

Striving for Sacred Speech that Does Not Harm:

Yom Kippur, Microaggressions and Beyond

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One of my favorite prayers in the siddur is *Baruch Sh'amar*-- blessed is the One who spoke and the world came into being. Speech is the core metaphor for the divine creative power, based in the Genesis account of creation as, God's speech creates the world. This speech is understood in the Jewish mystical tradition as the sustaining energy of creation, giving life to all existence from moment to moment.

This is one pillar of the foundation for the rabbis' deep reverence and love affair with the power of speech. The other pillar is the idea that we are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, teaching us that "each person should be treated with deep respect as a reflection of the Source of all worth."¹

It is difficult to overstate how important ethical speech is in Judaism. The book of Proverbs succinctly says "death and life are in the hands of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21). The Jerusalem Talmud states: there are four great sins...that a person is punished for in this world, and their principal, remains in the form of punishment dealt out to them in the world to come. These four are idolatry, incest, murder, and slander (*lashon hara*), the last of which is as bad as all the other three put together. (Jerusalem Talmud, Peah 1:1)²

Yes, you heard that right. According to one authoritative rabbinic text, slander is as bad as idolatry, incest, and murder put together!

We speak a great deal about tikkun olam at Oseh Shalom, and we put it into practice as well. Usually we talk about it in the context of social action or social justice, but how we speak to each other is an equally important area of tikkun olam.

¹ *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Volume 1, Everyday Living*, David A. Teutsch, page 122

² Rabbi Elliott Dorf, *The Way Into Tikkun Olam* (Repairing the World), page 70. See https://www.sefaria.org/Jerusalem_Talmud_Peah.1.1.38?lang=bi.

Becoming more mindful with our speech can have a big impact. It is an important way we train our minds toward the good. My teacher and mentor at RRC, Rabbi David Teutsch writes: “Our minds follow our speech as much as our speech follows our minds. When we teach ourselves not to do l'shon hara [harmful speech and gossip] in any form, we gradually reshape the way our minds work, bringing us to see the good in others more fully, and making us more deeply aware of the good in our world.”³

Being conscious of not speaking in hurtful ways is a countercultural act, but there is much in Judaism that is counter to contemporary American culture. Norms around speech in our country of course continue to reach new lows, particularly online. I was struck by a recent Atlantic article I read recently titled “How Telling People to Die Became Normal.”⁴

But let's focus some of the words the tradition is placing right before us on this day. In our machzor, there are two separate 22 line acrostic al cheyt confessions,⁵ There are 22 lines for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Of these 44, around 13 lines have to do with speech. In the *vidui* that precedes the al cheyt (*Ashamnu*, etc), around 7 have to do with speech.

In the vidui, the 4th and 5th words are: “*Dibarnu dofi.*”

Dofi means blemish or fault. Rabbi Deborah Orenstein writes: Dibarnu Dofi means “we have spoken slander,” but with the implication that we are looking to find fault and perhaps even relishing the blemishes of others. Even if the blemish or fault we observe in someone is real, we are guilty of *lashon hara* (harmful speech and gossip) when we speak about it to others.⁶

A few words later is “*Chamasnu,*” which means “we have been violent.” This certainly refers to physical violence, but for our purposes, it can prompt us to think: “when have we been violent with our words?” Anyone here have experience with the Nonviolent Communication approach, known as NVC? This approach to speech is a definite way of countering and bringing tikkun to this misdeed.

³ Rabbi David Teutsch, personal communication, 9/14/23.

⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2023/09/internet-troll-motivations/675203/>

⁵ The one we do less commonly out loud at Oseh starts on p. 764, and contains more references to speech. It was part of our silent shacharit Amidah.

⁶ See the middle of this source sheet: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/255454?lang=bi>

Latznu means we have scorned or mocked. *Niatznu* means we have shown contempt. Both of these usually happen through words.

In the Al Cheyt prayer that follows the vidui, we have a line such as “*al cheyt sh’khatanu l’fanecha b’tipshut peh*” for the wrong we’ve done before you in speaking thoughtlessly,” something I’m sure almost all of us have fallen into.

One important category of Jewish speech ethics is called *ona’at devarim*, which literally means “oppression or mistreatment with words.” It is not specifically mentioned by name in the al cheyt or vidui, but can be understood to be addressed with our mentions of the misuse of speech in those prayers.

The rabbis describe *ona’at devarim* in the Mishna, the first major written collection of the Jewish oral tradition, which dates from 200 CE. They write:

Just as there is a prohibition against mistreatment or oppression [*ona’a*] in buying and selling, so is there *ona’a* in words/*devarim*. The mishna then gives examples of verbal mistreatment. **One may not say to a seller: For how much are you selling this item, if one does not wish to purchase it.** One thereby upsets the seller when the deal fails to materialize. The mishna lists other examples: **If one is a baal teshuvah (ie someone who has made amends of earlier misdeeds), another may not say to them: Remember your earlier deeds. If one is the child of converts, another may not say to them: Remember the deeds of your ancestors, as it says in Ex 22:20: “And a convert (the ger) shall you neither mistreat, nor shall you oppress them.”**⁷

I want to shift now to discuss a contemporary issue of *ona’at devarim* which relates to how we use our speech at Oseh Shalom, and that is the issue of what are called “microaggressions.”⁸ In an effort to create a truly inclusive synagogue community in 2023 and one characterized by conscious speech that does not bring harm, Oseh Shalom’s Racial Diversity Equity and Inclusion Committee (RDEI) has been hard at work creating a simple way of educating our community about the topic of microaggressions.

⁷ *Mishna, Bava Metzia* 4:10. Bold is the actual Mishna text, the non-bold words are the Steinsaltz commentary.

⁸ Although Rabbi David Teutsch suggests the categories of *motzi shem ra* and *rechilut* may best fit the contemporary definition of microaggressions.

I want to call your attention to a resource that the committee has created that is hot off the press. It describes what microaggressions are and gives a few common examples. There are copies of this handout that are available for you to take home on the table by the office as you leave Oseh. I'm going to read a little bit from the handout because this topic is sufficiently important that I want us all to have some basic exposure to it.

So, what are microaggressions?

Microaggressions are the everyday slights, insults, put-downs, invalidations, and offensive behaviors that people of marginalized groups experience in daily interactions with generally well-intentioned people who may be unaware of their impact.

Microaggressions are reflections of implicit bias or prejudicial beliefs and attitudes beyond the level of conscious awareness. Social psychologists have studied implicit bias for decades, along with the role it plays in human behavior. Almost any marginalized group can be the object of microaggressions. Racial, gender, LGBTQ+ and disability microaggressions occur daily toward these groups.

Here are some examples:

Jews of Color are often asked how they are Jewish and when or why they converted to Judaism – questions that incorrectly assume that all Jews of Color are converts. They may be told that they don't "look Jewish" or hear statements of surprise, i.e., "I can't believe you know this much about Judaism!"

People with disabilities often encounter false assumptions about what they can or cannot do as a result of their disability; their needs for accommodations aren't always taken into consideration; and they may receive unsolicited, anecdotal "advice" from people without disabilities.

This last point, the unsolicited and thus harmful micro advice, is a direct expression of something else we say in the vidui: "Ye'atznu ra," literally, "we have given bad or harmful advice."

LGBTQ+ Jews are often addressed with incorrect [gender pronouns](#); their partners may be mistaken for blood relatives or platonic friends; they may be asked intimate questions about their personal lives (i.e. “When did you come out?” or “My cousin is trans, too; or “I wouldn’t want a gay spiritual leader.” “See how open we are? We have a gay couple in our congregation.”

Microaggression awareness is an important part of the evolution of speech norms, a way of making the Jewish commitment to sacred speech that does not harm real in our contemporary context.

Let me tell you a short story to give another example. A number of years ago, a young Reconstructionist rabbi started his job in a new Jewish community. After a few weeks on the job, he was leading a Shabbat morning service. This rabbi had a little bit of what you could call *frumkeit*, a certain adherence to traditional Jewish practice, and so before continuing the service with barchu, he tried to surreptitiously count the number of people to see if there was a minyan.

One of the people was a woman of color whom he had met before and knew she was in the process of converting to Judaism, but he did not know if she had completed the process towards becoming Jewish.

So he turned to her in front of the small group and asked something about if she had finished her conversion process. She was the only person he spoke to during the service in this way. She answered and the service continued on uneventfully.

Later, after Shabbat, the rabbi was told that the woman was hurt by being singled out in this way, and another congregant present was uncomfortable with what happened.

The rabbi realized he had made a mistake, and called the woman and profusely apologized. She accepted his apology, but the damage had been done; she had been singled out in a small service, and it felt to her that it would not have happened if she hadn’t been a woman of color.

I tell you this story not just because it is an example of a microaggression, although this is debatable since it is probably a bit larger in its offense than a microaggression.

I tell you this story because that rabbi was me.

In the course of a few seconds, driven by my own frumkeit and not thinking well, I made a major mistake, one that I will remember likely all my life, and probably one that this woman will also remember much of her life. All in a few seconds, with just a few words.

The mistake was of course not intentional, and whether or not this was an expression of unconscious bias, singling someone out publicly in this way, especially a woman of color, was a terrible idea, and a violation of several additional Jewish values, such as not publicly embarrassing someone. But I had definitely committed *ona'at dvarim* as well as *tipshut peh* (speaking thoughtlessly).

Chevre, this is why I'm excited about this work. I believe I'm a good person, and I believe you all are good people, and I'm excited that these kinds of hurtful things don't happen in our community, or if they do happen, repair is quickly sought.

I am excited to say that if you want to go a little deeper in exploring this topic, RDEI committee member Heidi Rhodes will be leading a workshop today at 4 PM in the Teen Lounge.

We don't exactly have a traditional Jewish phrase for healing speech. There is no body of Jewish teaching that discusses what "*lashon hatov*" is, although there are ideas about how to be supportive. We can speak of practicing the "guarding of our speech," *shemirat ha'lashon*." It's just that the tradition seems to have more to say about what not to do than what to do.

However, our microaggressions handout does contain a little bit of useful advice about what can be helpful speech, in the form of "microaffirmations." Here are some examples:

Microaffirmations can include simply telling community members on the margins that you're glad to see them, asking whether they enjoyed the event you both attended, and putting yourself out there both as a resource and as a friend in the community.

It's even as simple as having conversations that don't implicitly focus on their ethnicity, culture, disability status, or gender/sexual identity, or religious affiliation. Microaffirmations also include questioning people when they perform microaggressions, with the intent of helping them understand the impact of their words and to make better choices going forward.

We have this wonderful opportunity to collectively build a space of sacred speech based on Jewish values. This is really quite precious. You can't do this in the same way in your workplace; this is part of what coming together in Jewish sacred community is about.

We are coming together and agreeing that we want to live lives informed by Jewish values, which are values that help us become more conscious, more compassionate people. So together let's build this container of sacred speech, of *shemirat ha'lashon*, at Oseh Shalom.

G'mar chatimah tovah.