

Speak
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The Reform Temple of Forest Hills
Yom Kippur Morning – September 16, 2021

Last night, I shared about the importance of listening. The word for listen appears 238 times in the Torah to emphasize the point.¹ But listening isn't the only form of communication valued in Judaism. This coming Shabbat's Torah portion is called *Ha-azinu* – meaning "listen." But it isn't encouraging empathic listening. This poem by Moses begins, "Listen, O heavens, let me speak. Let the earth hear the words I utter."² It's all about speaking.

There are times to listen, and there are times to speak. When we are standing up for ourselves or seeking to make the world better than we need, we must speak out the truth. Times to speak up might include when you're being taken advantage of or when someone is hurting other people. This is at the core of Jewish beliefs. Proverbs 31 states, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are deprived. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."³

We know this all too well. Yet, we remain silent in the moment. There are myriad reasons we don't speak up. Too often, it is mere inconvenience, and sometimes it is fear. The social justice heroes of the 20th century cautioned us to overcome that silence. Elie Wiesel said, "Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." Dr. Martin Luther King added, "There comes a time when silence is betrayal."

In the book of Numbers, the Israelites are almost at the land of Canaan after two years in the wilderness. Twelve scouts are sent to judge the territory ahead. Ten of them say it is filled with giants, and the Israelites should not enter what would later become known as Israel. Two scouts challenged this report and said they'd succeed because God was with them. The people sided with the ten scouts. God told them they would now remain in the wilderness for 38 more years, ensuring that generation would die before entering Canaan. Why was the entire community punished? Midrash holds because they did not speak up when they could.⁴

This past spring, our Temple held an online comedy night. We needed a little more joy in our lives. The event was held on Zoom, an unusual place for a comedy club. Per the instructions of the head comedian, we only allowed a handful of people to

¹ <https://www.berotbatayin.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/ATRVaerahListening.pdf>

² Deuteronomy 32:1.

³ Proverbs 31:8-9.

⁴ Numbers Rabbah 16:23.

be unmuted to add a laughter track. The head comedian wasn't particularly funny. His jokes were musty and tired, trying to eke out a laugh.

At one point, he did what's known in the business as "crowd work." This is when you interact with the audience and usually make fun of them for their looks, profession, or other superficial characteristics. It's cheap comedy that the recipient of the focus rarely appreciates. The comedian turned to our member Gina Drangel and, looking at her, asked, "What is your story? Are you Ethiopian? Do you work for the synagogue?" These are stereotypes that Jews of Color face as people make racial assumptions about their background. It served no positive purpose and was simply insulting.

In the moment, no one said anything. This was primarily because most of the people, including Gina, were unable to unmute themselves. I was unmuted, but I didn't speak. I was stunned, processing this ridiculous aggression on Gina. When something unexpected and shocking happens, we sometimes freeze, unsure what to say or do. I regret deeply that my voice was absent in immediate response.

At the end of the night, the comedian asked me, "Rabbi, are you happy?" I had found my footing by then. Gina and I had already communicated, and now I shared with him how inappropriate his comments were. He didn't understand as people who hurt others often don't recognize the pain they cause. I wouldn't let the evening end without telling him what he did was wrong.

In the months that have passed, the pain has stayed with Gina. RTFH is a safe space and to be insulted in her synagogue home was a real blow. As a community, we want to be inclusive not only visibly but through our actions as well. Our congregation's values and actions have always been about supporting each other and stopping antagonism against anyone in need. The people at the comedy night are the ones who stand up for others as part of their core existence. Yet sometimes we don't speak when we need to.

Everyone in our community needs to know that we will stand up for each other, especially when our friends are unable to speak out for themselves. How do we do that? Gina, the chair of the Racial Equity Team, and Allie Robbins, the chair of our Diversity Committees, and I want to turn an adverse event into a positive future. On Tuesday, October 19, and Wednesday, November 10, RTFH is holding a two-part program called *Disrupting Racism: Becoming a More Effective Ally* with Dr. Victoria Farris. Dr. Farris, a tremendous teacher, will guide us over Zoom to learn how to better speak up – from acts of overt racism and violence to the microaggressions and seemingly innocent remarks of cruelty that we hear every day. More info will come. We hope you'll join us and find new and better ways to share your voice.

In the wonderful movie musical *Moulin Rouge*, Toulouse-Lautrec repeats over and over, “I only speak the truth.” The truth is a murky subject these days as people are confident of facts that others are certain of the exact opposite. But “your truth” is clear because only you can define it.

I have the privilege of working closely with children and teens in our synagogue as they grow and learn more about who they are and where they are going. Sometimes this is represented in something like their clothing or their hair. Sometimes it is much more profound as when they share their sexual orientation or their gender identity. Several years ago, we had the privilege of learning that two of our religious school students, Jackson and Raphael, were transgender. They were now living their true gender identity, which was not the one they were assigned at birth. We wanted to support these tweens as much as we could. We felt education in our community was a vital facet. Dubbs Weinblatt, a speaker from Keshet, an LGBTQ Jewish organization we had done some learning with, came to speak in person. We held a program for our 6th and 7th graders and later one for any parents. Hopefully, it would answer some questions and make RTFH a safer, more understanding place.

After the program for the students, I went to the 6th grade classroom to check in and also to support Raphael, whose family had talked with us about Raphael’s gender identity. After some reflections from the class, Raphael said to them, “You’ve always known my pronouns as ‘he’ and ‘him.’ From now on, you should use ‘she’ and ‘her.’” From the session they just had, the class understood that Raphael was a girl. They burst into applause, and with tears in my eyes as they are right now, we shared the *shehecheyanu*. Raphael spoke her truth that day. We should all be like her.

On Yom Kippur, we are told to seek *teshuvah*, repentance. One could tell their therapist they are sorry for something they did to someone else. One could speak to one member of their family about another relative. Or a co-worker about their boss or employee. But Judaism doesn’t let you apologize remotely.

On this Atonement Day, we only find repentance when we go to the person we’ve offended and speak to them directly. You don’t have only today to do this. Apologies are acceptable all year long. But you can’t apologize to someone else. You must speak up to apologize directly to the person. And then don’t do it again, so the apology is sincere.

It is still good advice from some Greek philosopher, “We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.” We should listen more than we speak. But we still have a mouth. Use it to speak out against injustice. Speak your truth. And speak your apologies. Let the words our mouth be acceptable to You, O God, and also to each other.