

Did you ever notice that a slim chance and a fat chance are the same, but a wise man and a wise guy are opposites? That when the stars are out they are bright, but when the lights are out they are dark? That our noses run and our feet smell? Or that writers write, and singers sing, but fingers don't fing, and hammers don't ham? Speaking of which, there is no ham in hamburger, no egg in eggplant, neither pine nor apple in pineapple. Sweetmeats are candies, while sweetbreads are meat. And if a vegetarian eats vegetables, what does a humanitarian eat?

Words are so much fun!

My mother used to love telling everybody about my **first** word. Having bathed and powdered her baby girl, mom looked at me and asked, "what could be nicer than a fresh clean baby?" Apparently not knowing it was a rhetorical question, I looked right back at her and answered "Me!"

How monumental the moment when a child first speaks! Those first words open up a whole new world. The world of communication and relationship. Baby's first word is itself a moment of birth, of creation. Not unlike God's first words. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God said "Let there be water, let there be sky" Creation came into being by the word of God.

The power of speech is the power to create. Like God, we create worlds with our words. The insights of a good teacher open new worlds of discovery or inspiration. A first hello between two strangers can create a world of friendship or a lifetime of love. We sustain worlds with words as well. God gave Adam and Eve the power of speech and put them in the Garden. The whole time they were there, Adam and Eve never spoke to each other. Eve talked to the serpent, Adam spoke to God, but the man and woman never communicated with each other. Maybe if they had talked, we would still be in Eden.

We can maintain our worlds by making that long avoided phone call, by raising an issue that needs discussion, by speaking out against injustice, by saying, “I’m sorry,” or “I love you.” Expressing compassion, love, fear, loneliness, even anger, can breathe new life into a world, which might languish in silence.

This sort of world-work is a difficult business. Sometimes the necessary words are hard to find: words to express fear or anger, words of apology or forgiveness, even expressing love in words can be very hard. I wonder if the real reason the Israelites had to wander for 40 years was to give God time to find the appropriate words for the covenant.

Even once we find the words, it can be hard to express them the right way. At Mount Sinai, God uttered the Commandments in thunder and lightning. It was too frightening. The Israelites were so afraid of God that they turned to Moses, saying, “*You speak to us, and we’ll listen.*” Had God spoken more gently, perhaps in the in the “still small voice” that Elijah heard, the people might have been able to listen to God directly, avoiding some of their later troubles.

God said, Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw the light that it was good. (Genesis 1:3-4) On our best days, we too can look at what we’ve wrought and see how good it is. But words abused or used carelessly create quite another type of world. A sarcastic wisecrack, an insensitive or poorly timed criticism; an angry outburst creates a dark world of pain and loneliness. That has been woefully apparent on the public scene these past few weeks. It seems every other day another politician, athlete, or celebrity was apologizing for their outbursts.

Be honest: do you always think before you speak? As Rabbi Amy Eilberg has written:

We speak so easily, so well, so cleverly, so much. We revel in our ability to communicate, to impress, to have impact. We readily acknowledge the obvious truth that words can wound, yet we resist the enormous level of commitment required to use our tongues wisely.”

Even well-meant words can end up hurting. Take the story of Job. The poor guy is literally up to his ears in troubles, and his friends come to comfort him. They keep quiet for a while, but finally “help” by telling Job “God hasn’t treated you unjustly – you truly deserved your suffering.” With friends like that...

Each Yom Kippur I pause over one line in the Al Chet: “*Al Chet SheChatanu l’fanecha bilshon Hara*. For the sin which we have sinned against you by gossiping.” I think this is one of the most difficult transgressions to avoid. Gossip is so alluring. It can even build friendships; create a feeling of bonding and intimacy between those sharing it. But at what cost? Our sages see gossip as a capital offense: its triple murder, they say, destroying the souls of the speaker, the one spoken of, and the listener. And it diminishes God as well. According to the Midrash God says: “There’s no room in this world for slanderers and me.”

Proverbs teaches: “*Reckless words pierce like a sword,*” But a sage demurs: They are more like arrows. If a man unsheathes his sword to kill another, and the other pleads for mercy, he may be mollified and return the sword to its scabbard. But an arrow, once let loose, cannot be turned back. Have you ever hit “send” on an email and instantly regretted it? We can’t take our words back, but we can offer healing when they pierce their target. The Proverbs verse continues: *A healing word is a tree of life*. With our words we can still bring light to the darkness, comfort to the pain.

“*And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day, and the world was complete, and on the seventh day God rested.*” On the seventh day, God was quiet. After speaking for seven days straight, God stopped on the seventh day, creating the peaceful hush of Shabbat. Creative silence is a smile, a touch, instead of a word. It is the discipline to hold your tongue when a word might hurt.

I think Job’s friend knew better. He said, “Will it wear you out if I speak?” But self-righteousness overran compassion and he went ahead and chastised his suffering friend.

Our sages instruct us to hold our peace when we visit mourners, or anyone who is suffering. At such times words are at best inadequate, at worst harmful. At such times a hug is more comforting than “I’m so sorry about your loss;” compassionate silence is better than “Its God’s will.” We are supposed to let the mourners speak first, giving us the opportunity to pay attention to what they might need.

Ecclesiastes said, “ *To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be silent and a time to speak.* Ecclesiastes was wise. But how do we know which is which?

We can find the answer in a Mitzvah which isn’t in the big 10, but which is familiar to us all: I was taught that it is the “watchword of our faith: We remind ourselves morning and night: *Shema Yisrael: Listen, Israel.* A good watchword indeed.

My mom was a court reporter. Her job was to listen very carefully and precisely record every word. She loved an old joke about three court reporters walking down the street. “Its windy today,” one says. “No it isn’t,” responds the second. “Its Thursday.” The third says, “Me too. Let’s go get something to drink.”

Remember Emily Latella, the news commentator on Saturday Night Live? “What’s all this fuss I hear about Soviet Jewelry? She would rant on and on about it, until someone interrupted and corrected her. At that point she would smile sweetly at the camera and say, “Never mind.”

True listening means making an extra effort to understand what someone is really saying, not just what we *think* we hear. It means never having to say, “Never mind.” Someone once suggested imagining that your lips are glued shut when someone else is speaking. If you don’t have the option of opening your mouth, you’re more likely to open your ears.

As important as it is to really listen to one another's words, it is equally important to be attuned to their silences. The mystics find the true meaning of Torah in the white spaces between the words.

The same is true of people. Real communication means listening to the words with our ears, and to the silences with our hearts. The prophet Isaiah said, '*Hearing with their ears and understanding with their hearts, they will return and be healed* (6:10) It isn't easy to understand the silences, to read the white spaces. Parents of teenagers know the pain of trying to understand their suddenly sullen, withdrawn child.

It is especially hard sometimes to understand God's silences, when it seems our prayers are unheeded. But those apparent silences may just mean we need to listen differently, with our hearts instead of our ears. It is the same with God or with people: we need to listen openly and fully, not just for what we want to hear, but to what is really being communicated.

The theme we have chosen for the coming year at Mount Zion is *Panim el Panim*: connecting face to face. Tomorrow morning, Rabbi Spilker will discuss it in more depth, but in a nutshell, *Panim el Panim* is about relationship, about really being together as individuals in community. Obviously, speech will be at the center of our efforts.

In Deuteronomy we are commanded מוֹצֵא שִׁפְתֵיךָ, תִּשְׁמֹר "Guard what comes out of your lips" (23:24). The Hassidic Rabbi known as the Sefat Emet – which incidentally means the “language of truth” interprets:

Motsa sefatecha tishmor requires full-time duty -- day and night – because all the rest of our deeds depend upon it. The human faculty of speech is more wondrous than anything else in Creation...

I'd like to issue a challenge tonight. As we embark on this year of *Panim El Panim* – connecting face to face, let us make a true and concerted effort – day and night – to fulfill the Mitzvah of *Motsa sefatecha tishmor*. I challenge each one of us to

always think before we speak, to ask ourselves whether our words will wound or heal, create light or deepen darkness. Whether it is a time to speak or a time to keep silence. Start small: Choose one day: a 24 hour period in which you will really pay attention to what you can create – or destroy- with your words. Speak up when something needs saying, even though it might be easier not to. Hold your tongue when the opportunity to gossip arrives, or when even though you have something to say, it would be better not to say it. When that day is over, try 48 hours, then a week.

Some time ago, I came upon the following prayer:

Dear God

So far today, I've done all right. I haven't gossiped; I haven't lost my temper; I haven't been greedy, grumpy, or nasty. I am thankful for that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed. And from then on I'm going to need a lot of help!

The cantors will sing for us a liturgical version of this sentiment. It is the prayer at the end of the Amidah in our prayerbook, the final words before our prayers go silent:

Elohai n'tzor l'shoni m'ra usfatai midabber mirma...

My G-d, guard my tongue from all evil,
And my lips from sprouting lies.
May I think before I begin to speak,
May my words be gentle and wise.
Help me ignore those who wish me ill,
Help me be humble before all
Open my heart to Your Torah
That I know how to answer your call.

(translated by Juliet Spizer)

Ken H'hi Ratzon. May it be God's will.