

Kol Nidrei 5767 Right Speech

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There is a teaching among the Chasidim that says: if one refrains from idle conversation for forty days, he or she will receive divine inspiration.

Thinking this to be a shortcut to God, a certain individual set his mind to the task with great diligence. Forty days passed and not once did an idle word cross his lips. And yet, at the end of his practice, no inspiration came. Seeking an explanation, he traveled to the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the founder of Chasidism.

After listening to the story, the Baal Shem Tov asked the man if he recited his prayers during the forty days. "Of course I did," the man retorted. "What kind of Jew do you think I am? Can it be that after forty days of prayer and psalms and abstaining from idle conversation one does not receive divine inspiration?"

The Baal Shem Tov didn't even need to think about the question. "No," he said, "The teaching is true. It was your practice that was faulty. While you may have uplifted your conversation with other people, you babbled your prayers to God. They became your idle speech."

You are what you say. The quality of your speech reflects the quality of your soul. Idle speech is thoughtless chatter, suggesting a scattered mind. If you wish to improve the latter, improve the former...even and perhaps especially in prayer (Rami Shapiro, Hasidic Tales, p.10).

No single story, teaching, or piece of liturgy conveys the challenge of refining our speech more profoundly than the Kol Nidrei we heard tonight.

From within the sometimes haunting, yet compelling melody, from beneath the Aramaic sounds so surprisingly familiar even though they are neither English or Hebrew, emerges this prayer that we all share: Forgive our unfulfilled promises! Free us from the vows we made but could not keep, or chose not to keep! Forget what we said before, don't hold us to it...

Sometimes we immediately regret the words that seem to just spill from our mouths. "If you do that again, I swear I'll..." "I'm never eating there again." "Why do you always..." "Why don't you ever..."

Other times we make promises that we fully consider and intend to keep but later come upon new information that leads us to change our minds.

I remember being a student in Jerusalem during the first Intifada and hearing a certain old military guy on a radio newscast promise to break the bones of every Palestinian boy or girl who so much held a stone in his or her hand in the presence of Israeli soldiers. Yitzchak Rabin became a martyr for the peace movement in Israel.

I remember being in high school and reading an Israeli editorial about massacres in two Palestinian refugee camps in Southern Lebanon and later another old military guy defending his calls in the field. Ariel Sharon

became another leader who gave his best years in office to the peace movement.

We make promises, and things change. Then what?

Just weeks ago we witnessed the power of words as the Pope quoted a 16th century Catholic assessment of Islam in what he called an attempt to engender dialogue. The aftermath has been absolutely fascinating.

Many Muslims called for apology while others called for violence. Liberals criticized the Pope for his audacity in citing such a provocative text while Conservatives claimed that anybody should be able to say anything without his life being threatened.

Who's right? Who's wrong? What are the bounds of free speech? I don't know the answers to these questions. But I do know that I want to live in a world in which it is safe to ask questions and voice dissent, even when the questions are rooted in ignorance and the dissent belongs only to a small percentage of the population at large.

I know that people can say one thing and mean something else. Sometimes we hide our true sentiments. Sometimes our point of view shifts and we draw new conclusions.

The Baal Shem Tov taught that a person is born with a fixed number of words to speak. When they are spoken, the person dies. Imagine if this teaching was true. We'd definitely spend our words more carefully, wouldn't we?

I doubt that the Baal Shem Tov is correct, or even intends his teaching to be taken literally. But I do think it is a brilliant way to convey the value we ought to place on the words we speak.

Imagine the peace Yitzchak Rabin and Ariel Sharon had they not each carried the baggage of a recorded historical litany of hate and callous speech directed at the Palestinian people.

Imagine the peace and joy we could experience in our homes and with our loved ones if we didn't carry recordings of the harsh words we exchanged in the past.

Kol Nidrei calls us to forgive words that were said, and either not meant from the start or no longer applicable because we've changed our minds and our perspective over time and with new information. Kol Nidrei calls us to let go and start anew.

But I think we can do better and that we ought to strive to do better. Rabbi Rami Shapiro composed the following vow as a guide for spiritual practice based on the 9th commandment, Do bear false witness:

Aware of the suffering caused by wrongful speech and shallow listening, I vow to cultivate compassionate speech and attentive listening.

I vow to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, compassion, justice and hope.

I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain or to share information that will cause needless harm.

I vow not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure and to cultivate an open mind.

I will refrain from uttering words that cause needless division or discord, and I will make every effort to reconcile differences peacefully and compassionately and resolve all conflicts however small (Minyan, p. 52).

Some people say that talk is cheap. I would suggest that words are incredibly valuable and cheap talk is incredibly hurtful and dangerous to personal relations and the foundation of trust that is necessary for living in a free and egalitarian community.

I don't know if forty days of refraining from idle speech will clear enough space for divine inspiration or revelation to take place. I haven't yet succeeded in completing the practice.

I do know, though, that refraining from idle speech, from the unnecessary filling of space with the sound of my voice, has permitted me to hear others better and to know them better and to love them more deeply.

Ken y'hi ratzon, may we be released from the promises we failed to keep or the vows we chose to forget by words of Kol Nidrei...but better yet, may we cultivate an introspective awareness of the words we wish to utter and spend them wisely so that on some Yom Kippur eve in the distant future, our need for the Kol Nidrei ceases to exist. Amen.