

PARASHAT EMOR 5774  
HAPPY BIRTHDAY ISRAEL:  
THE POWER OF THE WORD

Rabbi Nancy Morris

Sermon For

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# Happy Birthday Israel

I'm not a great believer in Facebook. It is partly because I feel very profoundly that most people, including my "friends" are ultimately not that interested in what I had for dinner or where I've been on holiday. I also still feel passionately that I would like to maintain and safeguard some sort of privacy and have control over what personal, intimate facts Facebook knows about me and feels free to spread far and wide. However, as a complete hypocrite, I suppose, I occasionally like to keep up with what other people are posting. One post I read this week was particularly striking and amusing to me. It was one of those visual jokes with a photo of a poster containing an illustration of an elderly lady knitting. It read "Let's eat Grandma." Underneath, it read "Let's eat, Grandma," followed by an exclamation saying "Punctuation saves lives." I liked it because, although a bit silly, at its heart was an acknowledgement of the power of language – which is such a throwback to our current age of instant texting and Instagram which thrive in a culture where real communication, speech and language have broken down to a large extent.

Today as we stand on the cusp of celebrating Israel's 66<sup>th</sup> birthday – which should be a cause for joy and celebration, the news was full of the breakdown of the peace talks brokered by John Kerry. There was probably never much hope for a real will on either side to make those talks a success, but it was still sad and disappointing to really come face to face with how much intransigence there is, and how far we really are from any sort of peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. On the other hand, one of the analyses I read was quite heartening in a way. One of the reasons, it said, for the lack of strong will on the Israeli side is that its economy is in such a good place. Its high-tech sector is booming and there is no outright war or violence between the two sides at present. Because of the growth and economic strength, Israel has no great incentive to reach a deal that could lead to political instability, economic disruption or violent backlash. I suppose these are some things to celebrate as Israel approaches its 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary in a few days.

It was fascinating, though, as the talks broke down, the news focused yet again on use of language. Kerry, obviously disappointed by the outcome had made some impolitic statements about Israel, saying that it risked becoming "an apartheid state". After much anger erupted on the Israeli side and from major Jewish and Israel advocacy groups in the United States about the comments, Kerry at first denied it. But one would have thought that these days, in the age of recording and constant surveillance, it is futile to deny words that one has uttered. Ultimately, he even used the recording metaphor to kind-of apologize for his comments, saying, "If I could rewind the tape, I would have chosen a different word to describe my firm belief that the only way in the long term to have a Jewish state and two nations and two peoples living side by side in peace and security is through a two-state solution."

It is almost cliché to reiterate once again how important words and one's speech are in Jewish tradition. In every service, upon ending the Amidah, we read the words based on Psalm 34, "who is the person who desires life?" "Keep your tongue from causing harm and your lips from telling lies." One's words are the very basis of life – a good life, a long life. The idea of this silent meditation at the end of the Amidah, is, as our Siddur states, an invocation of God's help and support to maintain integrity between one's inner and outer life. That is, if we think righteously, we cannot utter wounding, violent or

hurtful words. Our bad or violent words are a reflection of our violent, wounding and hurtful thoughts and intentions.

Every one knows the old saying, “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” But equally, we probably all know that it is not true. We remember verbal abuse far longer and more poignantly than physical attacks. At least I think I do – and I don’t think I’m alone. We are living in a visual age, an age of instant communication with symbols and numbers and three-letter acronyms substituting for proper speech, an age where language is breaking down, and where people no longer understand the need and importance of proper grammar or punctuation. Nevertheless, Jewish tradition still understands that words are dangerous. If they weren’t, Facebook, Google, the government, the NSA wouldn’t be monitoring everything we say.

In a fascinating Devar Torah by Prof. Rachel Adler, she discusses how fundamentally the Torah, particularly the portion we read today, understood the power of words and language. At the end of *Emor*, in the section we have read, there is a very disturbing incident. In the heat of a fight, a man curses God and is stoned to death for blasphemy. We did not read the full incident, but reading it through in its entirety, is quite shocking, even repulsive. We might even think that the violence described and even commanded by God and Moses is something that we shouldn’t find in our holy Torah. As Adler describes it, “The narrative does not give us the man’s motive but presents him as socially marginal; the first fact we are given is that he is of mixed ancestry. His mother is an Israelite, while his father is an Egyptian. Significantly he is never called by name; his name has been erased by the text for his aggression against God’s name. We learn only that a fight broke out in the camp between this man and an Israelite man, and during the fight, the man of mixed ancestry pronounced a curse on God using the Divine Name . He is brought to Moses and kept under guard while Moses consults God. We are given the perpetrator’s mother’s name and lineage: She is Sh’lomit, daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan, the only woman named in the Book of Leviticus.....”Then, God’s verdict is that the.....”The blasphemer is sentenced to be taken outside the camp. In a chilling ritual, all who heard him lay their hands upon his head, transferring their guilt for hearing the blasphemy onto the blasphemer himself..... Then he is stoned to death. God further instructs that anyone, Israelite or stranger, who curses pronouncing the Name *YHVH* shall be put to death.”

One of the mysterious aspects of this narrative is that even though we are quite aware that cursing God is something so terrible that it is punishable by death, the text is not absolutely clear about what it means to blaspheme. Adler looks at the strange root of the verb used in this passage to mean “to curse” and notes its normal usage means piercing or boring a hole in something – the curse, therefore, suggests an actual act of violence. So, as she notes, the blasphemer who.....”tears a hole in the Divine Name, tears a hole in the integrity of all that exists, all that the One Who Is Being called into being.”

The name of the *parashah*, *Emor*, means “Say.” The entire portion is about divine sayings to Moses – sayings about fitness for priesthood, sacred times and festivals, the *mishkan* or tabernacle. The man who utters the blasphemy is the son of Dibri – which can mean “the speaker” in Hebrew. Dibri, the speaker, gives birth to a son who blasphemes – who, in a sense, un-speaks things. Adler writes, “To blaspheme is to abuse language, the building blocks with which God created the universe. To blaspheme is to unspeak the world of meaning that one’s community inhabits, hurtling it toward chaos and unmeaning.” Words are very important in Judaism and in the world of the Torah. In Genesis, God speaks and creates the universe. This is what is picked up on in the John’s

gospel in the New Testament – a very literal understanding of Genesis 1, “in the beginning was the Word.” Words, in our tradition, *matter*. It is of fundamental importance how we use them. Words can create, and words can hurt, abuse or do violence. Words can un-do things.

Unfortunately, we moderns have lost most of our reverence for the name of God – but that is what is at the root of Orthodox insistence on all kinds of verbal games to avoid uttering the tetragrammaton. For them, even euphemisms of the euphemism are inappropriate and the only acceptable way of saying God's name is “Hashem” – *The Name*. It is amusing how Adler herself reverts to Facebook to illustrate just how much of that type of reverence is lost in common parlance. She is right to note how ubiquitous is the use of OMG which is, she says, “a meaningless verbal tic” which no person in their right mind would want used to express their own name.

Despite our obvious recoil at the harsh, violent punishment meted out to the blasphemer in this portion, the fundamental importance of being aware and respectful of words, and of how and what we utter, is beautifully illustrated in *Emor*. When the meaning of words becomes less and less important to us every day, we become more vulnerable and open to lies, deceptions, threats and curses. In the world of the Torah, a curse against God does violence to the very truth and existence of the Divine, and therefore the Truth of being and existence. That is why, in this context, blasphemy is such a heinous act.

The portion of *Emor* illustrates what it is “to say”, and how important it is to understand the impact of our words. It exists in a world where it is heinous to do violence to the divine being that created all, for by so doing, we do violence to all of that divinity's beautiful creation.

So, reflecting upon all that, I conclude that what John Kerry said is not minor, it matters. It was distressing, and it was right to object. He should have paid attention to the accurate meaning of the words he was using. Thank goodness we still live in a world where we can understand that punctuation saves lives, and thanks to our Torah for so wonderfully pointing out to us how important that is. Things are by no means perfect in Israel, but it is not an apartheid state. This Shabbat I think we can, with a clear conscience, utter our words of happy birthday to the state of Israel on this eve of its 66<sup>th</sup> birthday.