

Rabbi Max Miller/Temple Emanu-El/Erev Rosh HaShannah 5778

Each time Rachael and I are in Jerusalem we try to visit a different synagogue for services. This past Pesach, Rachael and I spent Shabbat with some friends of ours who frequent a modern Orthodox shul in Katamon, a neighborhood of west Jerusalem, called Yakar. This synagogue, Yakar, is known for its beautiful singing and is the “it place” for young singles in the neighborhood. That Friday night, we arrived at the end of the service which precedes kabalat shabbat, and we made our way to our respective sections—Rachael to the women’s section, and I went to the men’s. Even though it was early, the space was already packed. I found a seat in the middle of the men’s space and started to make my way over while others were in the midst of their prayers. Doing my best to *not* disturb the prayers of another, I took a roundabout way of getting to my seat. Unfortunately, there was one man who would not acknowledge my presence and would not move to let me by. Innocently I thought that he must not have heard me say “s’licha,” excuse me, as I tried to move past him. So I started to move his seat to avoid him, but it was to no avail. So I found some space and I nudged my way past him in the way we all board an airplane or get to our seats in a crowded theatre. I must have bumped him ever so slightly, but he acted as though I had broken one of the ten commandments in front of him! I apologized, but he continued to tell me how I had sinned for interrupting his prayer, and how I should know better and how inconsiderate I was. I was in shock, but the irony wasn’t lost on me. A. I could not believe an Israeli, some of the pushiest people I’ve ever met, was berating me for being pushy. B. I was shocked that this pious man, so devout in his prayer, lost sight and compassion for his fellow human. We spoke for a few more minutes debating the topic, but eventually we dropped it.

Then a worse thing happened. I had to get back out of the row to get a prayer book. In all the hubbub, I forgot my siddur! So out I go again, scooting past this gentleman, but when I came back he stood and greeted me with an apologetic expression. I met his expression with one of my own and we both saw our mistake. I apologized for interrupting his prayer, and he apologized for needlessly getting angry with me. I left services that night feeling thoroughly Israeli for having just argued in Hebrew during services with another person over something so utterly irrelevant. Yet, I also felt true connection with that man and those services because of the incident. Our apology brought us closer together, and the healing of those words made me feel a sense of what we try to achieve each High Holy Day season.

Each time I reflect on that experience, I come back to one essential principle: our words, just like our deeds and actions, have power. Going all the way back to our first Creation narrative, the story we Reform Jews read on the second day of Rosh HaShanah, we recount that our

universe was created through words. Several years ago, I took a course on translation theory, a class where we discussed all the ins and outs of what goes into taking a text from one language and taking it into another. On the first day of classes our professor said his goal was that, by the end of the year, we would be in such awe of the power of words, we would tremble at the thought of putting together even a sentence. When we completed the course we had a certain reverence for language that has had a lasting effect on me to this day. My experience in that shul in Jerusalem only reinforced my previously held beliefs. My words and those of my interlocutor have the power to break us down or build each other up. **We must approach language, be it spoken or written, as the most consequential building block of our culture.**

As “People of the Book” we understand this implicitly. We have carried our words with us for thousands of years, from exile, to persecution, to inquisition, across rivers, mountains, and seas; we have been sustained by the power that we give to language. In this 21st century culture we are so often reminded of the inverse: words are the stuffing used to fill news segments, twitter messages, or Facebook posts. In macroeconomic terms, we have created so many words—so much supply—that we have eliminated demand. The word market is saturated and we are overstuffed. So what if we limited ourselves to ten words. In ten words we could do a lot. We could create the world in ten words, at least so our tradition tells us.

Let me explain through one of my favorite books in rabbinic literature, a volume called Avot D’Rebbe Natan. If you’ve heard of a volume called Pirkei Avot, “Ethics of Our Ancestors,” then you would be somewhat familiar with this book. Avot D’Rebbe Natan is a challenge for us in the 21st century. We don’t know exactly when it was written, we don’t know who wrote it, and we don’t know if it was based on Pirkei Avot, if Pirkei Avot was based on it, or if the two are in some way rival texts. What we do know is that Avot D’Rebbe Natan contains passages that are not preserved anywhere else. In the 31st chapter of Avot D’Rebbe Natan the text says, “The world was created by the use of ten utterances.” The text asks rhetorically, “why would anyone on earth need to know this?” I’m paraphrasing a little bit here, but that’s almost word for word what the next sentence says. The narrator continues, “we should learn that the one who performs the commandments, observes Shabbat, and sustains a life is like one who has sustained the whole world—the very world created in ten utterances.”

The text equates performance of Jewish practices with the creation of the entire world. We learn that one who acts counter to Jewish practice is like one who destroys a world. The author uses this to say that the actions we undertake in our lives are equivalent to the ten words spoken by the Holy One when the world was created. The author carries this further to say that in his worldview, words are so primary to the existence of life that the Torah itself was created

before the creation of the world. Scientifically is the so? No, but we read this text to understand how our ancestors organized their world. For the author of Avot D'Rebbe Natan, the existence of the world, of human beings, of all of God's creations, are due to language.

With this in mind, we must consider the very act we engage in during these High Holy Days—prayer. Under the same basis as the creation of the world, so too prayers were written in order to affect the cosmos. From ancient times to our rabbinic sages who lived so long ago, the language of prayer was thought to have transcendent power. The human response to life, death, good fortune, and disaster was channeled through formulaic dialogue with the Divine. Prayer is something we create that should reflect who we were, who we are, and who we want to become. The antiquity of these words anchor us in our tradition, but we must wrestle with their meaning for us today. The wrestler I choose to follow is the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. In his book of poetry, "Open Closed Open," Amichai wrote a long form poem in which the following stanza appears in reference to the traditional prayer, Ani Ma'amin, based on Maimonides 13 principles of faith. Amichai writes:

I declare with perfect faith
that prayer preceded God.
Prayer created God,
God created human beings,
human beings create prayers
that create the God that creates human beings.

Our need for Rosh HaShanah, for Yom Kippur, for Shabbat, for morning, afternoon, and evening services each day is not only a Jewish notion, but a human response. Human beings need prayer. Human beings need that uppercase Power in the Universe. Prayer is our response to the instinctual feeling that there is Something, with a capital "S," greater in the universe. Anyone who has felt that knows the need for prayer.

More important than any other act we will undertake these coming *yamim noraim*, days of awe, is the act of repentance. We ask for forgiveness from two sources. First, we ask for forgiveness from God. Second, we ask for forgiveness from our fellow human beings. In fact, it is the latter that takes priority in these awe-filled days, and we engage in t'shuvah in atonement through speech. We speak some of the toughest words in the English language, "I am sorry." Yet, just speaking those three words is not enough, not by any standard. An apology comes with recognition of guilt and of self-reflection that we could have done better. Maimonides, the honored Jewish-Spanish scholar of the 12th century tells us that t'shuvah, making amends,

happens in three stages. First, is the apology, the admission that we did something wrong. When we apologize we name the offense, because when we name we begin to have control over it. Second, is rectification, we do what is necessary for the other person to feel whole again. Our words or our deeds may have destroyed their world, in the terms of Avot D'Rebbe Natan. Now it is incumbent upon us to see that their world is restored. As if the first two were not tough enough, the final stage of t'shuvah must come unconsciously. When we have the opportunity to transgress again, we must not do so because we have conditioned ourselves to change. The last step goes beyond the conscious decision to avoid harming someone, it goes to our very core. We have to internalize the change necessary and alter our very being.

So potent and powerful are our words that we must wield them with care. As our ancient rabbis knew and as we know today, words have immense potential energy to create and destroy. Whether our thoughts turn to matters for which we must atone, or ways we could use our language to better serve us, let us approach 5778 with greater respect for the words we share. May we construct a community, a culture, a home with the strong, kind words of love, compassion, and empathy.