

Yom Kippur Day Sermon – 2009

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Introduction

The contemporary debate over good manners and what constitutes disrespectful speech usually elicits sighs and groans, and especially from those who lament the decay of morality and civility in the contemporary world. How many times have I heard an exasperated parent or grandparent exclaim, “If I spoke to my father the way that this child speaks? I can’t even begin to describe the consequences that I would face beginning with a slap on my head!”

How we speak to each other, a perennial subject, and one that often provokes intense criticism and unfavorable intergenerational comparisons. Yet, when it comes to public speech, the opposite seems to be true, in that most people appear to believe that things have improved since the old days. What we tend to forget, however, is that in ante-bellum America, for example, dueling, fisticuffs, and threats of bodily harm were not unusual occurrences, even in the halls of Congress. In 1854, southern congressman Preston Brooks savagely beat Northern Senator Charles Sumner in the halls of Congress as tensions rose over the expansion of slavery related to the Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854. Or how about the morning of February 15, 1798, when pandemonium broke out on the floor of the United States House of Representatives. Federalist representative Roger Griswold of Connecticut confronted colleague Mathew Lyon and cursed him as a scoundrel. Griswold pounded the Vermont Republican’s head and shoulders with a thick, hickory walking stick. One has to think carefully before assuming that earlier generations were much more respectful in public speech than we are today.”

Still, it is obvious that over the past few weeks, pundits and media personalities have been steering us towards a debate on civility in public life, and while I have no wish to dwell heavily on our local congressman and his outburst during the president’s recent address to Congress, nevertheless, we cannot sidestep entirely the question of whether or not people are still capable of speaking to one another today with civility and respect.

Sociologists and historians may want to chime in to this topic with regard to American history and public discourse. From a religious viewpoint, the power of words can heal or destroy people. Whether we are speaking about debate or just one to one communication, Judaism is quite concerned about the ability of people to err in the way they communicate with other individuals. Our tradition has a lot to say about gossip, slander, and embarrassing people with harsh language. The rabbis also provided guidance about how best to conduct debate in the halls of the ancient academies of learning. And they preserved examples of how even one scholarly debate erupted into a full scale brawl.

I am not convinced that our society has regressed to the point where we have completely lost respect and civility for each other in public life. What is profoundly different about communication today is that we have so much more opportunity through technology to commit transgressions of speech. In that regard I am convinced that the ethics and standards of respectful speech has not caught up with the unbridled freedom to say anything we want in so many mediums that are available to us today. We certainly have freedom of speech but we have not yet arrived at a national consensus over what constitutes responsible speech.

Judaism teaches us to reflect carefully upon those words before we speak, to assess lapses of speech that may have compromised our own integrity and, in turn, may have violated divine laws that respect the dignity of another human being. Our tradition teaches us that Yom Kippur will not atone for us or that God will not forgive us until we settle our accounts with those whom we have offended. Errors of speech rate near the top on the top ten list of most common transgressions. Tonight we confessed sins against God and against our fellow human beings that originate from caustic and abusive speech. My main point is that public or private speech have codes of ethics and laws in the religious and secular domain which demand us to be thoughtful and distinguish between what expressing our passionate views and understanding the impact of those words upon the person we are addressing.

First Point:

If there is one lesson that we have recently learned, it is that it is not only what a person says, but from where the person speaks that impacts their standing in the community. The institutions of government, such as the congress have rules about what a member may and may not say. Courtrooms also have strict rules, definite boundaries and consequences which are enforced by the judiciary towards lawyers, litigants and the audience. Even secular places, like courthouses, for example, possess a kind of sanctity that is reflected in their architecture and their ambience, and we commonly respond with feelings of respect, and maybe even a little bit of awe.

We in Jewish life did not possess such imposing structures except for the Temple in Jerusalem. It may surprise us to learn, however, that in the rabbinical academies of ancient times our otherwise exemplary sages occasionally succumbed to their emotions, and even to the point of anarchy. In one episode the rabbis broke into a passionate argument about some rabbis who violated a canon law of behavior in the rabbinical academy. What is that? Whenever a rabbi would argue a point of Jewish law, the sage would quote a source including the name of the person who said it to bolster their point. The situation that erupted over one who refused to quote a source had two rabbis so agitated at each other, that in the bedlam which ensued the rabbis in question began tearing a Torah apart. One rabbi, who witnessed the episode exclaimed, "I shall be surprised if this synagogue is not converted into a shrine for idolatry." According to our tradition that is exactly what happened.

There are other stories about rabbis fighting with each other over quoting sources properly. They even traced this kind of problem back to Joshua who quite often quoted the law without attributing it to Moses.

The other side of this issue takes us to the House of Hillel, a scholarly school of rabbis, who debated the school of Shammai. Rabbinical Judaism has one hundred and sixty five cases of debates between the two schools. Hillel took the lenient and more compassionate side of a question of Jewish law. Shammai, on the other hand, practiced the stricter interpretation of Jewish law.

One source shows the Jewish way for how we are supposed to deal with the proper etiquette of scholarly debate. In one case God listens to the arguments of both sides and in typical Jewish fashion, God says, "Hillel and Shammai are both correct and consistent with my teaching." Then

God pauses and says, “But I decide by supporting Hillel rather than Shammai.” Why? “God says that Hillel triumphs because of the courtesy they showed to the school of Shammai. The Hillel school advanced the opinions of Shammai before they discussed their own views. That respect for the other opinion was the deciding factor for why God sided with Hillel.

We have heard the worst and the best of Jewish practices of public debate. People are allowed to question and challenge the opinions of each other. Yet, when the issue becomes the person and not the issue of law itself then there is a breakdown in civility.

Finally this kind of breakdown had severe repercussions when it came to the Roman expulsion of the Jews in the first century of the Common Era. The texts of our tradition remind us that when Jewish civility broke down, the entire country imploded. For that reason, the rabbis said that the 2nd Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed because Israel was engaged in baseless hatred which weakened them to the occupying Roman forces.

This is the reason why people connect grossly inappropriate behavior in the leadership of the nation to a breakdown of the country as a whole. But behavior inside the halls of government on the floor of Congress has its own sacred laws and cult that make up part of the mystique of our country. Congress is a kind of temple in a secular context. There is blasphemy in those halls of government just as there is profane behavior in rabbinical seminaries. Yet the most explosive transgression is when we turn against ourselves and lose complete perspective of the big picture. When we abandon the moral high ground from which we claim the respect due to the office of elected official, that is when a society begins to turn against itself.

Point Two

Now that we have some historical perspective about how even the best of us are vulnerable to the passions of debate, it is time that we focus our attention upon our own holy place. We have a brand new building. It is the opportunity that comes rarely, maybe once in a lifetime. We have put our hearts and souls into raising the funds and building a wonderful structure that we should be proud of.

This is a wonderful congregation embodying a warmth of spirit that is critical for a healthy congregation. At the same time, this is an opportune moment to remind ourselves that just as we hope to renew our selves in a new edifice, we should also be mindful of the charge to renew and reaffirm our most important values. What that means is that we too should have certain codes of conduct that instruct us about behavior which we should avoid. If we believe that a temple is holy, then let us and every synagogue highlight those kinds of values that we affirm and those which we will not tolerate.

I have developed a Code of Conduct and set of cherished values for effective synagogue life.

First, we should not engage in any expressions of gossip or slander of another human being.

Second, we should not listen to it either.

Third, we should not engage in behavior that embarrasses or denigrates another human being.

Fourth, knowing that disputes arise outside of temple, the sanctuary of this congregation and its worship services are neutral grounds. We will not carry on our disagreements inside the temple and let them impact our privilege and responsibility to attend worship services.

Five we will not be silent in the face of injustice both inside and outside of our congregation.

Now, in addition to these cautionary rules, what are the values we really should cherish?

One, God is present in the life of a synagogue.

Two, every person is created in the image of God.

Three, people make mistakes and the challenge of our faith is to make tikkun olam, to repair ourselves and the world around us.

Four, we extend ourselves to make and maintain peaceful relations with everyone in the congregation.

Five, we will do everything in our power to face and resolve all conflicts with the result of teshuvah, Tzedakah and tephillah as means to move forward from conflict to reconciliation.

I am sure one could adapt these values into any religious community or organization. We are on public view not only because we are the only full service congregation in the Low Country, but because there are opportunities today for Jews to affiliate with other congregations in the area as well as non-Jewish organizations for Jews to nourish their spiritual needs. That is part of the new reality in American religious life.

Point Three and Conclusion

Therefore, when someone says something hurtful and shows disrespect then there should be afforded to them the opportunity to acknowledge their mistake, demonstrate an understanding why it was a mistake and rededicate themselves not to repeat it again. All this started about when one person uttered two words on the floor of the congress during a speech by the president. If there is good that comes from the episode, then let it be that we could all grow wiser regarding the way we watch what we say in public and in private forums.

America's history of legislative violence is well known. However, we have moved forward from the times of duels and other forms of bitter personal conflict, and today we generally try to preserve the honor of our institutions and those who represent us. Of course, the world presents us with other kinds of threats, and media saturation is such that just about any word, however carelessly uttered, can be blown up until it becomes a public scandal. My point is, however, we still have to be careful about what we say and how we say it. Judaism teaches us to respect the persons we debate, even when – or especially when – we oppose their views. Jewish values adjure us to take the moral high ground and focuses on issues and not personalities in the debate.

Judaism is no less vulnerable to lapses of civil behavior. I am sure there have been some major battles in Israel's Parliament, the Knesset. The stories of our tradition reveal that ancient sages

did not have a spotless record of debate either. Judaism teaches us to respect the debate even when we oppose the person and to respect the person even when we argue against them in the debate.

All synagogue communities need to be acutely mindful not only of taking the moral high ground, but also of creating a welcoming spirit and minimizing the amount of politically divisive behavior that tends to attract too much attention. Staying away from gossip and slander and other forms of hurtful behavior guarantees a strong and healthy temple. As we finish building the edifice, it is time for us to secure the spiritual beams and infrastructure for the kind of environment we want people to experience here at Temple.

The bottom line is that we all say things at times that we end up regretting down the line. Where we speak the words, and to whom we address our remarks let alone what words we actually speak, all become different ways for us to err in judgment. Whether we are talking to a President, a spouse, a child, friend or relative, colleague or neighbor, what is important to remember is distinguishing between what we meant to say versus how we made them feel about themselves after we spoke to them.

We read in the High Holy Day Prayer book,

“Help me then O God on this sacred Day of Atonement: to banish from myself whatever is mean, ugly callous, cruel, stubborn, or otherwise unworthy of a being created in Your image. Purify me, revive me, uplift me. Forgive my past, and lead me into the future, resolved to be Your servant.” (Gates of Repentance p. 326)

Maybe the best reminder about civility comes in the silent meditation on Shabbat where we read, “Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech.”