

**So You Say:
Words and What We Can Do With Them
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5777
October 3, 2016**

My friends, a word, if you will, about what is being said somewhere else. The traditional Torah portion for the morning of Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the holiday, is actually a chapter prior to what we read today. The Testing of Abraham, the Binding of Isaac that is, traditionally, encountered tomorrow, on the Second Day. Most Reform synagogues read this today because, until recently, few held services on the Second Day and, now that many do so, well, attendance is... look, I love that service, the feel of it, the intimacy. I urge you to come, and I can pretty much promise you'll be able to find a seat.

So what words are heard instead, by most Jews in the world, on this occasion? It is also, as it turns out, a hard tale to tell. It is the expulsion of Hagar, the exile of Ishmael, a family forced into the wilderness, facing a dangerous and uncertain future. They don't know the landscape, they don't know the language, they don't know what their sources of support and sustenance will be.

So it is here, indeed, that I want to take a moment to take note of what we are doing, as a community, for a single family, in exile themselves. Descendants of Ishmael, fleeing for their lives, they are met, here, with a helping hand, and an act of love. Our team greeted them on their arrival, gave them a meal of welcome in the middle of the night, furnished their apartment, and brought them through a blizzard of bureaucracy, the mountains of

paperwork, the unknown wilderness of school registration, state regulation, medical examination, immunization, language accommodation, and acculturation. We have been their rides, their guides, their companions. And we are very, very new to each other. They don't know what to make of us. And we are still learning surprising things about them.

I am so very proud of our entire Refugee Response Team, guided by Karen Green, coordinating with Lutheran Social Services, functioning only because of the energy and efforts and people power and hours of time and the gifts given by so many of you. We are witness -- no, we are actors in a scene in which, standing against all the suspicion and hate around us, we are a Jewish congregation working with a Christian social service agency to welcome a Muslim family to this nation. And I thank God, and you, and our own innate sense of goodness for that.

Back then, now, to ourselves, to what we have chosen to read, to the words we heard here on this morning of Rosh Hashanah.

Maybe... maybe it was all just one big misunderstanding. Maybe the angel had laryngitis that day, or Abraham had wax in his ears. 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 – because the words are clearly 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...” It is a strange sentence. It is... well, 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 to this bind we are in now. Because, obviously, demonstrably, Isaac is *not* Abraham's only son.

The tradition jumps through all kinds of hoops to make sense of what is going on, but I think there is another possibility. Look, if we got those words wrong, maybe we should be very careful how about all the others. Maybe we just heard it wrong. Maybe Abraham was supposed to raise Isaac up, not offer him up. Maybe one word more or less and this would make a lot more sense. Maybe it meant something else, and we have spent centuries fretting in Freudian angst for no reason.

My friends, the message I want to share with you today, is that 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. And they can be the way, the vehicle we use to act out the highest vision and values of our lives.

Walk with me for a bit, far afield. We begin with a tale taken from the tomes of the Talmud. It is a story so... salacious... that in this setting, and this space, I am going to have to... paraphrase part of it.

The Israeli teacher Ruth Calderon – more widely known now for her recent term in the Knesset, sets the stage for us: “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, in the nexus of the rough and the refined that a very strange encounter takes place.

Rabbi Yochanan was the head of the academy in Tiberius. He was known for his brilliance – and for his beauty. Bookish, light and slight, a scholarly ideal!

Resh Lakish was well known, too. He was the head of the bandits, the tallest of the thieves, the fastest and strongest of them all. 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 went swimming in the river. Resh Lakish saw him, and... jumped into the Jordan. He dropped his spear in the water, and leapt to the other side of the river.

When Yochanan saw him, he said ‘Your strength should be for Torah!’

*Resh Lakish said: ‘Your beauty should be for women!’**

Rabbi Yochanan said: ‘If you repent, and change your ways, I will give you my sister, who is more beautiful than I am!’

Resh Lakish agreed, and accepted this arrangement. He tried to retrieve his tools, but was unable to do so.

Rabbi Yochanan taught him Torah and Mishna, and made him into a great man. One day, they were debating in the study house. A fine point of law, regarding the ritual of impurity: The sword, the knife, the spear, the sickle... at what point do they become impure.

[In other words, at what point in production do these pass from raw materials, not subject to the laws of impurity, to finished products, which are?]

*The students answered: "From the time they are completed."
 And when are they completed?
 Rabbi Yochanan argued: "When they are refined in the furnace."
 But Resh Lakish said: "When they are polished with water."
 To which Yochanan responded: "A thief knows the tools of his trade!"*

Now, I am going to pause, to point out what I missed when I first studied this story. Yochanan has just done something... really nasty. This is no longer an academic argument. And it is getting... well, pun unintended based on his reference to a furnace, but the stakes are high and the words are getting heated. Reputation, image, ego, even self-worth are on the line. Embarrassed or enraged, feeling questioned or upstaged, put out by a protégé acting as an equal, a student who has spread his wings, Yochanan gets personal. And he hits where he knows it will hurt the most.

Resh Lakish's answer about being polished in water echoes his own experience. He, too, was "refined" in a river. It is where he was "completed," where he went, as it were, from raw material to a finished product.

But does Yochanan ever really, fully accept that his brother-in-law has changed? Look at the transformation! Repentance! A new family, a new life, a new man. And think of the symbolism: he left his spear behind! For all that might mean. And still Yochanan throws it in his face?

Resh Lakish's reply says it all:

‘So in the end, what good have you done for me? There, among the robbers, they called me ‘master.’ And here, among the sages, they call me ‘master.’” Yochanan realized what he had done, and said: “I have not done any good for you at all.”

Yochanan’s spirit grew weak. Resh Lakish grew ill. By the end of the story they are both dead. And we are left, to scratch our head.

Is there, then, more honor among thieves? Are their rough and rugged ways somehow more straightforward, more honest even, than the posturing and petty jealousy, backbiting and swirling currents of underhanded aggression in the study hall? Is the veneer of civility and civilization 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 Fox and MSNBC. Just listen to the violence of our vocabulary, the weaponization of words in this season we are in!

What outrage, what falsehood is yet unsaid? The taunts of bullies, the madness of the mob, the crude and the rude and insult after 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! Maybe, you know, maybe some other time it’s been this bad before, but not that I have ever seen, nor even heard of.

And is this, then, the best we can do? Is this who we are and what we really want to say, the role models we want to be for each other? Is this kind of language a legacy we want to leave, or what we want to teach?

And whoever said, even in a hail of sticks and stones, that words can never hurt me? That's a nice thing we may say to ourselves. How's that working out for you?

In the wake of words which are meant to tear down and cut up, I want to offer a way of being, a discipline of speech which can soothe and heal. I want to share an ancient tradition. And I want to propose a campaign of our own, for this election season, and beyond.

I believe that the traditional system of *berachot*, of blessings, teaches us how to use words in a way which opens our eyes, and lifts up our lives.

Do you remember the opening scene of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the montage of encounters, snippets of shtetl life? Do you remember the disciples who approach the rebbe? They pose an innocent-seeming but deeply challenging dilemma, one which touches on the nature of God and the character of creation, which questions the goodness of the universe in the face of evil. "Is there," the disciples ask... "Is there a blessing for the czar?"

And the rebbe responds: "Of course. There is a blessing for everything. May God bless and keep the czar...far away from us!"

For me, no matter how many times I hear it – and I have shared that line with you before -- the ending always makes me laugh. But the most important part of the answer is what comes first. “There is a blessing for everything.”

Barukh Atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam. Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of Existence.” A set opening. A fixed formula that precedes the more specific focal point that follows. 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 happens all around us.

Part of the problem in seeing it this way may be the word “blessing.” In English, it has an invariably positive implication; it is something clearly “good.” Remember, though, that there is a *beracha* to be said... on hearing bad news. Even, indeed, on hearing about a death.

Maybe we should just leave it at the Hebrew, at the word “*beracha*.” If I had to translate it, I would follow my teacher Larry Kushner, and say it mean something like “awakening,” an opening of the eyes, a newfound awareness of the spiritual potency and interconnected complexity of what is around us.

In our meals, in our encounters, in our lives, many Jews know and use 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*,” nodding to the creator of the vine before toasting “to life!”

But these are just... two among thousands. I'm not sure why we stopped emphasizing others. There is the blessing to be said on food that comes from a tree, and that which comes from the ground. There is a generic blessing for meat, fish, and eggs, eaten without bread – and a special prayer for chocolate chip cookies – or, rather, for various baked goods. There is a hierarchy of handling food: the closer to the natural state, the higher the level of blessing. Oranges get the blessing of the tree; orange juice the generic one. We can recover, from this, a sense that what comes out of our mouth should reflect and connect to the content of what goes in... what it is, and how it was made.

And the other experiences of our lives. There are blessings for what we see: a friend, the ocean, trees blossoming for the first time in a season. A rainbow, a tall mountain, a great scholar, the ruler of a country.

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

And just as is the case with DNA, where every cell contains the code for the entire organism, so does every moment hold within it the echo 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. I implied, a moment ago, that we do not teach about this tradition enough. Well, I am focusing on it now. As you leave the Sanctuary today you will find, in the lobby, a beginning [booklet of such blessings](#). I hope you will take into your homes and your hearts. [And if you prefer to avoid paper in this electronic age – there’s an app for that. You can download the [CCAR’s Daily Blessing app](#), available for either android or iOS platforms!]

Take these blessings, use them, learn them play with them, experiment with them... and I believe this custom can add an aspect of appreciation and awe... to many layers of our lives. The words are a key to unlock our minds, a portal to take us from any place, to every place, and there to meet the One we call “One,” the raw energy of connection and creation we call “God.”

But we should not be trapped by the tradition alone, frozen or intimidated if we do not know the ancient words. And the rabbis didn’t think of everything. We live in an age of creativity and choice. We should feel free to respond... with new blessings as well.

An example, I have shared in other settings: a modern mantra, which I sometimes remember to say. Think about what it means, for a moment, to make a routine stop at a gas station, and fill up our cars.

Because what is gasoline made from? It uses oil. And what is oil? It is fossil fuel. It is, literally, dead dinosaurs. We are using something that was once alive, to get from here to the Nationals game.

An ordinary moment? Routine? Hardly! It is a miracle of connection and combustion and life. It a moment of power which deserves recognition.

But the Talmud never knew about this method of movement, or this kind of engine. So I made up a *beracha*. I open in Hebrew, and with the formula which roots me in the tradition, connects me with the community, echoes the past while facing the future. But then I finish in English. I made this up and sometimes, at the pump, I remember to say: “*Barukh atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam*, who lets us fly on the wings of life.”

I made that one up, on the spot, some time ago. But I am sure you can do even better, and come up with the moments, and the words, that work for you.

I am so enthusiastic about this aspect of our tradition that sometimes I think it is an answer to all of our spiritual woes. But not everyone agrees with me. I share the following with permission. I recall, recently, sitting at lunch with one of you, asking about what Judaism has to offer in our everyday lives. I went on about this whole system of *berachot*. And my lunch companion said: “But rabbi, all of that is so... reactive. It’s a response; it depends on the outside. I want to get up in the morning and *do* something Jewish. *What can we do?*”

You know, I had never thought about it like that before. I believe in the power of these *berachot*. But maybe it is not enough.

So let's say we want something more. I would like to propose a new campaign, for positive, proactive Jewish speech. Instead of just avoiding *lashon ha'ra'ah*, gossip, or evil, or negative speech... I want to suggest that we commit ourselves to *Lashon HaTov*. "Good speech." Proactively, deliberately, ten times a day, just do it.

Go ahead. Make yourself say something nice - maybe even instead of something self-centered or sharp, cutting or critical or hurtful or aggressive.

And ten nice things is not an upper limit, of course! Okay, that's it, quota's up, done for the day. No, I mean ten times when you would not have done so before.

The psychologist Martin Seligman teaches that optimism and a positive outlook can be learned. In doing so, he grasps the power of choice, our own ability to reframe almost any situation we are in. This, too is, I believe, at its core... this emphasis on power in our hands, this is very Jewish.

Now, it is easy to make fun of this emphasis of choice, of just making ourselves say nice things. I'll never forget a meeting where one woman said she thought someone was "nuts." The facilitator politely reminded her that we were trying to stay positive. So she nodded and said: "Okay. Got it. I'm *positive* that he's nuts."

And there are days, and ways when this will feel funny or forced. Remember the old JetBlue sound track, when you were on hold on the phone. “Flights are departing close to on time. Your wait time is six minutes. Love what you’ve done with your hair.”

But there is something about which the authors of Genesis and the mystics of the Kabbalah, Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish, postmodern professors and social psychologists would all agree: we make our world with words.

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.

So try it for a month, and keep track if you can. Ten things a day, which you initiate, which are not a response but a proactive declaration. A kindness. A compliment. A more generous, more gracious, more charitable way of looking at the world.

Maybe we’ll get used to it. Maybe it will start to come naturally. Maybe it will even make things better, for others, and for us.

My friends, we have an almost unimaginable amount of power, simply in what we say. We can misread and mishear and misunderstand and always walk around 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 so much better than that.

We cannot fix everyone, and we cannot fix everything. But we can do so much more than we think at first... with awareness and awe, acknowledgement and appreciation, kindness and compassion, humility and holiness and love.

So this year, when we wish each other a happy new year, let us know that it is in our hands, and on our lips...to make it so.

L'shanah Tovah.