

Parashat Emor

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10 Now an Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel. And the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel fought in the camp, 11 and the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the Name, and cursed. Then they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan. 12 And they put him in custody, till the will of the LORD should be clear to them.

13 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 14 “Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. 15 And speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin.

Words

Words have consequences. The old saying, sticks and stones shall break my bones, but words will never hurt me, is patently untrue. In many cases, words can hurt you much deeper than long lasting effects and stones.

The last femur did not kill anyone, he did not read, he did not directly harm anyone, he did not steal, he did not lie: yes because he busted a blasphemy against God he was put to death. Is God still tentative that he cannot handle somebody calling him names?

We take words very seriously in our culture today. And rightly so. Many years ago, my wife and I were involved in counseling a marriage that was quickly falling apart. In the process of an argument, the husband threatened to take the children from the Wife and to move to another state where she would not have access to them. He quickly learned that these words said in a moment of

intemperance and anger would cost him his family. In Florida, the threat alone constitutes domestic violence, and warrants the issuance of a restraining order. You cannot threaten to remove children from their parents without severe consequences. These words cost him everything that was precious.

In a totally unrelated case involving my corporate career, an entire legal dispute hinged on the words type in one email. An email that was sent with an admission of guilt cost a corporation hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Words matter.

We live in a world that is made with words. It is one of the ways in which we are like God. As he created the entire fabric of the universe through spoken words, so we create our society, our culture, our families, our very reality Through words.

In a recent interview with a North Korean escapee Yemeni Parks, she addressed the central problem with the North Korean people. They have no words to describe the things that they need, that they earn, that they know must be. Erase from the dictionary to generations ago, there is no word for freedom in the vocabulary of North Korea. There is no word for rape in North Korean. There is no word for liberty. There is no word for human rights. Even the word love is not used in the romantic sense but rather as a sense of loyalty to their dictator. That a husband would say to his wife “I love you” does not exist in the vocabulary.

In parallel, a South African diplomat was attempting to explain the challenges that they have in the development of civil infrastructure, like roads and

sewage treatment plants. In their native language, there was no word for maintenance. Conceptually maintenance does not exist. There was no word for democracy. There was no word for development. These concepts which we so readily take for granted are not implicit to the human experience.

The central reason why it is important for us to expand our vocabulary is so we can define our problems and thereby aid in the first step to overcoming the them. An improper or an accurate diagnosis can be fatal.

The concept of the centrality of words to our universe stems from the Jewish Scriptures.

Genesis 15 one and the word of the Lord came to Abraham: the Hebrew for word is *daber* and it has a rich history in its counterpart in Aramaic *memra* and in Greek *logos*. It is not just speech. It is also that which creates. That which brings into being. The word of the Lord signifies, not just that which goes out from God, but rather a revelation of that which is within God. It is both an external and an internal revelation.

In the Targums the usage of the Aramaic *Memra* was read every week in the synagogue liturgical portion.

In Exodus, 31:15 where the Lord says, “it shall be assigned between me and you” the Targum translates this as “it shall be assigned between my *memra* and you”.

In Deuteronomy 35 where Moses said “I stood between you and the Lord” the Targum interprets this passage. This way, “I stood between the *memra* of the Lord and you”.

Again in Isaiah 48:13 the prophet records, the words of the Lord “my hand has laid the foundation of the Earth”. However, the Targum interprets in this way, “my memra has laid the foundation of the Earth”.

John’s opening of his gospel was not a new concept to John that is that the word of the Lord was from the beginning, but rather a further expansion upon the identity of that word. The word that was hidden within, became the word that was revealed without. In parallel form, Jesus said that the words that come out of us testify of us and display the words that are hidden within.

Returning to our passage, we see several important distinctions that are elucidated by the rabbis. Firstly, the man cursed God’s name Wallace in a fight with his fellow Israelite. Not only had he blessed me in God’s name, but he used God’s name in vain against a fellow Jew. Furthermore, the words were said in violent anger with the deliberate intent to cause someone else harm. The reason Moses took this judgment to God is a warning for all posterity that words said in anger, and especially those words that break the sacred bond between the children of God and our words that will cause death.