

Dvar Torah: Mattot

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Words matter. At the beginning of today's parshah, there is a discussion of the importance of vows. That vows cannot be retracted; they must be kept. That the words we say really do mean something.

We are familiar with other references to vows, perhaps most importantly every year when we say the Kol Nidre, which literally means All Vows: "All vows and oaths we take, all promises and obligations we make to G-d between this Yom Kippur and the next we hereby publicly retract in the event that we should forget them, hereby declare our intention to be absolved of them." We are asking G-d to not hold us to vows to Him that we should not make because we understand, as does G-d, the importance of these words.

Words have great meaning throughout the Torah—G-d *spoke* and the world was created--and in Jewish life in general. Isaac, tricked by Jacob, gives Jacob his blessing to rule the land. When Esau comes along to receive what should have been his blessing, Isaac tells him that it is too late, that he cannot change his blessing, his vow—his word. And this was before You Tube—so it wasn't like anyone else would have known.

And of course there are the Ten Commandments. Commandment 3: You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your G-d. And Commandment 9: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

There is a wonderful line in the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*: “Words, words, they’re all we have to go on.” And that’s true—it’s really what the Torah tells us. We rely on words. Words can heal, but they can harm too.

When children are small, we often tell them that old adage, “Sticks and stones may break your bones but names will never hurt you.” Unfortunately, we now realize that names can hurt you. Children have committed suicide because of persistent verbal assaults, not only spoken but sent virally over the internet. The situation has become so bad that almost every state in this country—with the embarrassing exception of this one and a few others—now has a law on the books regarding bullying.

We live in a world where many adults also seem completely unconcerned about the words they speak and their potential consequences. Do you ever read the comments at the end of the online articles in the *Free Press*? If the story is about Detroit, the comments are often appallingly racist. Or, some of you may have seen a *Free Press* article a few weeks ago about intermarriage in the Jewish community. Many of the blog comments following the online version of that article were pointedly anti-semitic: The Jews have already polluted Christianity and continue to by intermarriage. The Jews already own everything, etc. And keep in mind that these comments are filtered by the paper, so the “really bad ones” aren’t posted.

Just a few weeks ago, a State Senator referred to the President and a woman of Indian descent running for Governor in SC as “ragheads.” A State Senator!

A few months ago, we saw and heard people shouting out the N word at a group of African American congressmen who were headed to vote for the health care bill. And this was dismissed by some as “Oh, they’re just letting off steam.” It’s not steam: it’s pure, unmitigated hatred. Meant to hurt; meant to inflict harm. And those words are heard by children—what does that teach them? And perhaps worse, they are also heard by people who are mentally imbalanced who don’t view them as letting off steam at all but as a call to action. As I have often said, those who urge on the lunatic fringe must understand that there are some real lunatics in it and so bear responsibility for their actions. Proverbs, 18:21, says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue; And they that indulge it shall eat the fruit thereof.”

As a politician and a student of political history, I am well aware that American politics have been littered with ugliness almost since our nation came into being. And while voters have repeatedly said that they don’t like negative, ugly ads, for instance, the fact is that those ads move votes. It’s been proven.

Many politicians promise everything and anything to voters when they run for office. They make vows to voters, often with no intention whatsoever of keeping them. It’s no wonder that so many people turn a deaf ear to politicians. And what do we often say when someone lies: You broke your word. Broken words lead to broken trusts, to broken bonds—bonds between ourselves and G-d, bonds that make us a national community.

The Jewish people have often been referred to as The People of the Book. Which of course means that we are the people of the words. That we hopefully understand the importance of

our vows, our promises, of everything that comes out of our mouths. We are the People of the Book because we know that words matter.

Shabbat Shalom.