

Words That Work
Kol Nidrei 5782
September 15, 2021

We come together on this sacred night to perform a ritual once ridiculed by rabbis and rationalists alike. Perhaps... perhaps it is only the power of the music, the haunting melody, its ability to bypass anything cognitive and speak right to our soul, which gives this night its primary power.

What is *Kol Nidrei* about? It is an incantation, a formula. It negates the past, to give us a fresh start, a clean slate for the future. It releases us from promises we have been unable to fulfill.

It claims, in other words, that words are so potent, so *important* that, once uttered, they stand, they bind, they remain in some permanent record unless... Unless we use this ancient rite, to ply them loose from the clutches of the cosmos. To remove them from the hard drive of the Divine.

My friends, I want to speak with you tonight about words that work. I want to ask what has entered into you so deeply that it has changed your mind, altered your behavior, or transformed your life.

Tonight, at least, it is clear it is the cantor who moves us the most. I know that; you know that. But we rabbis are a stubborn bunch. We believe that what we say matters.

And so, yes, from the moment Yom Kippur is over, we begin thinking about the High Holy Days next year. What can we say, what will we address?

How can we use a moment in time, which everyone says they want to be as brief as possible, to really have an impact?

Some of us scribble on scraps or make notes on our phones every time an idea comes. Many view this as an art form; it may start in one place, go somewhere else, and, eventually – hopefully – circle back to where we began.

Have you ever noticed how often news broadcasters interview other colleagues? It is a self-reflective world, a feedback loop. It makes the news be about the news. Well, tonight, I admit, this is a sermon about sermons. And it is a bit unlike anything I have attempted before.

Take a moment, if you will. Think about the most powerful, the most effective sermons or teachings you have ever heard. I am going to share some of the moments which meant the most to me. I am going to reflect on the few times I think what I said might have made a difference. I am going to ask you to share what has moved you. Then, I will conclude with an image, a metaphor, which underlies, which binds most of my teaching together.

Sermons I have heard, or heard about.

Many of you know – I shared this recently -- that when I was growing up, there were times when the rabbi was... not there. “Oh, he’s in jail,” my mother said. “Again,” she said. “Marching for civil rights. Again.”

For me, this was a sermon in and of itself. It was, truly, the sound of silence, an absence which made the man more present, a lesson which shouted values and spoke volumes, all without words.

But an actual sermon? I recall a moment, when I was quite young, at which a group of people got up and walked out in the middle of a Rosh Hashanah sermon. It was only much later that I understood what was going on. He was speaking about housing. And a group of Washington D.C.'s most prominent slum landlords got up, left, and reportedly joined another congregation in time for Yom Kippur.

I'm not sure one should measure... success... by how many people walk out on you. But it certainly had an impact!

We were taught to always bear in mind, to always hold in our heart the fact that we have a mix of occupations and opinions before us. You might have some of your city's major captains of industry, listening to you. And that industry, those businesses, often have... side effects.

So, as an example: speak about pollution, ecology, the environment as you must. But there are words, inscribed on many an ark, meant to refer to God, which apply here, and to the congregation as well. "*Da lifnei mi atta omeid.* Know before whom you stand!" Speak, but with care, so that words may matter, and not just be heard and set aside.

A sermon I heard about. When I was an assistant rabbi in Boca Raton, some parents pointed to certain children, born in a particular year. “Those are Merle babies,” they said.

Now, Merle Singer was my boss, my Senior Rabbi. And this made me, immediately, well... worried about where this was going.

But my theme, now, is the impact of sermons, and this one was out of the park. Apparently, one year Rabbi Singer gave a High Holy Day Sermon on demographic trends. In his remarks, he urged, he pleaded, he begged Jewish families to have more babies.

I wasn't there when this happened, so I don't know if attendance the following morning was a lower than usual, or if people, um, waited a bit. All I do know is that I met a whole group of folks who listened to that sermon!

Fair housing practices, and Jewish family life -- two examples of words of others which, well, had an effect. One was about how Jews treat others. The other was about Jewish strength.

So, then: what have I had to say, in the past, which might have had an impact, or made a difference in the world?

Looking back, the words I think worked, the preaching of which I am the most proud include:

- my remarks twenty years ago in the immediate **aftermath of 9/11**, which I shared with some of you this weekend. I believe that I was able to bring comfort, but also issue a clear call for fairness and a moral compass in our response to that attack on our country.
- My advocacy of **Same Sex Marriage**, calling our community to work on a Maryland ballot initiative which, when it passed two months later, was the first voter-approved measure of its kind in the nation.
- Announcing the change in my position on **officiation at interfaith marriages**, and how I did so – even if that sermon was mostly greeted with a shrug and the sense that it took me too long to get there.
- Some of my sermons about **Israel**, which balanced searing questions about certain policies with solid support for the Israeli polity. I have convinced quite a few people to travel to Israel, often in trips I led. And being in Israel can, and often does, powerfully change lives.
- The Yom Kippur sermon in which I called upon my congregation to **sponsor newly arriving Syrian refugees**. It took months of organization and effort, but by June we were assigned a family. Over the following year, we helped these new Americans with housing, furniture, vocational counseling, educational placement, emotional adjustment, advocacy for the children and opportunities for the parents. One of the girls in the family even published a children's

book about her family's journey. Coordinating with the Lutheran Social Service Agency, we were a Jewish congregation, and a Christian aid group, welcoming a Muslim family to this country. (As we gather here now, I am wondering – and have made some initial inquiries – whether we, here, can similarly host an Afghani family, and whether any refugees might be coming here.)

Of the two sermons I cited earlier, one was outward looking, if you will, and the other focused on the needs of our own community. What strikes me, in this brief review of my own teaching, is this same split in the direction of my gaze. Inclusion, justice, outreach: this is a primary Jewish value. Protecting, promoting, strengthening our Jewish lives: this, too, is our task, and one which helps us find our way in the world.

For me, for now, that is what stands out... from X years, mostly delivering four sermons during each set of High Holy Days. Those are, for me, words which might have worked.

So, now, I turn to you. What can you recall – sermons, speeches, life lessons from a cherished teacher - which made a difference, which changed your life, or your behavior, or your mind?

[Discussion.]

Powerful teaching does, I think, one of two things. Either it moves us, propels us towards action. Or it frames a way of seeing, and being; it shapes identity, and shores up a sense of who we are. Or both.

I have a metaphor I would like to close with tonight, more in service of the second of these goals. It is not a call to action, and it is not, in and of itself, going to shake the world. But it is how I see the universe.

If there is a thread, a single strand of connection, between everything I believe, it might be this: that the oneness of God with which our tradition began describes, demands, implicates a connectedness of all. Holiness implies being whole. And being whole means a link between what is in us, and what is around us.

The universal and the particular are intertwined. When we stand up for others, or when we build ourselves up, both... both... are what God wants of us. Feed a family, speak up for the voiceless, celebrate love, study a text, immerse yourself in a Jewish ritual, build a Jewish home, immerse yourselves in the Jewish homeland... all of it, all of it is God's work.

When I open my eyes I see, all around me, a pulsing, throbbing, mystic unity, science and spirituality in consort, heaven and earth in harmony, partners in pulling together all of being.

Take a single cell. Let's say it is from your liver. Inside that cell, we now know, is a strand of something called DNA. And the DNA in a cell itself contains a dual gaze. It serves distinct functions.

There is something in the strand which enables differentiation. It tells the cell to do liver things, to make the liver work. It gives out a specific job.

But there is also, in that same strand, a code for all of you, your whole being, everything which make you, you. It is an outline of an entire person, an echo of eternity.

Perhaps, then, all of us are cells in the organism of existence – functioning as individuals, doing our own thing, feeling separate, but sensing, somehow, that in us we are not merely apart, but also a part, of everything that is, and was, and will ever be. In, and out, a dual gaze, either one leading to all that is, that Ultimate Unity we were among the first to name as God.

Return, again, to where we began tonight, with the music. Somehow there is a resonance, a melody which reverberates over centuries and continents alike, transporting us in time and space, echoes from our past and hints at our future alike.

Through word or through sound, through mind or heart, in whatever way works for you, may each of you, each of us, have some sense, this night, of harmony, of connectedness, of being called to who you are, and also part of something larger than yourself.

L'shanah Tovah