

**We have desecrated the sanctity of words; turning them into bullets.**

Rabbi Shay Piron (former Minister of Education in Israel), Sept. 27, 2020.

Translated from Hebrew: Rabbi Emanuel Ben-David



Yom Kippur evening opens with our plea for forgiveness from God for the words we have spread throughout the thin air this past year. Those words have the ability to connect or just generate alienation. The sanctity of our words has been contaminated and the value of their meaning degraded. The tone of conversation everywhere – in the social media, in the Government corridors, in shops and businesses, as well as in our own living rooms – is terrible; the decision and action to change it is in our own hands.

The renowned Israeli author, David Grossman, wrote in one of his books: “Why aren’t people required to have a license to use certain words, just as one needs a license to carry a concealed weapon?” Words have turned into bullets. They injure, and sometimes even kill. Some of the worst sins of the human race were driven by words, yet some of them are magical and inspiring. An old Chinese proverb says: “open your eyes quickly, and your mouth very slowly”.

It is the evening of Yom Kippur. Most Israelis will participate in the Kol Nidrei Prayer, that opens the holy day. The purpose of this prayer is one: to ask God to forgive us for the words, the promises, the oaths, the vows, and the excommunications (casting out) that we have spread into the space of our community. Our words define us and clarify to others who we are; they tell our story.

**Words have a crucial and central role in our lives: on one hand we belittle them. However, on the other hand we are hurt by them.**

There is verbal air pollution across all boundaries. It is a rough, rude, violent, arrogant and cynical verbiage. It is a tone of conversation that grows thistles rather than the blossom of flowers. Words fashion the space of interaction between persons. Words create connection and words create alienation. We have contaminated the sanctity of the word, we have given up its might, and we’ve degraded its meaning.

Yom Kippur enables us to erase all our false promises, oaths, vows, curses and excommunications. It invites us to decide that our tone of our conversation will change. It is not just “them” the leaders; it is not just “out there” in the Parliament (called in Israel The Knesset); it is not just in the social networks and the media. This terrible kind of conversation is also present within oneself, in one’s living room and around the family’s dining table. It meets me on the road, in the bank and the local supermarket.

Yet, the choice of words is mostly mine and your decision. It is WE, and not THEY, that start to talk differently as of now. We are trying not to fowl our tongue. Not to raise our

voice. Not to curse. Not to excommunicate. Not to catalog people into categories. We can do that by following five steps:

1. The first step in this Tikkun (repair) process depends on the recognition of the situation, and changing our own awareness. Whatever the mouth is used to uttering, the heart gets used to believing in. Let us try to start understanding the scope of the damage. The devastating meaning of the quality and form of our conversation. I must stop “throwing words.” I need to understand that “I didn’t mean it” and “don’t take me seriously” are expressions that should be taken out of my vocabulary.
2. The second step in this Tikkun protocol involves a tough decision: there are words that I will never again say. Every week during the next several months, I will decide on a single word that I will never say again. A word that has no room in my Nefesh, soul. A word that will never exit my mouth again.
3. The third step is building the substitute. I am building myself a gym of good words. I will train myself to use good words. As the words of the Israeli poem Ya’akov Gil-ad proclaimed: “Every now and then it is hard, but most of the times, a good word does me only good, and immediately. Only one good word, maybe two – not more than that.”
4. The fourth step, probably the most difficult of them all, is to appreciate the power of silence, of being quiet. Speech is a humane action, and silence is Divine, because silence has strength, restraint and control. Speech is lavish and wasteful, silence is precise. Moreover, speech takes its power and becomes meaningful only when it is accented by the opposite background of the “no-noise” of silence. Slowly, very slowly, we learn that it is possible to communicate, to converse, through silence.
5. The fifth step is putting everything in proportion. We must stop using pompous, “big” words when dealing with small things. Sometimes a small, insignificant things triggers us...creates in us an disproportionate response, pulls our tongue to use bombastic words: why, what for, what happened that justified the use of those kind of words?

Each word has a value. “My brother” is a word that should be used with my brother and him only. Not everyone I meet in the street is my brother. “My essence of life” is a deep and profound expression that is worth whispering in the ears of my loved one. All conjugations of the word LOVE are sacred. Unique. I am not desecrating them anymore.

“Life and death are in the hand of the tongue”, is not just a biblical verse. It is a fact. The fire of the harsh words already burns the fringes of our society. If we will not extinguish this fire, the house will burn down. This time, not from the bullets of weapons, but from the gunpowder of words.