

Lishon HaRah – Civility in our Discourse

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A few months ago, at the end of July, I was invited by Senator Ron Wyden to accompany him on an inspection of border facilities in El Paso, Texas and across the border in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. On this trip, the senator brought a few staff members and three Oregonians – an immigration attorney, a pediatrician and a rabbi. I was, of course, the least qualified person to accompany him, but he told me and others that based on his experience at previous boarder trips, he wanted his rabbi with him.

There was much on this trip which broke my heart: the dangling of hope held out with one hand and snatched away with the other, the unwillingness to consider the humanity of those fleeing their homes and seeking safety here, the mind-numbing bureaucracy designed to discourage any application for asylum. But one of the elements which struck me the most was the language used. I walked away with the phrase I heard over and over again – at the ICE facilities, at the border crossing: “We’re full,” they repeated. “We’re full.” As if the entire country was a lifeboat which had exceeded its capacity. Before hearing your story or considering your circumstances, the hand goes up: “There’s no room for you here. We’re full.”

This statement was an echo of one which President Trump used in April, both in tweets and in public appearances, including before a Jewish audience which included descendants of Holocaust survivors “Our system’s full; our country’s full,” the President said “You can’t come in. Our country is full.”¹ Aside from the fact that demographers and economists agree that far from being “full” one of the biggest problems facing our future in the United States is an aging population and declining birthrates creating underpopulated cities and towns;² but the phrase itself carries echoes of the late 1930’s in which Jews attempting to escape the rising Nazi terror were turned away from America’s shores. “We’re full,” they heard – at least to Jews. This was popular sentiment at the time. Close to 70% of Americans surveyed in 1938 supported turning away what they called “political refugees” from Germany seeking asylum in the United States. A smaller number, but still a majority, supported turning away Jewish refugee children.³ “We’re full” carried life and death consequences for our own people – perhaps our own family members.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/06/us/politics/trump-jews-border-asylum.html?module=inline>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/09/upshot/trump-america-full-or-emptying.html>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/17/what-americans-thought-of-jewish-refugees-on-the-eve-of-world-war-ii/>

Jews in that era were considered to be invaders. Unclean. Unwelcome. To us, the country was “full.”

Language has real consequences. The way we talk about an issue changes the way we think about it. Pollsters understand this well and carefully construct the wording of surveys to advance or avoid a particular outcome. Politicians know it even better.

A week after my experience in El Paso, there was a horrible act of domestic terror in that city, a shooter opened fire in a Walmart store targeting and killing people he perceived to be Hispanic. Less than 20 minutes earlier a manifesto, alleged to come from the shooter, appeared online.⁴ It spoke of a “Hispanic invasion of Texas” as a motivation for the attack. The use of the word “invasion” when referring to immigrants is an echo of language used by the President on numerous occasions, including in campaign ads on social media.⁵ But that image of an immigrant invasion did not begin with this President or even in Washington, DC. According to a recent article in the Atlantic⁶, it was first used right here on the West Coast, as an anti-immigrant screed against the Chinese a century and a half ago. In August of 1873, the San Francisco Chronicle ran a notice for a new book:

THE CHINESE INVASION! They Are Coming, 900,000 Strong.
What are you going to do about it? Nations of the earth take warning.”

The advertised book was titled:

The Chinese Invasion: revealing the habits, manners and customs of the Chinese, political, social and religious, on the Pacific coast, coming in contact with the free and enlightened citizens of America.

Needless to say, no such invasion took place and the history of the American West has more to say about discrimination against Chinese than it does about the establishment of the “heathen Chinese despotism,” that the book warned of. Fear-evoking words like “invasion” and “infestation” led to political action, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first significant law ever to ban an entire national group from entering the country.

Words like these have a de-humanizing effect, painting others as insects, rodents or other kinds of dangerous pests; a disease to be eradicated or shielded from. It is the same kind of language used in Europe in the early to mid 20th Century, to describe Jews.

It is painful to hear these words take root again today.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/us/patrick-crusius-el-paso-shooter-manifesto.html>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/05/trump-internet-facebook-ads-racism-immigrant-invasion>

⁶ <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/08/trump-immigrant-invasion-language-origins/595579/>

On October 27, we are going to hear from NY Times columnist Bret Stephens as our 2019 Oseran Lecturer here in the Temple. Stephens recently got into a highly publicized controversy over a tweet by a professor at George Washington University which compared him to a bedbug infesting the New York Times. Some say he overreacted, but Stephens, who is Jewish⁷, noted in a subsequent column that the language of infestation precisely mirrors that used by a Polish bystander watching the Warsaw ghetto burn “The bedbugs are on fire. The Germans are doing a great job,”⁸ the observer said.

As I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, hateful anti-Semitic words have come from the Right and also the Left. These amplify ancient tropes depicting Jews as disloyal or worse. These words are hurtful, even if the speaker does not know their history.

A few weeks ago, on the first day of religious school, I spoke to our high school students about the rabbinic concept of *Lishon HaRah* – literally the “evil tongue.” Usually translated and described as “gossip,” I explained to the teens that our sages gave the term far more weight than that. Maimonides points out that in the Mishnah the rabbis identify *Lishon HaRah* as equal to all the worst possible sins.⁹ The Talmud goes on to say that “evil speech kills three people: The person who said it, the person who hears it, and the person who it was said about. And the person who hears it,” the Talmud proclaims, “more so than the person who says it.”¹⁰

Lishon HaRah – Evil speech – corrupts those who hear it. And how easy it is to hear it and spread it, especially in this age of social media.

Avoiding *Lishon HaRah*, I told the teens, is also considered to be among the most difficult commandments. Not asking for forgiveness, not honoring your parents, not fasting on Yom Kippur. Gossip, destructive speech, harmful rhetoric is all very difficult to separate yourself from. The more you hear, or read in a tweet, the more you become inured to it. Hate speech becomes normalized. Words come easily and words you hear become echoed in the words you speak. This is why the rabbis consider that the person who hears *Lishon HaRah* is more truly destroyed than the person who speaks it. Hearing “evil speech,” we take in those ideas and give them credence and weight we normally would not. They came from a “credible” source, or worse they just become part of the background noise. I reminded our teens that the language of disparagement comes not only from their peers, but from the adults around them. It comes from social media. It comes, sadly, from political speech. All sides are guilty of it. But I have never seen a time worse than this. And just this past week, accusatory words like “spy,” “coup,”

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bret_Stephens

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/30/opinion/world-war-ii-anniversary.html?searchResultPosition=5>

⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, Human Dispositions, 7:3 quoting *Yerushalmi*, *Peah* 1:1

¹⁰ B. Talmud, *Arakhin* 15b

“treason” and “civil war” have been thrown out into the public¹¹. I am constantly amazed, I said in speaking to our teens a few weeks ago, that people who would never consider littering are perfectly comfortable talking trash. And which is more polluting? A dropped piece of paper degrades to dust and disappears, but a dropped word degrades the soul and never goes away. The words of our mouth are the most powerful healers and the most efficient destroyers. We choose. “May the words of my mouth. . .be acceptable to you, O Lord” goes the prayer¹². As we review our year on this Yom Kippur, would we say that our own words have been acceptable to G-d?

And, as I listed to the teens the many ways in which the adult world has failed them – I reminded them that we are about to begin election season. If the past is any indication, all our media is about to be filled with *Lishon HaRah* – words of degradation and disparagement as political opponents proclaim less about their own worthiness than the disqualifications of the other. Some of these statements in recent months have already crossed the line into hate speech, evoking racist, homophobic and antisemitic tropes. And that was *before* the impeachment scandal.

Last week, my colleague and friend, Rev. Dr. Chuck Currie, who is the Director of the Center for Peace and Spirituality at Pacific University, posted a remarkable audio on Facebook. Dr. Currie is a frequent social media and legacy media contributor, often appearing in the New York Times, the LA Times, NPR and Huffington Post. He is also a frequent critic of the President. Last week, he posted an audio of some of the voice mails he has received not so much defending the President but condemning the Rev. Dr. for criticizing him. I listened to the voice mails Currie posted – there is not one I could quote in public. They are obscenity laden and threatening and beyond any measure of acceptability. It reminds me of my own experience, as I have been working with a group of interfaith clergy on promoting a ballot measure to ban certain types of military-style firearms used in highly publicized mass murders and acts of domestic terror. Last year a state lawmaker posted the private phone numbers and home addresses of the 3 chief petitioners of the ballot measure, including me, to a Facebook group of gun rights supporters¹³. Soon my cell phone was ringing incessantly with outraged callers. My voice mail filled up with the same kinds of obscene and hate-filled messages as my colleague posted. I began to look very carefully at the cars passing by our home. I found that while the voice mails were bad, the Facebook posts were worse – including some who posted nasty things on the Temple’s Facebook page. I am grateful to those congregants who spontaneously put positive reviews of

¹¹ https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/us/politics/trump-treason-impeachment.html?te=1&nl=impeachment-briefing&emc=edit_ib_20191002?campaign_id=140&instance_id=12797&segment_id=17529&user_id=2878be2ad1efc4deff4f7626b15e66da®i_id=270699

¹² B. Talmud Berakhot 17a, quoting Ps. 19:15

¹³ <https://www.oregonlive.com/politics/2018/03/republican-lawmaker-posts-info.html>

Temple on Facebook to counter and outweigh the hate. But the worst messages were reserved for Facebook Messenger where for some reason people felt free to send me the most hate-filled messages. And, sadly, some of the worst of those were from people who claimed to be Jewish. These were not people arguing the finer points of Second Amendments rights – these were people spewing hate and crazy conspiracy theories, or dark images of impending Fascist government takeover which can only be stopped by a fully armed citizenry. The assault on me culminated with a group posting a “Michael Z. Cahana Memorial Page” featuring little more than Holocaust imagery and the statement that I evidently didn’t learn about the Shoah in “yeshiva¹⁴.” I eventually noted in a public statement¹⁴ that as the son of survivor of Auschwitz, I was probably more aware of the lessons of the Shoah than the website’s publisher.

We can do better than that. We are better than that. We should expect more and better from those who debate policy issues. We should expect more and better from those who would be our leaders, who would represent us, than to engage in *Lishon HaRah*. We can expect more of ourselves than to repeat, or retweet, or amplify them. This is not about politics, this is not about policy – this is about the coarsening of our society. Judaism encourages disagreement and strongly held positions. At the same time, I have always argued that we can disagree without being disagreeable.

Words, of course, can also be the most powerful healer. I think we can each recall someone whose words touched you, healed you, helped you to become better. I recall my early days as a rabbi and the great insecurity which strikes me even today when called upon to preach. I remember my father’s words of wisdom and appreciation as he bolstered my shaky confidence. He used to refer to me as “the 21st Century Rabbi,” an acknowledgement that while I may have done things differently, preached differently than he would, he believed my approach was what was needed for the times. In fact just last week I picked up a shofar in my office which he had given me long ago. I had forgotten that he had had it inscribed with my name and the words “21st Century Rabbi.” I am glad he never saw those gun activists’ posts, although he endured the same and worse when he spoke up and preached about Civil Rights in the 1960’s. My father has been gone for 15 years, but his words of comfort sustain me still. I am sure you have someone in your life whose words gave you the uplift you needed when you needed it.

How much more powerful are healing words than hating words. How much better our society would be if we could use words to bind rather than rend.

My father defined the heights of the 20th Century rabbinate, as he experienced it in America, as the teachings of Gandhi and King – the response to violence with non-violence. Not passive or ignoring or “turning the other cheek” but active public peaceableness. Perhaps we need more

¹⁴ https://www.oregonlive.com/politics/2018/10/ceasefire_or_blasts_page_on_or.html

of this as we approach the second decade of the 21st Century: the response to hateful dehumanizing speech must be thoughtful, uplifting, humanizing speech. Finding the humanity in the “other” is a discipline. Firing off hate speech is the antithesis of the Jewish way.

In a recent and unusual statement signed by the leaders of all the Reform Movement’s organizations – from the Union for Reform Judaism to the Central Conference of American Rabbis to the American Conference of Cantors – there was a powerful message about our responsibility to uphold ethical speech:

The words of the High Holiday prayer book are written in the collective, reminding us that responsibility for misdeeds and their correction lies with the community as much as the individual. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel . . . observed that while “Some are guilty; all are responsible.” Indeed, decency knows no party. Whether we are Republicans, Democrats, or Independents, conservatives, moderates, or liberals, we all bear the responsibility to uphold the norms of ethical speech and moral conduct that have made our democracy great. . . Speech that demeans and demonizes creates an atmosphere of permission for further intolerance. Hate speech is hate speech, and hate speech leads all too easily to hate crimes. We all have roles to play in stemming the spread of hate, and elected officials tasked with pursuing the common good. . . have a special obligation to uplift, rather than diminish, the public they serve.¹⁵

As I sat in a city on our Southern Border this summer, I gazed into the faces of those who have been called “invaders” and “parasites.” I heard their stories and their fears. However we feel about the complicated issue of immigration and the long brokenness of our system, I pray that we can also see the humanity in the individuals, and not the labels that are used for them. I pray that we can be thoughtful in our language and in the language and imagery our words evoke. On this and all the issues which confront or bedevil us, “may the words of our mouths. . . be acceptable to you, O Lord.”

As we begin this most sacred time on our Jewish calendar, as we look at our deeds throughout this past year and vow to make a change, may we strive to make our words acceptable to G-d.

Amen.

¹⁵ <https://urj.org/blog/2019/09/03/reform-jewish-movement-leadership-statement-we-must-all-expect-more-president-united>