

RABBI'S MESSAGE

A Clean Slate

What a beautiful opportunity the Jewish calendar gives us! Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur encourage us to contemplate ways we can fill the New Year with appreciating blessings rather than denigrating others. I don't know about you, but I can hardly remember having a better feeling about the start of a New Year. Our High Holy Day services were inspiring, not just by the liturgy, the music and the messages; but by the presence of so many people actively engaged in worship and learning. I look into the congregation and see faces that are ready to be filled with a good spirit. The Yom Kippur fast is not about punishment or deprivation. It is about mentally, spiritually and physically emptying ourselves of the *schmutz* we've been carrying around, and let ourselves be filled with goodness.

Between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, several TBT members gathered by the waters to symbolically throw away the past by letting breadcrumbs (a metaphor for our sins) float away. On Yom Kippur afternoon, before the Yizkor service, many experienced a quiet, guided meditation to help us open our hearts. We received marvelous teachings from members Emma Brawn and Brian Eoff that brought ancient writings into modern day learning. And at the end of Yom Kippur, we sang together by the candlelight of *Havdallah*, and then enjoyed a feast of delicious offerings shared by our community. The synagogue felt fuller than it had in three years, and I hope those on Zoom felt well included.

How do we keep connecting to this kind of feeling? One way is to continue to connect with each other. The High Holy Days often seem like a reunion, because so many make it an annual pilgrimage. Friendships build community. Stay connected to those you may have just met, or don't see very often, and who knows? They might become your lifelong friends.

That seems easy and obvious, but with our busy lives, sometimes we forget to make time for friends. Too often, I find myself connecting with someone only when there is a reason; an illness, a death, a *simcha* or a need. One of my best friends from high school used to say to me, when we saw each other as adults, "Don't be a stranger." It's an ironic statement, because in the Torah, kindness toward strangers is mentioned no fewer than *thirty-six times*. But if we don't reach out on a regular basis, we could very well become strangers.

Another way to keep the slate clean is to avoid gossip and speaking ill of others. This can be a real challenge, because many public figures demonstrate an example that makes it seem like chastising others is the only way to communicate. On the contrary, Judaism teaches very strongly that gossip is among the worst activities we can practice. The Talmud says that words that can destroy another human being's character are as harmful as murder. As they say, you can't put toothpaste back in the tube.

The beginning of the year is as good a time as any to review some of the most difficult and important teachings of Judaism. The laws of *lashon ha-rah*, literally, "the bad tongue,"

prevent us from using words to cause harm. According to the Chofetz Chaim Foundation, *lashon ha-rah* is defined as

“The making of a derogatory or damaging remark about someone. The Torah forbids one to denigrate the behavior or character of a person or to make any remark that might cause physical, psychological or financial harm.”

Chofetz Chaim is the name given to Rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen Kagan (1838-1933), who is recognized as a leading authority for the Jewish laws of “*shmira lashan*,” or “guarding the tongue.” We are taught that harmful speech hurts three people: the person who is being talked about; the person who hears the gossip, AND the one who speaks.

While not as famous as The Ten Commandments, the ten rules about *lashon ha-rah* are equally important:

1. Do not speak negatively about another person ***even if it is true and deserved***. (False statements are governed by other laws)
2. Statements that are not actually derogatory, but can ultimately cause someone physical, financial or emotional harm are prohibited.
3. ***Humor*** that is potentially embarrassing or might cause *even the slightest humiliation* is prohibited.
4. Incriminating *yourself* along with negative comments about others is no excuse.
5. These laws are not limited to overt words; hints, body language, winks, rolling eyes and writing can all be harmful.
6. It is also not limited to individuals; speaking negatively about a community and harmful remarks about children are specifically prohibited.
7. Do not denigrate a person’s character to *anyone*, including spouses and family members.
8. Even if the information has already become public knowledge, and there will be no more harm, it is forbidden to repeat it.
9. Repeating gossip, telling one person something that someone else said about him/her, is forbidden because it causes animosity between people.
10. It is forbidden even to ***listen to lashon hara***. If we *accidentally* hear something, we’re not supposed to believe it. We are always supposed to give people the benefit of doubt.

There are, of course, exceptions. If there are facts that we know that could cause someone harm, we are required to speak out, as in cases of warning someone about a potentially harmful business or marriage partner. But even these exceptions must be based on *facts*, rather than rumors or second-hand information.

These rules seem almost impossible to follow strictly. But we *can* be continually conscious of what we say, what we hear, what we repeat and what we allow others to say to us. As modern Jews, we make our own decisions about rituals, like Shabbat observance and dietary laws; but moral codes, such as the laws of *lashon harah*, can be considered even more timeless.

Pirke Avot (Ethics of our Ancestors) teaches, “Who is strong? Those who can control their impulses to do evil.” *Lashon hara* might be one of the most tempting influences around. It’s hard to imagine how much harm we can perpetuate by repeating a rumor, engaging in gossip and assuming that things we hear from others are truthful. Imagine how much good we can do by simply watching our words carefully.

We’ve begun the New Year with a clean slate. While we’ll never be perfect, let’s think about the harm we can avoid *and* the good we can do by understanding the power of what we say, and how we react to what we hear.

L’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon