

One of the most important books I've ever read, a book that changed the way I think about Jewish civilization, is by Israeli author Amos Oz and his daughter Fania Oz-Salzberger called *Jews and Words*. It explores the importance of language in Judaism - making the claim that "Jewish continuity has always hinged on uttered and written words, on an expanding maze of interpretations, debates, and disagreements, and on a unique human rapport...ours is not a bloodline but a textline," they say.

And words, therefore, are our sacred inheritance from generation to generation. In fact, words are so important in Judaism that God creates the world through them. "God said, 'Let there be light.' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). Words are holy vessels of human experience. They hold our love and our pain, our joy and our sadness, our hardships and triumphs. They evoke tears, cause laughter, boil our anger, and separate the holy from the mundane. They create meaning, and transfer memory. Rabbi Heschel teaches that, "words are our tools for bringing holiness or evil into the world. The Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria, and Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns; it all began with uttering evil words, with defamation, with language and propaganda. Words create worlds," he taught. "They must be used very carefully."<sup>1</sup>

On Christmas Day in 1235, in the town of Fulda, Germany - just about 90 minutes northeast of Frankfurt - two parents returned from Christmas services to find their mill burned to the ground. They tragically found the charred bodies of their five sons in the ruins and were told that "the Jews did it." This lie, this rumor with no evidence - ended up inspiring the lynching of 34 Jews in that town.

But the townspeople didn't stop there. They were so worked up by the lie that they put the children's bodies in a cart and carried them to the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, as evidence of what "the Jews" had done in Fulda. They walked more than 150 miles, stopping many times along the way to retell this story, to spread a rumor that had already wrongfully taken lives.

To his credit, the emperor issued a well researched edict the following spring that declared the Jews completely absolved of any accusations. Government officials of our day should be so thoughtful. But the edict (those months later) didn't stop the vicious lie from spreading. [Sources<sup>23</sup>]

Two-hundred-and-forty years later, (1475) later on Easter Sunday in Trent, Italy a 2 ½-year-old child had gone missing, and a Franciscan preacher gave a series of sermons

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<sup>1</sup> Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, p. Viii, Introduction by Susannah Heschel

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-1235-34-jews-burned-to-death-1.5352841>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/Ch.5.pdf>

claiming that the Jewish community had murdered the child, and used his blood to celebrate Passover. [This vicious lie is known as the blood libel.] The rumors spread fast. Before long a story emerged that the boy's body had been found in the basement of a Jewish house. The Prince-Bishop of Trent immediately ordered the city's entire Jewish community arrested and tortured. Fifteen were found guilty and burned at the stake. The vicious rumor of the blood libel spread - despite an intervention from the Pope! - inspiring other communities to commit similar atrocities.<sup>4</sup>

But this sermon isn't about antisemitism - it's about language. It's about the words found in Proverbs, that "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov 18:21). And the Jewish experience is replete with examples of others using the power of the tongue to degrade us, to spread hatred about us, in many cases to inspire our murder. And that experience should carve into our collective conscience the power of language. Just as our tradition reminds us to treat the stranger with respect because we too were once strangers, our tradition holds language as immensely powerful - holding the potential to birth incredible evil or to create a world of holiness.

And you might be thinking, "Well that's an extreme example. I don't spread gossip that kills!"

But our tradition truly does not distinguish. Lashon hara, or an evil tongue, is lashon hara and it's treated as seriously as murder. The rabbis even teach us that God doesn't want to exist in the world of a gossip.<sup>5</sup> Gossip is God-repellant.

I want you to reflect for a moment as I list some categories of *lashon hara* / gossip and think to yourself if you relate to the experience.

Have you repeated something negative about another person, even if it were true?

Has someone asked you to share information about someone else, and you did?

Have you repeated something you knew wasn't true, or perhaps embellished a story?

Have you shared something harmful or derogatory about another person, something you wouldn't say to their face?

Have you spoken about another person in any way that didn't uplift their image in the world?

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/fake-news-history-long-violent-214535/>

<sup>5</sup> [Arikin 15b:13](#)

The answer is probably yes. For all of us. The reason our tradition has so many rules around *lashon hara* isn't only because we intimately understand its power to do evil. It's also because despite that intimate understanding - we still do it. We're all guilty. We say - it's not that bad. Everyone gossips. It's human nature. But Judaism implores us to: "DO BETTER."

There's a talmudic story of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel asking his servant: "Go buy me something good from the market." He went and bought a tongue. Later, Rabbi Shimon said: "Go buy me something bad from the market." And the servant returned with another tongue. The rabbi, confused, says: "I told you to buy something good and something bad and you returned with the same thing. How is this possible?" And the servant said "From the tongue comes good and bad. When it is good there is nothing better than it, but when it is evil, there is nothing more evil than it."<sup>6</sup>

With every word we utter, we are architects and builders of the world in which we live. In a world so often poisoned by speech, we have the choice - like God - to speak a holy world into existence. In our morning blessings, we say *Baruch she-amar v'hayah olam*, "Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came into being." And during these days of awe, we ask to "be inscribed in the book of life." May we all speak a world into being that deserves our blessing and be inscribed in a book of life crafted with holy words.

*Tizku l'shanim rabot* - May we be worthy of our years and may they be many.

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<sup>6</sup> Vayikra Rabbah 33:1