

## Power of Words

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I love magic. I love that, after speaking the magic words *abracadabra*, a magician can pull a rabbit out of a hat, make something disappear, or move the card chosen by a volunteer from the middle of a deck of cards to the top. I was surprised to learn that those power words, *abracadabra*, have Aramaic origins, the language of the Jews of Palestine and Babylonia, the language in which much of our sacred text, the Talmud, is written. Literally, the early Aramaic words were *Avara* (I will create) and *k'dvara* (as I speak).

This simple magical phrase names a deep truth: Words have tremendous power . . . the power to create and to destroy . . . the power to inspire, engage, and bring hope . . . and the power to hurt, bring pain, and challenge our faith. And one could say that, especially as of late, words have led to a questioning of truth and to confusion.

Indeed, words have power—and we learn this throughout Jewish tradition, even in our Torah portion this week, *Devarim*, which begins with the words *Ele Ha-Devarim*, “these are the words.” These are the words which Moses shared with our ancestors, the final words Moses imparted before the Israelites persevered into the land of Canaan, the final words which Moses spoke before he died. And surely, these words inspired and engaged, brought hope, and were a call for our

ancestors to be better and do better than the generations that had come before them. What is challenging, though, is that the words Moses shared with the People are not entirely true. His depictions of events occurring in prior books of our Jewish narrative are contradictory.

I understand that people often see history differently. I understand that one's perception is also one's reality. But I don't understand when truth is stretched, when floods of statements undermine each other.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century biblical commentator Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, also known as the Ramchal, viewed his explication of Scripture, especially his linguistic interpretations, as a full and true expression of the plain sense of the text. "The reasons for these variations show the precious glory of understanding the plain sense." Luzzatto also believed that his interpretations of the plain sense were the only truths in the interpretation of the text, for "there is one plain sense, as there is one Truth." On the basis of this position, anyone who disagreed with him was challenging both the plain sense and the truth.

Luzzatto ascribed the position of those who disagreed with him to their fear of the truth. For him, the path of Truth was a most narrow one, "for there is one Truth and its way is very narrow, leaving no room to diverge right or left. He who lands on the fine line will find it, and he who looks hither and thither will go astray."

In Luzzatto's opinion, in order to avoid entering controversy with those who go astray, on one hand, or agreeing with their mistaken views, on the other, the Sages extended the methods of interpretation. Thus, any view can be accepted, and one Bible scholar may not criticize another, "for does not the plain sense approach present difficulties, forcing them to prove to the one who is in error the flaws in his views, or else to agree with him in all his erroneous opinions?"

Therefore, "together they advised to broaden the way, so that one sees communities of learned people gathering together, each opening his mouth and revealing his own ideas."

And there are times when this surely is the case—when one's own ideas and interpretations are necessary, valid, and can bring us together. Yet, there are also times when one's own ideas and interpretations can tear us apart, create conflict, and further divide us from each other.

And yes, in most places, conflict resolution strategies can diffuse the situation, but there are indeed times when there is no resolution to said conflict. As much as I am a proponent of social media, I also know that through social media one's ideas and opinions are more accessible than ever before. While we tend to choose friends (whether in real life or on social media) whose opinions are similar to ours, inevitably there is one person who holds a differing view. In the current political climate, sometimes the bonds of friendship have been broken. It's now easy and simple to "block" one's opinions on social media, simultaneously remaining "friends" with someone but limiting what they can see from you and what they can comment on, or to end friendships without any explanations.

I know that this tension has created family conflict during Thanksgiving and the holidays, leading to family policies of “no politics” during gatherings.

“Life and death are in the power of the tongue,” declared our ancestors in Proverbs 18:21. Furthermore, they went on to say, “In the multitude of words, there is no lack of sin” (Proverbs 19:10), because they realized how easy it is to talk our way into trouble.

Words certainly don’t seem to be a vehicle for sanctity anymore, but rather instruments of hatred—tools to mislead, deceive, and misinform. As we enter the “post-truth” society, a time in which facts are indiscernible from fiction, we become careless with our words.

So what can we do? While one can hope that we can change opinions, we can’t always count on that to be the case. But what we can do is choose when we will take a meaningful stand. Simply put, we can ask ourselves, “Is it worth it?” when we are called to take action. I have said time and again that we are a religion of deed rather than creed, of action rather than belief, and I think that this extends to words as well. While words have great power, what we do with those words may have even greater power.

I can’t tell you what taking a meaningful stand looks like for you, as this is very individual. I can’t even tell you when to speak out or what to speak out about. But I can tell you to be careful with your words. Be careful with your stories. Think

about the values that you hold dear and determine how those values guide your words, actions, and decisions. The whole world is a narrow bridge—one we must walk on carefully, one filled with words that can strengthen or break that bridge. But we need not be afraid. We can choose for that narrow bridge to widen, for that narrow bridge to be one of hope, fullness, and peace.

*Abracadabra.* Words can create. What magic will you do?

Shabbat Shalom.