

Baruch She Amar-Rosh Hashana, Day 2, 2023- 5784, Rabbi Andrea Merow

Perhaps you know the story of Saul Goldstein, the Jewish grandfather, walking on the beach with his grandson when a huge wave crashed down, sweeping the boy into the depths of the ocean. Saul dropped to his knees and prayed for the return of his grandson. "Please God, I have always been a good person a loving grandfather, please return my grandson to me." Just as he is finishing his prayer, another huge wave crashes back returning the young boy to his grandfather's side. Saul begins to cry and hug his grandson. He is overcome with joy and gratitude. Then he pauses and looks once more at his grandson, then looks up at the heavens and yells, "He had a hat!"

And in that moment the mood changes. What should have been a time of joy and gratitude are eclipsed by disappointment, exasperation and the sentiment of not getting it all. Instead of holding happiness, Saul dwells on the oys and not the joys. What should have been a moment of sweetness becomes sour. And while we may like sour pickles, no one likes sour grapes.

What does it do to our souls when we lean into the negative? How does it make you feel when there is always something not right *enough*, or never good enough? On this New Year can we choose to lean more fully into places of gratitude and feelings of blessing? Can we choose to not dwell on the negative?

Of course, this is a fictional story, and it made you laugh; but the tale illustrates a central message of our holiday season: Our Words Matter. They change how a situation feels. Our words create worlds.

Our Rosh Hashana liturgy reads,

היום הרת עולם – Today is the birthday of the world. We chant these words 3 times in our service after hearing the sound of the Shofar and before the words, *Areshet S'fateynu ye'erav lefanecha*: May the words on our lips be pleasing to you God. But we can stop at the first two words. May the words on our lips be pleasing.

Because life is challenging – and our families, friend groups, and communities should be places that are (pause) less hard.

Today is the birthday of the world. According to legend the first day of creation occurred on the 25th day of Elul, five days before Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is then the sixth day of creation and is the birthday

Baruch she amar, v'haya haOlam. Blessed is The One who spoke, and then the world became. For 900 years this phrase has anchored our daily morning service. Words are so important that God actually brings the world into being through speech. It is also "Blessed is anyone who speaks

and brings a world into being." God shared with us the gift of speech; we create social realities with our speech.

God says let there be light and there is light. And God responds with: *Ki Tov* – It is Good. God models gratitude, *ki tov* – it is good. Later in the creation story we even here that it is very good. This is the crucial value of *hakarat HaTov* – recognizing and naming the good. Can we make it our spiritual practice to name and honor what is good?

Could we imagine that only a few days into creation the world was not yet perfect? There were no couples in love, long summer days, or double lattes – it wasn't all perfect, but God speaks the words, "it is very good." **God responds in speech to what is present, not to what is missing.**

What if every time we speak we model God's actions of creation by creating good spaces and good feelings with our words?

Our words create our atmosphere with loved ones, at work, when speaking about our values – also known as speaking about politics, or in the sacred shared space of this holy community. Our families and our community should be known for its kind words and warm atmosphere. Each time we speak it is our choice, to love our neighbor as ourselves, or not, to lift someone's spirit, or bring someone down.

Our world seems to have an overabundance of harshness and criticism. Do you want to live in that place? I don't. I want us to create worlds built on the enduring values of loving-kindness and shalom.

On Yom Kippur we will enumerate the sins of *Lashon HaRa*, speaking badly about people. It can also mean language that is destructive to people or to a community.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l wonders IF there is *Lashon HaRa*, is there also *Lashon Tov* – good speech? "If it is a sin to speak badly about people, or to throw negativity into the world, is it a mitzvah to speak the good and to bring in positivity? Yes, we can engage in *Lashon Tov*. We can use language to encourage, empathize, motivate and inspire. ¹

This does not mean that every time we speak we need to engage in saccharin-like positivity. We do have obligations to speak and seek truth, and to give rebuke, but only under certain circumstances. We are responsible for the effects our words, our attitude, our energy and our tone have on others.

Our Tradition teaches that we should only bring rebuke if the person is able to hear us, if it is done gently, privately, and in the context of a relationship based on respect and even love. We can learn a lesson from the methods of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, or DBT: Before we

¹ Rabbi Jonathon Sacks (Covenant and Conversation, Metzora, 5771)

criticize we must ask ourselves, how will what I say be heard? Will it affect change? And we must search ourselves first: Do I always search for what is wrong? Can I find something good? In the Talmud, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria says: I would be surprised if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to rebuke correctly, without embarrassing the person they are rebuking.² Rav Chaim Luzzato, 18th Century scholar teaches that if we cannot give a rebuke in a dignified and kind way that will be heard, then it is "a mitzva to not say anything at all."³ Sometimes it is a mitzva to say nothing. We do not always need to be right, sometimes for the sake of shalom we can let it go. Our words should build worlds, not work to destroy them.

Can we create environments of love and kindness? Or will we choose to create worlds of strife and consternation, of it never being good enough? There are and will be places this year where there may be ugly rhetoric, not fueled by love: our country will enter an election cycle; Israel is struggling with its internal identity. Negative speech, constantly expressing what is not right, abounds and brings our relationships and communities down. Negative speech does not lead to bridges of understanding. Can we instead create worlds from kind words, and a sense that we can let things go and be OK enough with those around us. Can things be *Tov*? good, or good enough?

There is new dram com on TV, well HULU, called the Bear. In season two Richie, the main character, goes for a week of training at a high end restaurant. Richie is weathered, cynical and rough around the edges. At the start, he does not do well with the idea that every single customer interaction is crucial. He learns that words, kind intentions and mood create the experience. He is transformed and sees that his actions and words, even a few seconds of interchange radically change the diner's experience.

Ask the customer service trainers at Nordstrom or Disney and they will tell you the same thing. Every interaction: all of our words, tones and actions creates the experience for others. At Disney University their cast members, not employees, learn to turn "tragic moments into magic moments." Every employee is trained how to talk with customers, well not costumers, but "guests." And the person with the most training isn't the guy running the ride or the woman playing Snow White. The person with the most training is the guy with the broom. Because if you're lost, or if you're looking for a place to eat, or if you're kid gets lost, the guy you're going to ask for help is the guy with the broom. They are trained to treat you like their guest and to help you.

So, I wonder; we know this works in sales, but shouldn't it work in real life as well? How can we serve others with our kind, good words? There is a well-known idea that we are less kind or good to those we love the most because we can let our guard down; but shouldn't the customer service idea, the idea that our words, tone and actions matter even more with those we love, those we work with, and those we create community with? Good customer service should be practiced with everyone we encounter.

² Arachin 16b

³ *Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Mesilat Yesharim 20:14*

Let me leave you with a story: Once upon a time, in a land far away, a monastery had fallen on hard times. It was once part of a great order which, as a result of religious persecution lost all its branches. It was decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left: the Abbot and four others, all of whom were over ninety. It was a dying order.

Deep in the woods surrounding the monastery was a little hut that the Rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used as a getaway to think and be. One day, it occurred to the Abbot to visit the Rabbi and see if he could offer advice that might save the monastery. The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot and commiserated. *"I know how it is, the spirit has gone out of people. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."* The old Rabbi and the old Abbot wept together and spoke quietly of deep things as old friends do.

The time came for the Abbot to leave. They embraced. *"It has been wonderful being with you,"* said the Abbot, *"but I have failed in my purpose for coming. Have you no piece of advice that might save the monastery?"* "the Rabbi responded, *"I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that maybe the Messiah is one of you."*

When the other monks heard the Rabbi's words, they wondered what possible significance they might have. *"The Messiah is one of us? here, at the monastery? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Of course –he has been our leader for so long. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas, who is a holy man. Certainly, he couldn't have meant Brother Elrod – he's so crotchety. But then Elrod is very wise. Surely, he could not have meant Brother Phillip – he's so passive. But then, magically, he's always there when you need him. Of course, he didn't mean me – yet supposing he did? Oh Lord, not me! I couldn't mean that much to you, could I?"* As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to speak to and about each other with extraordinary respect, on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah.

Because the forest in which the monastery was situated was beautiful, people came to visit the monastery, to picnic or to wander along the old paths, most of which led to the old chapel. They sensed the aura of respect that surrounded the five old monks, permeating the atmosphere. They began to come more frequently, bringing their friends, and their friends brought friends. Some of the younger men who came to visit began to engage in conversation with the monks. After a while, one asked if he might join. Then another, and another. Within a few years, the monastery again became a thriving place full of love and respect, filled with kind and caring words.

If we choose, our worlds can also be filled with that aura of love, respect and kindness. This year, can we sometimes choose silence over negativity? Can we use our words with a little more gentleness? Can we find what is good in each other and name it?

Baruch She'amar, v'haya haOlam – Blessed is the One who speaks - each of you – as you speak, should be blessed with *lashon tov*, good, kind speech that create loving worlds among your family, friends, and in this sacred community.