

SLANDER

a sermon by Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor

Yom Kippur morning 5770

Congregation Da'at Elohim/Temple of Universal Judaism

From the 8th century on, the evening service for Yom Kippur began with the text the Cantor chanted so beautifully last night -- the Kol Nidre -- a text that nullified vows that we have made in the past and were unable to fulfill. The text of the Kol Nidre has its roots in the Book of Numbers, which tells us that when a person makes a vow to God or swears an oath, that person shall not break the vow, and must do all according to the words of the oath. From ancient times vows and oaths held great power and one is warned repeatedly to consider well the power of the voice.

By the 5th century CE, there was a discussion in the Talmud as to whether or not one could be released from vows. The majority of the rabbis insisted that, on this powerful day of Yom Kippur, individuals be should be given the opportunity to release themselves from vows they were unable to keep in the past year, thus the Kol Nidre was created. Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Jacob Tam, in the 12th century, revised the text of Kol Nidre and changed it to refer to vows that would be made in the future. Rabbi Tam recognized that with the coming Crusades, individuals would be forced to make life-changing vows in order to protect their lives. Certainly by the time of the Inquisition, our Spanish forebears knew that the only way to protect their lives and their faith was to renounce their Judaism publicly and practice their Judaism in secret, while publicly behaving as Christians. For these Marranos, Kol Nidre became the central statement of their faith. By the year 1500, an Ashkenazi cantor in Southwestern Germany voiced the sentiments of the terror-stricken Marranos using a touching melody which expressed the fear, and the horror as well as the hope for salvation. That tune is preserved in the setting our Cantor sang last evening. For almost 500 years that

tune and those words served to release Jews all over the world from the vows they made and could not fulfill.

There is no question that the most powerful characteristic we Jews have is our ability to make clear our thoughts, articulate our emotions and reveal our inmost being by the power of the voice. The great prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah used their voices to rail against the injustices they saw in the community, to challenge their fellow Jews when they believed that they were behaving poorly, to remind the community of the importance of worship and practice and to articulate what they believed God wanted of all of them. The texts of Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea and all the other great prophets of Israel are texts that resonate with the power of the voice. Read them. Drink in their words and you will know that these are not thoughtful musings on the problems of their society -- these are sermons, speeches, orations from which their voices reached out to the ears of the people to stir their souls. The prophets understood the power of the voice for they felt commanded to speak the words of God as they understood God. To this day, the prophet's words still have the power to change and transform, if they reach our ears.

Isaiah's words are what gave rise to our food collection here and his words also challenge us to do more than just afflict our bodies through our fast. He calls out through the centuries to remind us that the affliction of the body through fasting is meaningless unless it is coupled with action and intention to make the world a better place. The power of the voice is remarkable indeed.

To what do we listen today? How is the voice used to move? It sickens me to say that the uplifting, oratorical, homiletic, commanding voices have been silenced or ignored and what has taken hold of most people's attention is the poisonous voice -- the filthy rhetoric of pundits looking to shock and awe their listeners and generate millions of dollars for advertisers who care little for what is said, but much for how many tune in for their daily dose of bile. There are those who are willing to dismiss these violators of

the public trust as simply “entertainers;” but if what they say constitutes entertainment, then snuff films and pornography have become our new gold standard – for their words and their message fall far lower on the scales of taste and propriety.

Rush Limbaugh’s recent use of Nazi imagery when discussing our President’s health care proposals is the height of irresponsibility and taste. His comparisons between Obama and Hitler are sickening – and downright dangerous. Menachem Rosensaft, a friend and a recognized leader in the New York Jewish community, reminded us in an article published last month (August 10, 2009) that in 1995 right-wing Israeli demonstrations opposing any accommodation with the Palestinians featured posters of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin dressed as a Nazi SS officer. This message was certainly received by Yigal Amir, the student who assassinated Rabin in November of 1995.

Limbaugh is not alone in using the Nazi imagery – go back to pictures of the “town-hall” meetings. Swastikas and pictures of Obama with a Hitler moustache abound. And what of the discussion at these town hall meetings? Genteel? Respectful? Didactic? No, they were replays of the projectile vomiting heard daily on talk-radio, Fox news and public-access cable stations.

But what does the public think of Limbaugh? Is he dismissed as the ranting racist lunatic that he is? No – according to a recent Gallup Poll, a plurality of Americans consider Rush Limbaugh to be the main spokesman of the Republican Party. John McCain sees him as the voice of a “significant portion of the conservative movement today.” Mitt Romney says that he listens to him and our old friend Rudy Giuliani has said that “to the extent that Rush Limbaugh energizes the base of the Republican Party, he’s a very valuable and important voice. “ And RNC Chair Michael Steele has said that Rush is a “national conservative leader.” (Also quoted from Rosensaft’s article).

Has any leader of the right denounced this kind of abuse of language and imagery? I only hope that soon they will.

The power of the voice is remarkable indeed. The power of life is in the tongue, we are told by our Jewish sources.

Last week we heard the stirring and disturbing story of the binding of Isaac. At the end of the story we read that Abraham returns to Beer Sheva – but there is no mention of Isaac. The next chapter is called Haya Sarah (the Life of Sarah) but the first words of that story are: “And Sarah died.” There is a rabbinic midrash that tells us that Sarah heard from the local gossip-mongers about the plans Abraham had to sacrifice Isaac – Sarah couldn’t believe it, but Abraham and Isaac left so early in the morning, Sarah could not catch up to them to stop this folly as she heard from the gossipers. After several days, she lifts her eyes to see Abraham returning (remember: the Torah doesn’t say where Isaac is) and she thinks to herself: “They were right – he killed our son!” And there Sarah dies – of a broken heart.

And this is the result of gossip! For the one who publicly embarrasses another individual, Talmudic sources are even harsher. “The one who insults a person in public is morally as guilty as if he/she has shed blood (Baba Metzia 58b) Rabbi Nachman (3rd Cent) says that this is proven biologically as the victim first turns red and the turns white (on rush of blood and the draining of blood). This kind of rhetoric is similar to murder, as one’s public image is destroyed. While we know that President Barak Obama’s constitution is strong enough to withstand the onslaught of incendiary speech, his image becomes tarnished in the minds of those easily swayed.

Rabbinic judgment doesn’t hold much hope for Rush and his minions. In Pirke Avot we learn: The one who insults a person in public loses his share in the world-to-come. (Avot 3:11) And this kind of anger at slanderers and those of evil speech is extended even to those who jokingly harm another’s image or reputation: The one who call a person by a derisive nickname, even if it is

commonly used by others, is guilty of a grave offense. (Baba Metzia 58b)

But perhaps the most telling instruction on this topic comes from the rabbinic commentators on the Torah section which describes M'tzora (loosely translated as Leprosy). The rabbis ponder what this strange disease is and from whence it comes (remember: they were fascinating people, those people of Biblical times, but their knowledge of medical science was not advanced – they firmly believed that if you were sick, it was because of what you did and God's punishment for your act). We learn that the rabbis parsed the word M'tzora as saw it as an abbreviation for 3 words: Motze Sheym Ra – the one who speaks evil – or the one who causes one an evil name – SLANDER. The rabbis teach us that the “Leper” is one who slanders others – and their disease, an affliction of the skin is the punishment for bringing evil upon others. The Slanderer wears his sins on his sleeve – he is ugly on the outside because he is ugly on the inside. The purification from M'tzora begins only by healing the inside – ridding one of the evil tongue – this might lead to a healing on the outside.

Rush, and those whose poisonous vitriol pollute our airways are ugly – inside and out -- and we should say that loud and clear. Our voices should rise above the din as we demand a return to the voice of leadership – voices of respect and thoughtfulness, voices of prophesy and concern for the good of humanity and community.

No, the prophets of old were not sweet and kind – Isaiah would probably not have been much fun in a bar or a party – but he and his ilk spoke the truth with respect for those around them and didn't resort to name-calling or slander to get their point across. And just like the prophets of old, let us speak against the injustices we see and let us start with those who belittle others for their own aggrandizement.

The power of the voice to guide and teach, uplift and embolden is remarkable indeed. The voice can express the dreams and hopes for the future; the voice can express the prayers of the heart and soul; the voice can challenge the wrongs of today and

chart a course for a better tomorrow. But we have seen the power used to crush and insult, to defame and to slander. Let us use our voices to uphold what is right and good. May we soon see a return to civility, respect and dignity as we debate the critical issues of our day.

G'mar chatima tova – may you all be inscribed in the Book of Life for a year of blessing and peace.