

Think Before You Speak

Once, on a girl scout camping trip during middle school, I found myself struggling to get along with a particularly prickly classmate. I admit, she and I seemed to always find ourselves at odds, never quite getting along.

Throughout the weekend, we were butting heads, squabbling over who got which bunk, who got to climb the rock wall first, who got to hang out with which friends. It wasn't good.

On the last night of the retreat, I heard from the other girls that this person had said some, admittedly, pretty mean things about me. Blood boiling, years of frustration building up, I turned to the rest of group and without thinking shouted, "Yeah, well at least I don't still wet the bed!" A fact I had learned about my nemesis a few weeks prior from another, injudiciously chatty classmate.

You could hear a pin drop in the cabin. Stunned silence. Instantly, I knew I had gone too far, retaliated by offering a piece of information that was never mine to share. Something too personal, too private. For about 1 second, I felt such satisfaction that I had "gotten her," embarrassed her like she had embarrassed me. After that 1 second, as I stared at the eyes of the other

middle schoolers, as I saw the deep hurt and embarrassment on the face of my “opponent,” I felt awful.

All of us can think back to a time when we entirely, unequivocally, embarrassingly, put our foot in our mouth. Before the little voice inside could catch up to our emotions and say, “No!” “Don’t say it!” “Hold your tongue!” we open our mouths and Bam! We’ve gone too far, said something hurtful, spiteful, unproductive, unkind. Sometimes the hurt is small, we quickly apologize and hope the person can let it go, move on. Sometimes, the hurt is huge. We see their face fall, the room goes quiet, and instantly, we know we’ve said too much...

Unfortunately, I can recall more instances than I would like in my own life when I wish I had said something different, or even, remained silent. After all, I know my grandmother told me at least 50 times “If you don’t have something nice to say...”, well you know the rest...

Retaliation, vengeance, might provide immediate satisfaction, but it’s not the same thing as justice. And we’ve all heard two wrongs don’t make a right. Skipping ahead to the end of the story, this girl and I eventually found our way out of the tangled web of anger and hurt we’d woven together. By high

school we'd reached a neutral *détente*. We haven't spoken in probably 20 years; we aren't Facebook friends, I don't even know where she lives now. But I still remember her face, and the way she looked when my words, my choices, hurt her.

Words are powerful. We've all heard the saying 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.' I would firmly suggest that this expression is categorically untrue. What we say matters; how we say it, matters.

In the first portion of our Torah, *B'reishit*, we watch as God creates the entire world through the power of speech. From Genesis 1:3, "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." If each of us is made *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, as we're told later on in this same *parashah*,¹ then each of us, too, has the power, admittedly on a much smaller scale, to create light, or darkness, with our words.

In the book of *Mishlei*, Proverbs, which is said to contain the wisdom of King Solomon, we read "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."²

¹ Genesis 1:27

² Proverbs 18:21

On Erev Yom Kippur, we recite the Kol Nidre prayer to preemptively nullify all the promises and vows that we will make in the upcoming year, just in case we don't fulfill them and accidentally (or intentionally) leave a spoken commitment undone.

During our *Vidui*, our Yom Kippur confession, which we will embark upon in just a few minutes, within the *Al Cheit* and *Avinu Malkeinu* prayers, we specifically apologize for the sins of gossip, slander, lying, hateful speech. In fact, take notice of just how many of our confessions relate to our words, to what we say to one another.

Time and again our tradition reminds us that words are powerful; that we must be careful with them, that we should THINK before we speak. Indeed, as an educator, this is one of my favorite teachings. For our younger learners, we use the acronym THINK; each letter represents a specific question we must ask ourselves before we open our mouths:

T- is what I have to say True?

H- is what I have to say Helpful?

I- is it Important?

N- is it Necessary?

K- is it Kind?

As we explain the acronym, we tell the students that you must answer at least 4 out of the 5 questions in the affirmative, to be able to share your comment. Yes, using the THINK method might feel a little pediatric, but its goal is relevant to all of us. Indeed, I'm sure we all know plenty of grown-ups who could benefit from the THINK method... It reminds us to consider not just the content of our comments, but how we deliver them, as well as how they will affect our listeners.

The more time we take between the thought and the spoken action, the more opportunity we have to choose our words carefully, to be considerate of the person across from us and to remember the sacred responsibility we have to guard our speech with care and attention.

In the *Mussar* tradition, a Jewish spiritual practice focused on character development through cultivating virtues, or *middot*, to live a more ethical and meaningful life, our rabbis refer to this endeavor as “opening the space between the match and the fuse.”³ As Alan Morinis explains in his wonderful *Mussar* text, Everyday Holiness:

The problem with impatience, [with hasty action], is that it usually takes only a split second for its first glowing embers to ignite into flames that course through us even before we’ve become aware that they have started up. Impatience snuffs out consciousness...

Morinis is reminding us of the dangers of impatience, of reactive, hasty or thoughtless actions and speech. The quicker we are to ignite, to speak without thinking, the quicker we burn the people around us. And once that match is lit, once the “toothpaste is out of the tube”, it’s incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to put it back in.

One of my favorite “Wise People of Chelm” stories⁴ teaches this very idea. For those unfamiliar with the wonderful people of Chelm, think of a

³ Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar, Alan Morinis (Trumpeter: Boston & London; 2008), pg. 58-59.

⁴ Adapted by Rabbi Caitlin Brazner from: “A Pillow Full of Feathers,” Shoshannah Brombacher (https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/812861/jewish/A-Pillow-Full-of-Feathers.htm)

shtetl, a village, populated by Jewish Amelia Bedelias. For those who are unfamiliar with Amelia Bedelia, just know the people of Chelm are loveable fools who sometimes need a rabbinic lesson or two...The story goes:

There was a man in Chelm who loved to gossip, and he often spoke too quickly. Before he'd even considered his actions, he would run to a friend to share the latest news he'd heard. Before he'd paused long enough to THINK about his words, he'd react with impatience.

He knew it wasn't right, but of all the sins, he said to himself, surely gossip wasn't that big of a deal? And yes, he could be a little thoughtless with his speech, but who isn't?? Everybody does it!

One day, the man heard, and promptly shared, a new piece of gossip. And like always, it spread like wildfire through the town. When the news reached the town rabbi's ears, she knew she had to do something.

Seeking the man out, she arrived on his doorstep, looked him square in the eyes, and said, "Bring me a pillow and a knife!"

...Classic rabbinic request...

... "A pillow, rabbi?" he asked in confusion. "And a knife, too?"

“Yes, a feather pillow, please. And a sharp knife too.” She replied.

Fetching the items, he returned to his stoop. “Cut the pillow.” The rabbi declared.

Unsure of where this was going, but willing to comply, the man cut open his pillow, and watched as a cool breeze spirited away many of the feathers. They floated up high, wafting over the treetops. Some settled in the creek near his home. Some ended up in the cow pasture just down the road. Others still fluttered by, rolling along in the swirling winds.

“Ok rabbi, mission accomplished?” The man asked.

“Not quite.” The rabbi answered. “Now, go collect them all. I’ll wait.”

“...What?!” He answered in shock. “Surely, you’re kidding rabbi. The feathers have gone everywhere; it would be impossible to gather them all up.”

“Exactly,” she said. “Once gossip, or harmful words, have left your mouth, you can never take them back. They float along like feathers on the wind; you’ll never know how far they’ll go and how much hurt they might cause...”

The man understood, promised to apologize and to THINK before he spoke, in the future.

As the Chelm story teaches, what's been said can't be unsaid. Words take on a life of their own; they're powerful, impactful, and they can leave scars. I would bet that everyone in this room could cast their mind back to a time when they were hurt, deeply, by the words of another. To a time when you, yourself, harmed another with your words. We all know what it's like to hurt and be hurt by harmful speech. So how can we be more empathetic, more thoughtful, with our language? What does this look like when we actually pause, and THINK before we speak?

Thinking before speaking, choosing our words carefully, can look like:

- Refraining from gossip, no matter how juicy, or how many other people might be participating in it. In short, let it die with you.
- Not parroting harmful political views and party lines that we haven't thoroughly researched ourselves.
- Making sure we learn the pronouns of the people around us, even if it takes a little extra time and care.

- Making room for others to speak, ensuring we use our silence thoughtfully and intentionally.
- Asking more questions, being curious about the person across from you, rather than judgmental.
- Slowing down. Being circumspect. Internalizing the awesome power our words carry and actively choosing to wield that power with care and attention. THINKING before we speak.

Today, in a world torn by violence and pain, in a world where disagreement is on the rise and dialogue feels like a thing of the past, now more than ever we need to consider the language we use, the talking points we reference, the behaviors we engage in that perpetuate harm. Slowing down, THINKING before speaking, is a tool we can all employ to help us navigate charged conversations, or ensure our everyday interactions don't *become* charged.

To be clear, I'm not advocating for milquetoast dialogue that goes nowhere. Nor is this a call to simply "be nice." As the THINK acronym reminds us, sometimes, we need to say the true, helpful, important, necessary thing,

even if it doesn't "feel kind." Productive rebuke, what the Torah calls *tochecha*, is part of our tradition, too. Our prophets spoke truth to power; our Torah calls us to speak up, to step up, in the face of injustice, hard truths, even about ourselves, our community. Indeed, it is because words are so powerful, it is because 'the pen is mightier than the sword,'⁵ that we must be so circumspect with our language, must "increase the distance between the match and the fuse."⁶ Harnessing our tongues, actively, thoughtfully, choosing our words, this is how we show respect for the awesome power we wield as the only one of God's creations gifted with a conscience, and the powers of intellect and speech. Words, language, they are our singular privilege as human beings: they are worth treating with respect.

Conversations are only getting harder. Algorithms meant to keep us engaged, to feed us information to force a quick response, a click, a tap, a share, all of it works to bypass that part of our brain that tells us to think critically, to slow down, to respond with thoughtfulness. Our entrenched viewpoints only fuel this rapid-fire response. And yet, how can we ever hope for discourse if we can't even slow down enough to listen, if we can't

⁵ Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy, Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1839)

⁶ Everyday Holiness, Morinis, pg. 58-59.

remember that, by definition, dialogue necessitates another person with a differing viewpoint; if we can't strive to be curious, not judgmental, as one of my favorite rabbis Ted Lasso says.

This year, in 5786, let our community be made kinder, more thoughtful, more patient, with one another, by using language and words that come from a place of forethought and circumspection. Let us recognize the awesome gifts we are blessed with:

Minds with which to think and dream,

Tongues with which to speak brilliant, careful words,

Hearts and souls, a conscience, a still small voice inside, to guide our steps and inform our choices.

Let us remember to THINK, before we speak, before we act, before all the feathers fly away and we can never get them back.

G'mar chatimah tovah, may you be inscribed well in the book of life, and *shanah tovah*.