

## WE ALL HAVE THE POWER

Shanah tovah! I just love Rosh Hashanah. I love the fact that our community is together. I love the hint of Fall in the air. And I love the sense of promise, the sense that we can turn to a clean page in the book of our life and know that anything is possible.

On a less profound note, for many people in America, that hint of Fall is also a long-awaited sign that the football season has begun. I'm sure that even those of you who don't follow professional football have been following the scandals coming out of the NFL; the physical abuse of women and of children by football players. I'm not giving a sermon about that tonight because it would be much too short: domestic violence is horrific and utterly unacceptable, and those who commit it should be severely punished. And, if you know anyone who is a victim, you have an obligation to do something. If you're not sure what to do, call me. I can help.

So that sermon is over. Tonight I want to suggest that, while most of us never hurt anyone physically, many of us are still guilty of hurting others with our actions and especially with our words. And, without in any way minimizing their severity, physical injuries generally heal, while we may carry the internal scars of verbal cruelty for the rest of our lives.

There are plenty of people who proudly proclaim that they never spank their kids, while thinking nothing of berating and belittling them, and over time damaging them forever.

I saw a quote from a grandmother who said, "I never laid a hand on my children, but I could peel the skin off their back with my tongue." I can't quite figure out if this was said proudly, or with remorse.

We've all heard and probably repeated the phrase "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." Adults generally say it to children when we're trying to get them to ignore another's taunting. But it's just not true. Or, as one wag put it, "whoever said 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me' was an idiot."

King Solomon had it right 3000 years ago when he wrote in the book of Proverbs, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

But tonight, let's give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. Let's assume that, while we may raise our voices to our kids, our words are more often supportive and encouraging, not demeaning or destructive. That's fine.

I would still argue that most of us are guilty of hurting others with our words, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unthinkingly. We fail to do what my 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher used to tell us: Engage your brain before opening your mouth. If we could just remember to do that, we would cause a lot less heartache.

And it's more than that. The words themselves are the vehicle, the weapon we use to make someone else feel bad. If we had the right intention, we could just as easily choose words that come across as a gift. The truth is that, simply with our words, "We all have the power to make each other feel better or worse." – Psychologist Daniel Goleman

With that in mind I'd like to share two stories tonight. The first is from my colleague, Rabbi Bob Alper, from his book, **Thanks. I Needed That**. He writes:

The West London Synagogue is located in a prestigious neighborhood. The outside, like many European synagogues, is nondescript, even hard to find. But the interior is ornate, embracing, impressive, lovely. Dark wood, splendid tapestries, high spaces, history oozing from all sections. And the music: the music on that ordinary Shabbat was, to me, extraordinary.

But my most significant memory was not the worship service, or the sermon, or the building, or the music.

It was the lady with the dog.

I walked in early, and took a seat near the rear so I could admire the elaborate architecture and décor.

I read the service leaflet, and eavesdropped on a very British conversation behind me, with a young woman addressing the older man next to her as "Sir Jacob." People continued to filter in. A few engaged in quiet conversation, while others took their seats in silence.

I felt a presence approaching from behind my aisle seat, and, looking slightly over my shoulder, watched from the corner of my eye as a woman walked abreast of me, continued ahead, and turned left, stepping up onto the riser and moving into the pew directly in front.

Quite elderly, frail, thin, she wore a threadbare cloth coat, a scarf, and a small hat. And she was stooped over. Completely stooped over, her body condemned to nearly a 90-degree angle. Bad osteoporosis, it must have been. She was all alone.

At least that's what I thought, until I saw the plaid leash in her hand, and, following it downward, realized that she was accompanied by a small dog with curly gray hair and a speck of white on its little nose...

He was kind of cute, and, more important, docile. He just sat there, on the floor or on the seat next to his mistress, moving around occasionally, but nary a whimper, not even a proper British "woof."

The old woman couldn't seem to get comfortable, or decide what to do. In the minutes preceding the beginning of the service, she slowly, almost painfully, made her way out of the sanctuary with the dog, then returned, then walked out and back in again. Always to the same seats, in front of me.

And I began to think: this is really strange! I wonder if she's a street person, someone who simply followed the open door into the synagogue, or maybe she's a long-time member, an institution herself, within a venerable institution.

I also thought, how appropriate that this woman should have a little dog to accompany her, to occupy her, to love her. After all, her body is condemned to being so bent. With effort she can look straight ahead; otherwise, her face is downcast. Always looking at the ground. Always looking at the floor. Always looking at ... the loving, liquid little eyes of her adoring puppy.

But still: a dog on Shabbat at the West London Synagogue? Was this right?

Just before the service began, I received my answer. A few people were still filing in as the rabbi, synagogue leaders, and the guest speaker began to emerge from a door behind the high pulpit. Standing down below, in the front of the sanctuary, a dapper looking man, one who seemed very much at home in this place, surveyed the congregation. I saw his eyes stop when he noticed the old lady and her dog. He continued to look at her, and began to walk purposefully in our direction. This will be revealing, I thought. This will certainly be interesting.

I sat quietly, trying to look as if I were minding my own business, pretending to simply await the beginning of the service while, in reality, intensely interested in the little drama about to take place five feet in front of me.

The man marched up the aisle, his face a mask of neutrality, betraying neither anger nor amusement. As he drew closer, he looked continually toward the shabbily dressed old woman and her dog, now nestled beside her on the pew. Finally reaching her, he stopped, paused for a moment, took in the entire scene, and then addressed her with a slight smile: “Why,” he began, “your lipstick is a particularly lovely shade this evening, matching your coat in a most fetching way. You do look quite enchanting!”

He bid her “Good Shabbos,” a good Sabbath, then did an about face, returned to his seat, and the service began.

Choices. For evil or for good. To hurt or to heal, to curse or to bless. These choices are very much in our hands, every day, every single moment of our lives. “We all have the power to make each other feel better or worse.”

A second story:

Many of you have been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. At the very end of the exhibits, just before you exit for the memorial hall, there is a small theater. There, on a continuous loop, you can watch the film *Testimony*, which is made up entirely of short interviews with survivors. If you have ever done that, you may know the face of Gerda Klein. She is a lecturer and author. The HBO documentary about her life, *One Survivor Remembers*, won an Oscar, and she is a recipient of our nation’s highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

She has written several books, and it is from one of them, entitled *A Boring Evening At Home*, that the second story comes.

It’s not a Holocaust story, though it starts out a little bit like one – in fact it takes place more than 20 years before the Holocaust, before Gerda was even born, and it has a happy ending. It’s a story about her father, Julius, and his parents and siblings living in the Polish town of Czortkow during

World War I. And in particular, it is the story of the loss and miraculous reappearance of her grandfather, Reb Weissmann.

At the beginning of WW I this part of Poland was claimed by Austria, so all of the young men, including Julius, had been conscripted into the Austrian army. But by the time this story takes place, Czortkow had been occupied by Russia.

Reb Weissmann was a very pious man who went to synagogue every day. But above all else, he liked to recite his morning prayers while walking in the woods. He loved animals and knew the names of all the flowers and trees. One morning he was walking in the woods as usual, and suddenly he heard frantic twittering. He saw that a baby bird had fallen out of its nest, and the mother bird was hovering over it, unable to get it back. Reb Weissmann knew that if he touched the bird, the mother would reject it. He found a long branch with a forked end, and using that he lifted the little bird into the nest.

At that precise moment a couple of drunk Russian soldiers appeared, saw Reb Weissmann with the forked branch and accused him of being an Austrian spy putting up telephone wires in the trees. It didn't matter of course that he had never seen a telephone in his life. They arrested him and dragged him to court, where he was quickly convicted and sentenced to spend the rest of his life in Siberia.

Reb Weissmann's wife and his sister Anna cried when they said goodbye to him. He took only a small sack in which he put a few clothes along with his *tallit* and his tattered prayer book. They thought they would probably never see or hear from him again.

World War I finally ended. - Reb Weissmann's son Julius – Gerda's father - survived the war, got married and settled in Bielsko, over 700 km from his home town. He had a son named Artur. And shortly after Artur was born, Julius received an incredible telegram saying that Reb Weissmann had returned! One day he simply walked into his house, a thin old man with a very long gray beard. He kissed his family and his beloved books and of course his wife and his sister. All of Julius's brothers, who had also survived and now were living again in Czortkow, were excitedly talking in disbelief of their good fortune that Reb Weissmann had returned. But he did not ask about Julius. Not seeing him in the house with the rest of the family, he

assumed that Julius had been killed in the war, and he did not want to spoil the joy of his homecoming for them by mentioning Julius.

Suddenly his wife jumped up, ran to the bedroom, got Artur's baby pictures, handed them to Grandfather, and said, "Look at your grandson - Julius's son!" When they explained, he broke down and started to cry. And then he talked about his ordeal.

During his banishment in Siberia he ate only vegetables, mostly turnips, and potatoes baked in the ashes of fires, perhaps some fruit when it was in season and available. He did not eat meat because it was not kosher. He talked about how, when the war ended, and 'political' prisoners were released, he had a very, very long journey home. It took more than a year, mostly on foot, sometimes on a peasant's wagon, working for farmers for a little food, never traveling on the Sabbath. It was a miracle but he survived and made it home safely.

As soon as they learned the astounding news of Reb Weissmann's return, Julius and his wife, Helene, made arrangements to travel to Czortkow as quickly as they could. It was a very important occasion. Julius would not just be reunited with his father, Reb Weissmann, but this was also to be the first time that the rest of the family would actually meet his wife and their baby boy Artur. Helene and her mother wanted to make a good impression on the in-laws from Czortkow with their Viennese style cuisine, so they cooked and baked all their specialties, including Linzer tort and other delicacies. These, along with their famed chicken, were packed in boxes and baskets for the train ride to Czortkow.

Helene was nervous about the reception she would get from her new family. She was beautiful and she felt very self-conscious about being more worldly than her in-laws, and even foreign to them in some ways. She did not speak Yiddish fluently, only German, and her upbringing had not been as religiously observant as Julius'.

Helene, elegant in a dark blue dress and white hat, kissed her in-laws hands on her arrival in Czortkow. Then Julius, with Artur in his arms, embraced his father; Reb Weissmann, in turn, greeted his son with the biblical words of Jacob greeting his lost son, Joseph: "I never thought I would see your face again... And God has showed me the face of your son."

After the greetings were completed, Helene in her innocence started unpacking all the delicacies in her mother-in-law's strictly kosher kitchen. She placed some of her mother's succulent chicken on a plate and asked her new father-in-law to sample it. And then, as Gerda's mother tells it: "While the rest of the family looked on in speechless horror, Reb Weissmann gazed at the daughter-in-law he had just met, and then at the chicken.

'That chicken looks very delicious, my dear daughter,' Reb Weissmann intoned. With that, he went to wash his hands, recited a short blessing, broke off a piece of the chicken, and ate it.

Gerda continues: "Even as a young child who did not fully understand the significance of the story, it moved me. Here was my Grandfather, who for years in the loneliness and deprivation of Siberia would not touch meat because it did not meet his rigid kosher standards, yet he would not insult his daughter-in-law's concept of kosher by deeming it to be less worthy than his own."

Isn't that remarkable? Here was a man who endured incredible hardships, who risked his life rather than allow forbidden food to pass his lips. And yet when confronted in his own home with the choice of eating non-kosher meat or hurting his new daughter-in-law, his response was unequivocal.

"We all have the power to make each other feel better or worse."

For me, the most important moment in both of these stories is the pause. The pause before the usher spoke to the old woman. The pause before Reb Weissmann spoke to his daughter in law. Perhaps they had intended to say something else, something less than kind. But because they paused, because they engaged their brains before opening their mouths, their words were not weapons but gifts.

My prayer for all of us as we turn to a clean page in the book of our lives is that we will always be aware of the power of our words. May we remember to pause, and to think before we speak, and may our words come forth as blessings.