

Speaking with intention

The Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 served several purposes for the biblical writer. It can be read as an origin story for the development of different languages of the Ancient Near East. Ugaritic, Sumerian and Egyptian were some of the verbal currency of the time. More pointedly, the story acted as a polemic against the paganism of the Babylonians. In their cultic practices, towers were built into the sky to reach the gates of the gods. Here it is thought to be a particular tower, Esagila, built and dedicated to the god Marduk. The story mocks the hubris of “Bavel” in thinking that the tall towers could access the gods. Moreover, it likely mocks the Babylonian god Marduk whose murderous fight with the goddess Tiamat is the basis for the creation of the world in Babylonian mythology. This is in sharp contradistinction to the creation story of the Israelites where the biblical writer has the creation of the world done by using words by in Genesis, “and God said . . .” A comment on words using the wordplay of the story. The idea that towers could reach or affect the heavenly sphere is not limited to the ancient world. Indeed as we look at our own urban landscapes, we may wonder if perhaps Ecclesiastes was right when he said there is nothing new under the sun.

But apart from the interesting agenda of the biblical writer, the story is important to the consideration of respectful listening addressed last week. How can I be certain that what I heard is what you said, or turning to the speaker, more specifically, that what you said is what you meant? The reciprocal promise for cultivating active listening is the promise to cultivate mindful, meaningful and deliberate articulation. The Bible uses the verb “va-yomer”, “and he said,” 1948 times. There was clearly a lot of speaking happening. How many times might we use such a verb to recount our interactions? In the Tower of Babel story, the people went from complete understanding of, and cooperation with, one another to being unable to communicate. No amount of real listening could bridge that gap. It is worthwhile to consider how speaking and hearing have inexorably moved further apart from each other. In our time, we have more means of communication available to us than at any time in history, and yet a decreasing ability to understand each other. Mindful communication cannot be done in 140 characters or less.

Nor can it be done without paying careful attention to the express language we use. Our lexicon has many categories of words, some helpful, some not. There are those that simply have lost their meaning; those that may change cultural lanes and broaden their meaning; as well as those that

are too primed for harm or insult that they have become toxic and cannot be used. We have witnessed the use of words that sow division and hatred too easily and readily; words that alienate and denigrate; and words that wound. We can change our vocabulary and verbal habits to follow the Buddhist wisdom, “better than a thousand hollow words, is one word that brings peace.”

Among the hollow words are those that are so over-used they no longer retain any significant meaning. We all use them, adding to the problem. Indeed the Huffington Post published a list of such words, and hearing them may bring a rueful smile of recognition. They include “literally;” “totally;” “basically;” “really;” and “amazing;” as well as “honestly.” The last one, or its verbal relative “to be honest” should not even need to be said as honesty is an expected presupposition of our discourse. Conscious and deliberate attention to our words can correct these verbal tics and result in clearer meaning of what we say.

There are still other words that have originated in one context and may be usefully appropriated into another. We see this for example with Yiddish words that have become commonplace in our culture. We need look no further than bagels at Dunkin’ Donuts for evidence of successful integration of language formerly only considered Jewish, and by implication

very successful integration of Jews into American culture. Other words may be considered too engrained in their origin to be successfully transported. Words such as “blessing;” “ritual;” or even “sacred” are often seen as irretrievably religious and therefore inappropriate for secular usage. But I propose the opposite. Blessings are those “beneficial things for which one is grateful.” I can and do readily acknowledge the blessings in my life: my children, my grandchildren, my friends and my community. Rituals are those acts and practices that help us mark time, life passages and communal occasions. Without the meaning we vest in them, rituals are empty. But when they have meaning, they can be exquisite. Even the word “sacred” can appropriately be applied to the texts of our tradition, from the perspective of Humanistic Jews. Not because they are divinely written, but because they are beyond editing, though not beyond our re-interpretation.

Our ability to find acceptable meaning in words or to move them from one context to another has limits, making some words simply off-limits. Sadly, there are vile words of hatred and prejudice that cannot be rehabilitated. They act as verbal assaults on the individuals affected as well as our collective sense of well-being. In these instances, we must be committed to their containment, and pledge to counter words of division

with words of healing; words of prejudice with words of understanding;
words of wounds with words of compassion.

The sorts of words that should be in abundance are words of kindness, of love, of forgiveness. These are words of connection and understanding. Elie Wiesel said, “words sometimes, in moments of grace, attain the quality of deeds.” As such, they cannot lose their meaning through repeated and frequent use. Nor do they need to be reclaimed from another’s construction in order to be used with integrity. They cannot act to wound or pierce the heart. Yet despite all that such words have going for them, we often fail to use them. Perhaps we assume that another knows how we feel; or perhaps we find them superfluous and do not give them voice. But these words deserve frequent vocalization. The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, “kindness in words creates confidence. Kindness in thinking creates profoundness. Kindness in giving creates love.” It begins with words.

The words that invoke the most difficulty are those of atonement and forgiveness. Two phrases of three words each, “I am sorry; I forgive you” hold the enormous promise of emotional freedom. When said, out loud, with complete sincerity, they can release us from the burden of grudges and the weight of past interactions. They can bridge the gap or perhaps the chasm, which prompted their necessity. If we have grown immune to the

toll those things take on us, and they indeed take a toll, the words are harder to formulate. If we have yet to even understand what that toll is, the words are still harder to find. Today is our annual search for these words. Whether we find them, or if found, whether we use them, is up to us. Any inability to communicate and understand each other as in the Tower of Babel story comes from us, not from a punishing deity. Let us support one another in the search. Let us use our sense of hearing to actively and respectfully listen to what we need to say to one another, especially at this time of year. And let us use our words to express our gratitude, acknowledge our blessings and heal the rifts in our community. It is our hope that in the narratives of our lives, va-yomer, “each says” close to two thousand times in whatever span we measure, words of comfort, words of love, words of peace.