

Tikkun Olam Chavurah, Kol Nidre 5787

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In the beginning, we are told, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was waste and wildness, with darkness on the face of the ocean depths. The breath of God was hovering upon the water's face. God said, "Let there be light." And there was light. God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided between the light and darkness. And God called light "day"; and darkness God called "night." And there was evening; there was morning: One day.

God simply said the words, and the light appeared. And then days two through six: God spoke and everything in the heavens and the earth simply appeared. And by the seventh day, God was so exhausted from the week's work, that God needed an entire day to rest. A lot of power in God's words and so tiring that six days of a few sentences each day wore out even someone as powerful as God.

At the start of tonight's service, we heard the words spoken in our name, in front of Torah, three times so it is valid according to Jewish law: Kol Nidre ve'esarey u'shevu'ey vaharamey vekonamey vekinusey... All vows, and formulas of prohibition, and declarations of taboo, and promises of abstinence, and names of God, and pledges...and oaths, whatever we have sworn but not upheld, from the last Yom Kippur to this Yom Kippur, these oaths shall not be binding oaths.

We say these words (or Otter and Dan and Rebecca say them on our behalf) and it is true. The words themselves bring about a change in the universe; suddenly we start the year free and clear. Centuries after we stopped taking these words literally, we stopped making vows using god's name that bind us, the words have nevertheless retained their power. Such is the power of words.

A few weeks after the October 7th Hamas attack, I was sitting in a faculty meeting at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College where I served as the Director of Student Life, and where, while that is no longer true, I still teach with much pleasure (an amazing group of students).

"How are the students doing?" the then president asked. I answered that since Israel has been killing so many Gazans, many students are deeply upset. There was quiet in the room. I felt all eyes on me, and I wasn't sure why there was so much uncomfortable tension in the room. "I found your words hurtful," she said, and when I looked perplexed, she added, "that you didn't say that the Hamas attack and the killing of so many Israelis was painful, but just the deeds of the

Israelis.” And as I looked around the room, I saw others nodding in agreement. My words mattered, and for many, were not only wrong but hurtful.

Yet, my words were exactly what I meant to say.

A couple weeks ago, Yuli Novak, the executive director of B’Tselem, an Israeli human rights organization that closely tracks all Israeli actions in Gaza and the West Bank wrote this in the New York Times, “About a year ago, at B’Tselem, the Israeli human rights organization I lead, we realized we were struggling to explain what was happening in the West Bank. The problem was not a lack of information. Quite the opposite: By then, for almost three years, day after day, we had documented homes being burned and demolished, communities being expelled, children being shot and killed, roads being blocked and humiliating assertions of Jewish supremacy by settlers and by the Israeli government alike. Forms of violence once relatively rare in the West Bank, including aerial bombardment, large-scale destruction of residential areas and mass displacement, had become routine.

The question we kept returning to was how to find words for a reality no single incident could capture. We eventually realized that describing the larger system required listening to two political languages at once. These are not parallel vocabularies. One is the language the Israeli system uses to explain and legitimize what it does; the other is the language of the Palestinian people living under Israeli rule, describing what that rule does to their lives. Political language does more than describe reality. It shapes what people can justify and what they can ignore. For Palestinians living under Israeli rule and for many observers around the world, blocked roads, demolished homes, expulsions and violence are elements of blatantly unjust domination. Israeli political language can make that same reality seem necessary, even natural.”

I remember giving my first Yom Kippur talk in my first congregation after I was ordained, and I talked about words – how the words we would use when we talked to each other mattered. How I hoped we would be kind and considerate and honest. How I knew how hurtful our word could be and that I hoped ours would not be. But what I didn’t fully internalize at the time was how deeply and profoundly political our words could be. And how all our words have the power, real power, to create so much in the world but also to be used as weapons against us. God modeled the need to take a full day off after using nothing but words during the first six days; we need to learn from God, learn the power and energy and magnitude and deep significance of our words.

In that first congregation that I served, one Shabbat after I had been there a few years, I decided to try an experiment. It was a Conservative synagogue in a small town and not very used to change. The fact that I did not generally use male God-language was new for people; but using she and her to refer to God? That was unheard of! So I decided to try it. I did all the ‘right things’ in preparation; I had people on board and in support; I let everyone know it was happening; I gave time for us to all debrief after the service; I didn’t change the Hebrew, just the English; and I was clear that this was a one-time experiment for now. I thought the service went well, and then the after-service discussion started. Quickly, one man stood up and almost screaming exclaimed “Why do we need to do this!? Don’t you know that we don’t know if God is male or female?! It doesn’t matter how we refer to God, so it should just stay as it is!! It doesn’t matter!!” He was red in the face and looked as if he was about to run out the door. I listened, and quietly said, “If it doesn’t matter, then why are you so upset?” He murmured something and sat down.

I thought about this a lot and tried to talk with him about it, but to no avail. But I realized at that moment that it did matter – a lot. It matters how we refer to God if we see God as the ultimate example of power in the world and it matters how we refer to each other. Our language matters.

When people are mispronounced by people who don’t even begin to try to learn the right way to refer to someone, the way that respects who they are, it’s clear that our words matter deeply.

When my partner Betsy is referred to as my friend because someone introducing her is uncomfortable, who we are is being undermined. Of course, she is my friend – but our relationship is something different from just friendship. Using a different word because of someone else’s discomfort means that our relationship is being insulted. Words matter. And when it happens repeatedly, the seemingly small act of word shifting or mis-pronouncing leads to pain, to queer people questioning ourselves and our relationships, and so much more.

In the news of late has been the story of the rapper Macklemore who was removed from Ed Sheeran’s music tour after he said the words, “Free Palestine” and sang his protest song “Hind’s Hall”, about Palestinian justice demonstrators at Columbia who occupied a building and named it after Hind Raja, a Palestinian six-year-old killed by the Israeli military. After the show, Macklemore said, “I said “Free Palestine.” I want those words to be loud and clear, so that people all the way in Gaza to the occupied West Bank know that we have not forgotten about them.” The Israeli American Council, a conservative pro-Israel organization, demanded that

Sheeran remove Macklemore from the rest of the tour, claiming his actions raised questions over “Where the line should be drawn when an opening act uses a global concert platform to advance a one-sided political agenda. As someone who went to many concerts in the late 1960’s and 1970’s, I cannot remember a concert that did not protest the killing in the Viet Nam war and the inequities of racism here in the United States. Song after song and countless words were spoken nightly honestly claiming that the war in Viet Nam was just murder by another name. And the concerts kept happening and the words grew more powerful – and finally had an impact on ending the war itself. There were complaints; there were even television shows taken off the air because their words were too accurate and painful; but they did not stop and they kept having impact. Words matter – and matter at every level.

B’Tselem continues, “Many Israelis recoil at the term “settler colonialism.” That reaction is not accidental. Israeli political language has taught us to hear the term as a denial of Jewish history and belonging. Jewish historical, religious and cultural ties to this land are real, as is the long history of persecution and violence against Jews in many parts of the world. None of that changes the fact that exclusive Jewish sovereignty was built through Palestinian dispossession. The politics have shifted over time, but the underlying logic has remained the same: Israel has preserved a political order that places Jews above Palestinians in rights, power and control over the land.” We know this and we can and should use the language that accurately describes what is and was true.

“There’s a whole political language that Israel uses: “initiating friction” meaning deliberately creating confrontations with Palestinian residents over their land, often through violence and intimidation, until communities are worn down and people leave; “shaping operations” describing physically remaking the landscape, including uprooting thousands of olive trees that sustain Palestinian livelihoods; “Encouraging emigration” casts fleeing intimidation and violence as a voluntary choice, and of course, “total victory,” a phrase that became central to Israeli political discourse during the assault on Gaza and was widely embraced as a national goal.

For Palestinians, the reality behind these phrases is concrete: Restrictions and attacks close in from every direction. The road to work can be blocked. An armed settler can enter your land. A family member can be arrested.”

In the report B'Tselem has written, we tried to read these political languages together. The word we settled on to describe what these seemingly separate acts add up to is “elimination.” The logic of elimination

And we are told not to use the word ‘genocide’ to describe what is clearly a genocide by every legal, international definition of the word. Or to use the word “apartheid state” to use the words that accurately describe the state.

Not using these words lets Israel stand behind the lie that it is only the current extremist government causing the problem which, of course, will end. It allows people to assume that the Occupation will end and that the Palestinian community will be allowed to live fully. None of this is accurate; it is the words, the language that pushes us to deny what is happening right before our eyes. Palestinian collective life is being destroyed; yet if we don’t say it, can it be really happening?

At every level, we experience the power of words: what we do and do not say to those we love – that it matters if we tell them we love them; that it matters if we use words kindly, thoughtfully, honestly; that it matters if we are intentional and caring in how we talk to everyone in our lives. It matters that we take the risk of using the words we need to share to deepen and more fully build the relationships that are at the heart of our lives. I have heard way too often from someone after a loved one has died how sorry they are that they never talked honestly with them, never expressed their love, or never engaged in the struggles that could have made a difference in how they fully connected or grew a real relationship. Words matter.

And it matters that we refer to God in ways that honestly reflect how we see and experience power. If we care about shifting power in our lives, we need to let ourselves shift the words that are about the ultimate power in the universe. If we don’t use different pronouns, use different ways of broadening the language to include a nonbinary understanding of God, if we aren’t open to expanding images of godliness, life on earth will be slower to change because we will not have taken in a new understanding. Words matter.

And words matter in every way we look at our larger world – whether in how we refer to immigrants to our country or words that may disturb some and make some of our relationships more difficult in how we refer to Israel’s actions, or any other language that means taking risks;

that means pushing ourselves and others to see things differently. Words matter. And on this Kol Nidre night, we make a commitment to ourselves and our community to take the words we use seriously and to be open to taking the risks we need to to change the world.