

Watch Your Language
Kol Nidre 5777
Temple B'nai Shalom
Braintree, Massachusetts
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[sing] *Baruch Sheh amar v'haya olam.*

Those are the first words of our morning service tomorrow morning and every Shabbat and Yom Tov morning.

[sing] *Baruch Sheh amar v'haya olam.*

“Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came into being.”

Words have the power to create.

God said let there be light, and there was light.

But not only divine words have this power. So do our own.

In our creation story, God decides to create humanity in the image of God, then breathes life into Adam. What does it mean that we are created in the image of God? We, like God, have the power of speech and the power to use that speech to create.

This is not a new idea. Two thousand years ago in the region that now includes Israel, knowledge of Hebrew had declined. The language in everyday use was instead Aramaic. It was the equivalent of what English is today. When the Torah was read in synagogue, in addition to the Hebrew text they used a translation of Torah from Hebrew into Aramaic, just as we use an English translation today.

A man known as Onkelos created a translation of the Torah from Hebrew into Aramaic in the year 110 of the common era, about 1900 years ago. It is known as the Targum Onkelos.

In the creation story in Genesis as it is usually translated into English, God created Adam from the dust of the earth, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

But in the Targum Onkelos those words are translated into Aramaic as “God breathed into his nostrils the inspiration of life, and there was in the body of Adam the inspiration of a speaking spirit.” Not just a spirit of life, but a speaking spirit.

We become human when we are able to speak. When we today are first born, we cannot speak. We are infants. The word “infant,” I learned from the Latin teacher with whom I am privileged to share my life, comes from two Latin words: “in” meaning “not” and “fans” meaning “speaking.” An infant is in fans, not able to speak. We enter into our full role as humans when we have the capacity to speak.

As we are created in the image of God and thus able to speak, we are also, like God in the creation story, imbued with the power to create by speaking.

Consider, for example, a Jewish wedding ceremony. In a fully traditional wedding where only the groom speaks, rather than both the groom and bride speaking, the relationship becomes a marriage when the groom says to the bride, before at least two witnesses, the words, *Harei at m'kedushet li b'taba-at zo k'dat Mosheb v'Yisrael*, "Behold, you are consecrated to me with this ring, according to the law of Moses and Israel." Through the uttering of these words, the new legally-binding relationship is created.

The power to create by speaking is the power also to destroy by speaking.

"Sticks and stones," the nursery rhyme says, "may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." That may or may not be a useful lesson for children. We probably teach this rhyme to them so that they won't hit each other. We say to them instead, "Use your words."

But the message of that nursery rhyme is false. Words can and do hurt us. Words can trivialize, words can insult, words can stereotype.

Mean words can hurt on many levels. Words hurt when they change our view of ourselves or our perceived value to others, whether they are yelled, uttered sarcastically or stated quietly. Harmful words can leave lasting scars.

The National Association of College and University Residence Halls brings together students who live in residence halls on college campuses to share ideas, resources, and best practices in order to improve their residential communities. The Association runs a campaign called "Words That Hurt." The campaign calls attention to the harm caused by verbal abuse and bullying.

This month, the month of October, is National Bullying Prevention Month. Every October, schools and organizations across the country pledge to work together to stop bullying and cyberbullying by increasing awareness of the prevalence and impact of bullying on all children of all ages and recommending steps to prevent bullying and protect its victims.

Our Jewish tradition cares deeply about the proper use of words and language. Here are just three examples from the book of Proverbs.

“The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”¹

“Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.”²

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”³

Tonight we will join together in reciting the Vidui. Ashamnu, Bagadnu, and so on. In the English interpretation of that confessional prayer we acknowledge the following twelve sins, all having to do with the abuse of language and the use of harsh words:

We are cruel, we embitter, we falsify, we gossip, we hate, we insult, we jeer, we lie, we mock, we pervert, we quarrel, we are unkind.

If we mean what we say in this prayer, then we have to do a better job of guarding our tongues. Nowhere in our lives is this more important than when we disagree with each other, whether the topic concerns something in a personal relationship or the election next month.

Alice and I will celebrate our fiftieth wedding anniversary next August. People sometimes ask us our secret for a long marriage.

It’s no secret. It’s easy. Learn how to argue.

We did not come to this idea easily. Alice and I come from very different backgrounds. I was raised in a Christian home. Alice was raised in a Jewish home.

Growing up I never heard any arguments. In Alice’s family, arguments were common.

Alice says that she learned a new saying when she married me, something she had never heard in her life except in Doris Day movies. It was “Good morning.”

In her family, she told me, nobody said “Good morning.” Instead, when you came downstairs in the morning, your mother would say, “You’re going to wear that?!”

We had another difference about how people speak with each other. In my family, it was impolite to interrupt. You waited until the other person finished speaking before you spoke.

¹ Chapter 12, verse 18.

² Chapter 13, verse 3.

³ Chapter 15, verse 1.

Not so in Alice's family. Interruption was just the way you had a lively conversation. If the other person can't talk faster, you either finish his sentence for him or just say what you have to say without waiting for him to finish.

In the early years of our marriage, our arguments were pretty one-sided because I had no experience with arguing.

We also realized after a while that the arguments Alice had seen growing up did not have the aim of learning what the other person thought. Instead, they had the aim of proving the other person wrong. And there was also no tradition in her family of sticking to the point. If you realized you were losing an argument on one subject, then change the subject and bring up something else where you felt more certain you would win.

A married couple cannot and should not avoid all arguments. I don't know any married couple who never argues and also stays married for a long time. Arguments in a marriage are inevitable.

The question is how to argue so as to sustain the marriage, not destroy it.

Here is what we have learned. Many of you may already have discovered strategies like these.

The arguments that strengthen a marriage are those where we each are open to learning and are trying to get somewhere. In contrast, the arguments that weaken a marriage are those where the object is to prove the spouse wrong.

We have also learned that anger expressed during an argument often has a cause that has nothing to do with the topic itself. This is particularly true when the anger is out of proportion to the topic of the argument.

When one of us is able to take a moment to pause and breathe, we will ask the other, "Tell me please what was going on for you before we started this argument? Is there something bothering you in addition to what we've been arguing about?"

This in turn often leads to an understanding of reasons for being sad or mad or upset about something that has nothing to do with the topic of our argument.

We have also found some simple steps to take when an argument starts. We can do some of these if one or the other of us can remember to suggest them.

One idea is to suggest that we sit down rather than speaking with each other standing up. When two people face each other while standing up, the posture is like two fighters, and raises the adrenaline level. Sitting down can lead to a calmer discussion.

A second idea that works well is to remember that we all have two ears but only one mouth. That can remind us that it's good to listen twice as much as we speak. Let

the other person say fully what's on his or her mind without interrupting. And truly listen to what's being said. Too often people have a tendency to use the time when they are not talking to prepare what they are going to say next rather to try to hear what the other person is saying.

We can apply these lessons also in political disagreements. Too often I overhear or read on Facebook angry exchanges about the coming presidential election. Usually the arguments conducted that way don't lead to anyone learning anything useful. But such disputes carried out carelessly can harm relationships that are going to go on being important after November 8.

So here are a few suggestions we can apply when we want to have a productive conversation rather than just beat up the other person verbally.

- Don't quote out of context.
- Don't simplify opposing views.
- Don't speak in order to score points.
- Exchange views with civility.
- Inquire and take each other seriously.
- Listen to other views with respect, in order to understand, not to find flaws.
- Speak in person, not on the phone.
- Speak while seated, not while standing up.
- Speak somewhere comfortable and free of distraction.
- Determine which issues are most important to each of you.
- Ask each other "Why do you believe this? How do you know that the facts you are citing are true?" Don't ask this in a challenging way. You just want information.
- Speak to each other in a truly open way, with a genuine desire to learn.

Many claims are made in the election by the candidates and their supporters. Some are expressions of opinion. Opinions reflect values. We are all entitled to our own opinions.

Others, however are claims of fact. A claim of fact is a claim that can be objectively proven or disproven relying upon evidence. We are not entitled to our own facts.

In this election we hear competing claims of fact. To help us distinguish between which are true and which are not, I am providing tonight a list of internet resources to help us learn the facts and make up our own minds.

Copies of the list are in the lobby. Please take one as you leave tonight.

Please consult these websites. Please circulate the list to family and friends. We do not have to rely on the candidates to identify false claims.

I hope that we can resume an atmosphere of civility following November 8. To do that, we should begin now. Please listen with respect to the views of others and respond with civility and not with personal attacks. Our shared community is far more important than the issues that may separate us.