to you, do not do unto others. This is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary.” Hillel’s aphorism is a commentary on the biblical teaching: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Love of neighbor” requires “love of self,” which is “self-respect.” Both forms of love are in low ration these days.

What if we were to reverse the Vidui and instead of a confession of “sins,” confess our “aspirations,” and say: “We have loved, we have blessed, we have spoken positively, we have raised up, we have shown compassion, we have cultivated truth, we have shown respect, we have forgiven, we have comforted, we have repaired.” (Rabbi Avi Weiss, adapted).

The building blocks for this language are embedded in the Jewish tradition. We Jews take pride in being a verbal people. We gave to the world The Book of Books. It opens with the words: “In the beginning... God said....” God’s creative “word” turns chaos and darkness into order and light.

Would that our words might bring clarity and purpose to our present darkness and chaos? Might that be what it means to be created in the divine image?

The ancient expression “*Abracadabra*” is Aramaic (the language of the Talmud and many of our prayers – Kaddish and Kol Nidre): *Abra*: I will speak; *kadabra*, as I create. Words are magical. Words can wound or heal; soothe or irritate; seduce or alienate; make peace or proclaim war.

Some civilizations have contributed to the world great art and great music; great architecture and technology. We Jews have contributed words, words, words. That is why we should be so concerned about what is happening to words in our times.

Let me share with you a vocabulary of values from our Jewish moral tradition, relevant and helpful to us today:

Derekh Eretz means proper manners. Jewish etiquette advice begins way before Ann Landers and Dear Abby. In Judaism etiquette and ethics, manners and morals are linked through words.

Tzelem Elohim – Judaism teaches that since we are created in the divine image, when we insult or shame another person, we are insulting and shaming God. Humiliating a person in public is likened to shedding blood (murder), because upon embarrassment, the Talmud notes, “the blood drains from the face of the insulted person” (Baba Metzia 58b). Insulting someone is “character assassination.”

The Loving Rebuke – Judaism calls us to work out our differences with others. The Torah states: “You shall not hate your neighbor in your heart” (Lev.19:17). The Jewish moral tradition expects us to “reprove,” to “call out” the wrong actions of our family and neighbors. Civility and courtesy do not mean indifference.

With the onset of airline terrorism over the past decades, many airports have posted signs that say: “If you see something, say something.” The same should hold true for aural terror: “If you hear something hateful, say something.” Don’t let it go unchallenged. However, even when reproofing, Judaism teaches, we are to do so gently, without causing public shame or embarrassment. We focus on the issue, not the person.

Judaism warns us against **Lashon Hara**, the “evil tongue,” gossip and slander and hateful speech. Saying anything negative or injurious about another person is reprehensible and, except under very limited circumstances, forbidden. Even something which is true, if said with ill intent, is **Lashon Hara**, the evil tongue.

Hateful words are likened to weapons that can wound or kill. Once the arrow has left the bow, once the bullet has been fired, there is no taking back. It is like pressing that “send” button in the computer. There is no taking back. Let’s be cautious about that “send” button.

But, Rabbi, you will say: “We are an argumentative people! What’s wrong with arguing?” What kind of a Rosh Hashanah dinner, or break-the-fast, or Seder would it be without a little bit of arguing or complaining, perhaps about the rabbi’s sermon; the cantor’s singing; what so-and-so was wearing; the temperature of the air conditioning?

That brings us to **Mahloket L’shem Shamayim** – Yes, arguing is permissible, as long as it is in the proper spirit. The schools of Hillel and Shammai, the two great Talmudic rabbinical academies – the Harvard and Yale; the IU and Purdue of the first pre-Christian century – argued for three years over a controversial point of law. Finally, a heavenly voice was heard declaring both views “the true words of God” (**elu v’elu divrei Elohim hayyim**); but the law, proclaimed the divine voice, was according to the House of Hillel. Why, if both views represented the “words of the living God,” should the opinion of the Hillelites prevail

over the Shammaites? The Talmud comments: “Because the disciples of Hillel were kind and modest; they studied their own position and also that of the school of Shammai; they always respectfully cited the opposing view before presenting their own argument. This is a **Mahloket l’shem shammayim**, an “argument for the sake of Heaven.”

What if we were to witness this approach to argument, to dialogue, to conflict resolution in our society, in government, in our public spaces? What if the President and Congress really were to come together to solve the DACA immigration issue and not consign the young “Dreamers” to the limbo of oblivion and deportation as political pawns? Can the Right and the Left, Republicans and Democrats accord one another respect, hear each other out, collaborate and compromise without revenge, without bearing a grudge, without going on hostile attack?

Can we agree on how to preserve the history of our nation, less by taking down monuments and more by building shared memories? Can we learn to live with the past, yet not in it? Can we resuscitate a gasping body politic and restore the Untied States of America to the United States of all Americans.

Such was the distaste of the ancient rabbis to the language of hate that they claimed that Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed because of *sinat himan*, because of socio-economic polarization and wanton hatred among different religious groups. The Romans may have been the instruments of destruction, but the inability of the people to come together harmoniously, the rabbis believed, contributed to the process of disintegration that led to destruction. We cannot afford such *Sinat Hinan*, “wanton hatred,” in Israel or America.

I drew inspiration from a D’var Torah delivered by one of our dedicated members, Amanda Siegel, at the last Board of Directors meeting. She quoted Nitzavim, the Torah portion read on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, “You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God..., your elders and your leaders, men and women, your children, even the stranger and the poor within your camp, to enter into the covenant which the Eternal your God is concluding with you on this day.”

Note the enormous emphasis on the whole community standing together. We will not stand together if we sit by political affiliations, Democrats on the left, Republicans on the right. Rather, we must enter the High Holy Days with a feeling of empathy and understanding for all who gather in Congregation Beth-El Zedeck. The covenant that began at Sinai and is renewed this day, is not only with those who voted one way or another. A hurricane does not care about your political affiliation when it thunders through. God’s covenant is with all who are willing to come pray together and work together to make the world a better place. (adapted from Amanda Siegel’s notes)

During an Emmy Awards ceremony some time ago, tribute was paid to the beloved Jimmy Stewart. Following a clip from the movie “Harvey” (a much kinder Harvey than the one Houston experienced recently), Jimmy Stewart said in his own, inimitable style: “In this world, you can either be ‘Oh so smart’ or ‘Oh so pleasant’. For years I was ‘Oh so smart! I recommend pleasant.’”

Perhaps we, perhaps America, can try “Pleasant.” The 20th century Jewish humorist and radio personality, Sam Levenson, offered the guidance we seek:

ALL I GOT WAS WORDS

When I was young and fancy free
My folks had no fine clothes for me
All I got was words:

Gott zu danken..(Thank God)
Gott vet geben...(God will provide)
Zoll men nor leben un zein gezunt
(As long as we live and are well).

When I was wont to travel far
They didn't provide me with a car;
All I got was words:

Geh gezunterheit (Go in good health)
Geh pamelech (Go slowly)
Hob a glikliche reize (Have a happy journey).

I wanted to increase my knowledge
But they couldn't send me to college,

All I got was words:

Hob seichel (Have common sense)
Zei nisht kein naar (Don't be a fool)
Toireh is die beste schoire (Torah is the best commodity).

The years have flown, the world has turned,
Things I've forgotten, things I've learned;

Yet I remember:

Zog dem emess (Speak the truth)
Gib tzodokoh (Give charity)
Hab Rachmones (Have compassion)
Zei a Mentsh (Be a good person).

All I got was words...

At the end of the Amidah, our silent prayer, we say, *Elohai Netzor...* "Dear God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile.... May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You," to our loved ones and neighbors, to Israel and America, and to a world that yearns for the healing blessings of sweetness, renewal and peace.