

**So You Say:
Words That Hurt and Words That Heal
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5784
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An elderly man has trouble hearing. His doctor fits him with a pair of remarkably effective hearing aids. When the man returns for a follow up, the doctor declares "This works perfectly! Your family should be so happy you can hear everything now." "Oh no," the man responds. "I haven't told any of them. I just sit quietly, listening carefully. I've changed my will four times."

Akedat Yitzchak. The Binding of Isaac. The story heard in Reform synagogues on the first day of Rosh Hashanah - and in the rest of the Jewish world on the Second Day - this story cannot be what it seems! Maybe... maybe it was all just a big misunderstanding. Maybe Abraham had wax in his ears. Or the angel had laryngitis. It couldn't be, there's no way, it's not as if it could ever have meant... what it seems to say.

After all, there's a clue, if we listen carefully. The words are... well, they're wrong. "And God said: *kach na et bincha, et y'chid'cha, asher ahavta, et Yitzchak...* Take your son, *your only one*, whom you love... Isaac..."

Wait. What? But... If I were a media fact-checker doing my job at the *beginning* of the story, if I cried foul at the *first* falsehood, maybe we wouldn't have gotten into this bind we are in now. Because, demonstrably, Isaac is *not* Abraham's *only* son. Call me Ishmael!

The tradition jumps through hoops. It tries so hard to justify the words. It must mean his only “legitimate” son, the one from his wife rather than his mistress. Or maybe the only son *whom he loves*. Or maybe “only doesn’t mean only.” Or, or, or...

I think there is another possibility. **Maybe the main message is about missing the message. Maybe this is a story about misinformation. Manipulation. How easy it is to misunderstand.**

Maybe we just heard wrong. Perhaps Abraham was supposed to raise Isaac up, not offer him up. One word more or less and this makes a lot more sense. Might we have spent centuries fretting in Freudian angst for no reason, other than, perhaps, the fault in our ears?

And if we got those words wrong, well, perhaps we should be *very* careful about all the others.

Words matter. They matter in how we hear, and how we feel. They are the tools and the “tell” in how we respond, how we react to the world.

More. Words can harm or heal, can curse or make holy. They are vessels, vehicles to carry out the vision and values of our lives.

Words can hurt. They can cut and wound.

Walk with me for a bit, far afield. We begin with an ancient tale, a strange and salacious story. Bear with me, please; this is a kind of complicated passage. It has elements which are offensive today: an attack of ambiguous nature, a brother giving away a sister as some bizarre bribe to get out of a jam. Perhaps this was shady behavior at its own time, too. But the moral, at the end, is a warning that words can be sharper than swords.

The Israeli teacher Ruth Calderon sets the stage: “The Jordan river was the boundary. The city extended to its banks, and beyond it lay the Golan, a wilderness, a place of robbers and wild animals.” It is there, in the river, nexus of rough and refined, that a very strange encounter takes place.

Rabbi Yochanan was the head of the academy in Tiberius. He is known for brilliance – and beauty. Bookish, light and slight - a scholar!

Resh Lakish was well known, too: head of the bandits, tallest of thieves, fastest and strongest of them all. A wizard with weapons. Rugged, virile, kissed by the sun, where he went heads turned and hearts fluttered.

Hear, now, the words of the Talmud:

One day Rabbi Yochanan goes swimming in the river. Resh Lakish sees him and jumps into the Jordan. [It’s not 100% clear what is meant here, but based on Yochanan’s reputation and appearance, and based on what follows, it seems likely that Resh Lakish mistook Yochanan’s gender. Either way it’s a strange start for a story!] Resh Lakish drops his spear in the water and leaps to the other side of the river.

*When Yochanan sees him, he says ‘Your strength should be for Torah!’
Resh Lakish says: ‘Your beauty should be for women!’*

Rabbi Yochanan says: “If you repent, and change your ways, I will give you my sister, who is more beautiful than I am! Resh Lakish agrees. He comes out of the water. [We’ll see why the water is so important in a moment.] He tries to retrieve his spear but is unable to do so.

Rabbi Yochanan teaches him Torah and Mishna and makes him into a great man. [The former thief, now brother-in-law and student, became a great scholar. Disciple, protégé, and maybe... maybe... Yochanan’s equal?]

But one day, they are debating in the study house. A fine point of law about the tools we use. The sword, the knife, the spear, the sickle... at what point do they become “complete?” [When do they pass from their original and separate parts to become finished products?]

Rabbi Yochanan argues: “When they are refined in the furnace.”

But Resh Lakish says: “When they are polished with water.”

To which Yochanan responds: “A thief knows the tools of his trade!”

Now, this may sound innocent, but Yochanan has just done something... *really* nasty. This is no longer an academic argument.

In this Talmudic tale, stakes are high, and words are hot. Reputation, image, ego, even self-worth are all on the line. Yochanan felt challenged and upstaged. He was enraged, embarrassed, shown up by a protégé, a student spreading wings. So, in a phrase we know, he went low. He got personal. He hit where it hurts.

Because Resh Lakish’s answer about being polished in water was an echo of his own experience. He, too, was “refined” in a river. It is where he was “completed,” where he went, as it were, from rough past and raw parts... to a finished product. And Yochanan... Yochanan throws it in his face.

Maybe you know this fight? Maybe you recognize this move? A couple quarrels, and one of them brings up a barely buried barb, some unrelated but obviously unresolved issue from long ago.

Does Yochanan not believe that his brother-in-law has “repented?” I mean, look at him! A changed man! A new family. A great wife, a new life. He even left his spear behind! For all that might mean. And still Yochanan calls him a thief?

Resh Lakish’s replies:

‘So, in the end, what good have you done for me? [How am I better off in this world than I was before?] There, among the robbers, they called me ‘master.’ And here, among the sages, they call me ‘master.’”

Finally, Yochanan realizes what he had done, and replies: “I have not done any good for you at all.”

Yochanan’s spirit grows weak. Resh Lakish falls ill. This strange story... does not end well.

And we are left to wonder: is there, then, more honor among thieves? With rough and rugged ways are the scoundrels somehow more straightforward than sages?

What shade the story throws at the world of learning. Look at the posturing and petty jealousy, backbiting and swirling currents of underhanded aggression! This is culture? Is our veneer of civility really so thin? And which hurts, which harms, which cuts more deeply, the discarded spear – or the unleashed wit and the well-thrust word?

Look around! Turn on the TV. Switch back and forth between channels. Listen to the violence of our vocabulary, the weaponization of words in this supposedly modern world.

What outrage, what falsehood is yet unsaid? The taunts of bullies, the madness of the mob, the demeaning of experts, the crude and the rude and insult after insult. What isn't straight-out false is simply cruel, so in what we hear – either it is wrong –or it is *wrong!* Each day brings new insanity, and who knows what to think or where it stops or even what is really real.

Is this, then, the best we can do? On either side. Is this who we are and what we really want to say, the role models we want to be? Is this kind of language a legacy we want to leave?

And whoever said, even in a hail of sticks and stones, that words can never hurt? How's that working out for you?

But there is, in our history, even in spirited debate, a more spiritual vocabulary. There is speech which flows from appreciation and awe. And there are words which can help us heal.

This morning I want to share with you an ancient tradition. And I want to unveil a new kind of campaign.

In with the old. I believe that the Jewish spiritual practice of *berachot*, of blessings, trains us to use words to open our eyes, and lift up our lives.

Do you remember the opening of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the montage of encounters, snippets of shtetl life? Disciples approach the rebbe and pose a loaded question. Is there,” they ask... “is there a blessing for the czar?”

“Of course,” the rebbe responds. “There is a blessing for everything. May God bless and keep the czar...far away from us!”

Great ending. But the important part came first. “There is a blessing for everything.”

Barukh Atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam. Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of Existence.” We open with a formula, the words always the same, which comes before the variable, specific focal point of attention.

This is a *fundamentally* Jewish way of looking at the world. These are the words we say, the response we give to the raw stuff of life as it unfolds around us.

What is a *beracha*? Not “blessing” – it can’t really mean “blessing” in the way we think of it in English, since there is a *beracha* to recite on hearing of a death. But, more: “tuning,” or “focus,” or, with one of my teachers ([Larry Kushner](#)) maybe: “awakening.” You open your eyes. We discover a spiritual potency, a new awareness of an interconnected complexity around us.

Many of us know two blessings. Before meals we recite “*hamotzi lechem min HaAretz*,” praising the Power who brings forth bread from the earth.

Before wine we say “*borei pri haGafen*,” thanking the creator of the vine before toasting “to life!”

But these are two among dozens. There is the blessing to be said on food from a tree, and that which comes from the ground. There is a generic blessing for meat, fish, and eggs – and a special prayer for chocolate chip cookies (well, baked goods). [\[I am glad I am not giving these remarks on Yom Kippur!\]](#)

There is a hierarchy of food: the closer to nature, the higher the blessing. Oranges get the blessing of the tree; orange juice the generic one.

We learn from this that what comes out of our mouth should reflect and connect with what goes in... both what it is, and how it is made.

And there are blessings for what we see: a friend, trees blossoming for the first time in a season, a rainbow, a tall mountain, Margate Beach, a great scholar, the ruler of a country.

You may yawn your way through life. You may blink and miss the power of a moment. But no matter how mundane it may seem, every encounter is sublime. Under the surface of the superficial lies the very DNA of divinity, if we but open our eyes and see.

And just as with DNA, where every cell contains the code for the entire organism, so does every moment hold within it echoes of eternity. Every experience is an encounter with the entirety of existence. What seems separate is but a shadow of a unity that lies just beyond the border of our minds.

Our tradition gives us words, prods us to give voice to this wonder. As you leave the Sanctuary there are copies of a [booklet of blessings](#) which I have prepared. As of today, this is now also on our website, and available by later request as well. I hope you will bring these *berachot*, these blessings into your homes and your hearts.

Take these, use them, play with them. The words are a key, a portal to take us from any place, to every place, there to meet the One we call “One,” the raw energy of connection and creation we call “God.”

Berachot, then, are the words which open eyes, reveal and remind us of a web of wonder. They add appreciation and awe to all the layers of our lives.

But in a world in which the threads of connectivity are badly frayed, where there is so much said that is harmful and hurtful, maybe healing demands that we go even... one step further.

Out with the new, the coarseness and cruelty of our age. I propose a concerted personal campaign, for positive, proactive expression. Instead of just avoiding *lashon ha'ra'ah*, negative speech... let's commit ourselves to *Lashon HaTov*. “Speaking well.” Calling out the good. Consciously. Deliberately. Ten times a day.

Let us, then, make ourselves say something nice – soft instead of sharp, binding instead of cutting, gentle instead of aggressive. Ten nice things. That’s a floor, not a ceiling. Ten times to say something positive and supportive, when you would not have done so before.

A month. Keep track if you can. A kindness. A compliment. A more generous, more gracious, more charitable way of looking at the world.

Jewish life, religious life, spirituality is not just about what we believe. It is also about how we behave. The reason for ritual in the first place is the role it plays in... training. Discipline. Habituation. So, make ourselves be nice... and maybe we’ll get used to it. It might start to come naturally. It may even make things better, for others, and for us.

It is a very Jewish idea that, at least in part, we can *will our way* into the world we want. Because... being positive *is a choice*.

We have an almost unimaginable power, simply in what we say. We can misread and mishear and misunderstand and walk around always thinking the worst of each other. We can fan the flames of fear and suspicion, with just a few sharp words. Or we can choose to be better.

I believe that what we say shapes who we are. And I believe that words shape the world at least as much as the other way around.

We wish each other a happy new year. In fact, it is in our hands, and on our lips... not in what happens to us, but in what happens through us... to make that wish come true.

L'shanah Tovah.