

Yom Kippur Morning

Boker tov and good morning. It is only appropriate that I, as a public speaker, think occasionally about the power of words; and, as I do, I am constantly amazed at how words can change, transform and revolutionize an experience.

As a child, I learned the ditty, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” I don’t remember being taught this saying; it is as if I had been born knowing it. My parents’ explanation was rather simple-whatever anyone said to me couldn’t hurt me. The statements were to be treated as words that would bounce off me as if my parents had created an invisible fence around me. “Only physical violence could hurt me,” they said. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names would never hurt me.”

As a teen, I learned about emotional and psychological abuse. I understood that extreme cruelty of one’s words could hurt, destroy and break someone’s spirit, if not also their bones. Yet it wasn’t until I started to study Jewish theology that I really began to understand a theological underpinning to how words affect us as a people.

You see, in Judaism words are the foundation of all creation, the building blocks that lead to construction sites, scaffolding and walls. Gd spoke and the world came into being. GD didn’t imagine; GD didn’t go shopping; and Gd didn’t draw. Instead, Gd spoke. The Rabbis applied this concept of Gd’s creation through speaking to all of human life. Not only did the words that Gd spoke create reality; our words do too. You can see this in many different arenas, but one is the emphasis on crimes of the tongue in the Yom Kippur liturgy. In today’s *Ashamnu*, we will admit that “we have defamed,” “told lies,” “improperly advised,” and “covered up the truth.” In the prayer *al Chet*, which we recited last night, we asked for forgiveness for the sin of “foolish speech,” “utterance of the lips,” and “gossip or evil tongue.” We do not just sin with our body and our actions; but we also sin with our words, our speech and our talk.

The irony is that there are so many different ways to sin with words-so many ways of hurting one another. I would like to focus on two today: One is creating a neatly packaged sound bite and the other is choosing to be silent.

First, sound bites. Commercials were my first introduction to how a community can say as little as possible and in as short a time as possible. And throughout the years I have definitely enjoyed some commercials significantly more than others. This last year, one of my all-time favorite commercials is AT&T’s with little kids, even though I am not a consumer of its product. The little kids are sitting around Beck Bennet; and I don’t know how he gets them to say what they say, how many hours of taping for a one minute commercial, or if it is scripted or pure improvisation. But they are the most precious, funny commercials around. I mean who wouldn’t like a puppy brother or an island made of candy. I am embarrassed to admit I even went on YouTube to make sure I hadn’t missed any. And then for a reason I cannot really explain, I started to listen to the messages embedded in the words-the words behind the cute children and the adorable oversized guy sitting on the little chair. Here are the messages that I heard: faster is better, bigger is better, and doing two things at once is better. After all it is not complicated. Faster, bigger, multi-tasking is better. What a great use of five words. After all, who wouldn’t be upset when the turtle is run over by the big car?

These five small words reflect how technology is redefining, transforming and recreating our society. Sound bites, short quips that describe, reinforce and create new realities. By the time I have paused to think of all the things that are better done slowly, with less, and need intense concentration, we have moved on to ten new ideas; and I am truly a dinosaur left in the

dust. What if that sound bite needed to be expanded on, qualified, challenged, or even slightly altered? What if sound bites are not always the best use of our words?

As I grow older and slower, I wonder what happens if you don't talk or type fast enough to communicate in 140 characters or less. What happens if I have feelings, thoughts and ideas that require incubation, refinement and sharing over time to create the world that I hope to pass on, to the next generation? What happens if our need to think turns into silence? Those of us, who are not fast enough, who are not clever or quick enough become silenced. And of course, not using our words when they are needed is a sin, a sin of omission, a sin of failure to do what one can and must do.

During this last year there were two news stories that were and still are extremely controversial – the trial of George Zimmerman and the school shooting in Newtown; I am sure we may disagree on what happened, who is to blame, and what our appropriate reaction should be. And yet what I hope we will agree on is that our society's silence about complicated issues allows these cases to happen again and again. We must find constructive ways to discuss difficult topics like racism and mental illness in the United States, Maryland, Howard County, and, yes, here at CJC. Racism and Mental illness seem to be an odd partnering of ideas? In fact when you Google each concept, the other rarely comes up. They have different causes, different outcomes, and different manifestations. Really one of the few things they both share is our society's fear to talk honestly about them, not as a sound bite, not for political posturing, but as a true soul searching—what do I feel, not only in my head, but in my muscle memory or, as the Maxwell House Coffee *Haggadah* says, in my entrails? What is my gut reaction that I can't control or explain?

After all, isn't knowing myself what *teshuvah*, meditation and reflection is all about? How do I allow myself to really look at the aspects of my life that frighten me and others? Now don't get me wrong. I know many people here have spent their lives working incredibly hard to eliminate racism in our culture and their own lives.

I know Rouse developed one of the few integrated communities when Maryland really was still horribly segregated and I know many of you came to Columbia to develop a new culture -- one very different from what you experienced earlier in your lives. And I am so grateful that you did. Thank you.

I also know that CJC has a higher rate of therapists, social workers and mental health professionals than almost any other synagogue. Many of you have made it your life's work to help those who battle severe mental illness and their families. And I am so grateful that you did. Thank you.

And yet the work is not done. In fact in many ways the work that needs to be done is a very different kind of work all together. For you see, as President Obama shared, we need to talk to each other, not in sound bites, not in public settings and not quoted for posterity making us afraid to be misunderstood, but rather in true, raw, honest, soul searching ways, that begin to allow us to share, challenge, grow and eventually change. Not flip-flopping or being wishy-washy, but living and growing as individuals and a community that change and mature.

It is amazing how descriptions of both racism and mental illness often incorporate a request for us to break our silence about these two difficult topics. It says on the National Association of Social Works website, "Racism is pervasive in American society and remains a silent code that systematically closes the doors of opportunity to young and old alike." Or Glenn Close wrote, "Yet when it comes to bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress, schizophrenia or depression...we often say nothing." Or as Peggy McIntosh wrote in *White Privilege*, "To

redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silence and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tools here.” Or also as Glenn Close wrote, “the ancient social stigma of psychological illness remains largely intact. Families are loath to talk about it.”

How can we do real *teshuvah*, the kind that takes paragraphs, questions, dialogues, quiet, meditation, relationships, community support and thought, if we hope to continue and eventually advance the conversations? As it is written in, *Risking Connection in Faith Communities*, “To connect effectively with others you must first connect with your inner self.” And I would add, to challenge your inner self, you must enter into dialogue with others.

For the Rabbis studying anything was never a task done in isolation, but rather always shared through speech and dialogue with others; whether at the Shabbat table, in *chevruta* (with study partners,) or at the Rabbi’s feet was irrelevant. What mattered was that people studied with others. One of the questions raised in the Talmud was, “is it more important to study or to do.” Different Wise and famous Rabbis have given different opinions for why doing or studying might be greater. The final conclusion was that studying was greater, because it could lead to doing.

Isn’t it time again to create a personal, communal dialogue-using our words to say painful things, like “I am racist and I am not proud of the fact. I am not even always aware of when or how, but I know I want to become something better and kinder and wiser than I am.” Isn’t it time again to create a personal and communal dialogue like I have close family members who are affected by severe mental illness and this has forever changed my life.”

Isn’t it time again to rise up the unconscious, uncensored truths and use our words to open up our realities to educate each other compassionately and to begin or continue these dialogues here in our religious home?

It is written in *Tzena Ureena*, a Yiddish *Midrash* from the late 1500’s commenting on Lev. 14:1-2, “A person who honors the Torah and uses it to speak words of Torah and Mitzvah will be rewarded.” As progressive Jews, as Reconstructionists, we transvalue/reinterpret the words of Torah and mitzvah to mean a person who honors the tongue by using it to understand Jewish thought, Jewish values, contemporary values and ethics and, thus fusing the Torah and mitzvah together to create a new reality. This person will be rewarded. We will be rewarded.

Now is the time to think globally and talk locally.

Whether or not we think that President Obama should have weighed in after the innocent verdict for George Zimmerman came down, there is at least one thing in his speech that is worth our considering now. “I think it is going to be important for all of us to do some soul-searching. There has been talk about should we convene a conversation on race. I haven’t seen that to be particularly productive when politicians try to organize conversations. They end up being stilted and polarized and folks are locked into the positions they already have. On the other hand, in families and churches (it would have been nice if he had said places of worship but...) and workplaces there’s a possibility that people are a little bit more honest.”

I found this quotation; if you know who said it, please let me know. “One may discount the value of words. After all, they can be neither seen nor touched. However, so it is with the wind, which can be neither seen nor touched. Yet it is capable of destroying entire worlds.” Conversely it is also capable of creating entire worlds. Which are we going to do?

In the Zohar 1:246 it describes how Gd created many worlds without the Torah before creating ours. These previous worlds were perfect and therefore did not need the Torah. Of course, because they were perfect, there also was no need for growth or change. “In these

previous worlds there was no lust, but there was no love either. There was no cruelty, but there was no compassion either. There was perfect satisfaction, but there was no ambition. There was no strife, but no peace. There was no sorrow, but no joy either. Everything was without flaw, but there was no hope of anything better. The real spark of life-freedom, freewill, the opportunity and ability to choose good from evil...the ability to create and the right to fail-these are missing. This world which Gd created using the Torah as a plan is a dynamic world in which every choice we make, makes a difference.”

So in the coming year, let us choose to start again by breaking the silence, inviting speakers, attending their talks, and speaking honestly about what we think and feel. If you are interested in being part of this dialogue, give me a call or email me. Let me know. Whether we live in Sanford, Florida or in Newtown Connecticut, does not matter. What matters is that we need to use our words to create the world that we will be proud to pass on to our children.

Rabbi Tarfon wrote in Chapter Two of *Pirkei Avot*.
“The day is short, the work is great, the laborers (us) are lazy (I might add scared and overwhelmed) but the reward is abundant. It is not incumbent on us to complete the work but neither are we free to abstain from it.”

Now may we begin again. In our own lives, my own life, I have seen the power of people not only trying but also succeeding to transform our community and our country. In the area of mental illness, the research has made huge advances in treatment and medicines. In the area of racism, we have lived to see the first African American Male President. I am so blessed to be alive today instead of just 100 or 200 years ago. Thanks to many of you, we know more, we have ended more problems and created more opportunities. Faster, bigger and multi-tasking might not always be better, but one of the AT&T commercials says, “Better is better.” Whatever we chose to do, I do believe that better is better. May we work to create a better year next year than last year was, because, we were willing to break the silence and to use our words to create sacred relationships, in our sacred space.